

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 April 2023
7.30pm

JACK Quartet

Christopher Otto violin
Austin Wulliman violin
John Pickford Richards viola
Jay Campbell cello

Nicolà Vicentino (1511-c.1576)

Musica prisca caput (1555) *arranged by Christopher Otto*

Solage

Fumeux fume par fumees (c.1390) *arranged by Christopher Otto*

John Zorn (b.1953)

The Alchemist (2011)

Interval

Cenk Ergün (b.1978)

Celare (2014-5)

Helmut Lachenmann (b.1935)

String Quartet No. 2 'Reigen seliger Geister' (1989)

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The revival of medieval and Renaissance music half a century ago inevitably had an effect on composers, from Pärt to Ligeti. Now the question seems to be, in reverse, how the old might be affected by the new - and especially by the just intonation exemplified today in works by Catherine Lamb, Eric Wubbels and (to come) Cenk Ergün.

Nicolà Vicentino played an important part in mid-16th-century considerations of how Greek music theory should inform contemporary practice. On his view, microtones had to be involved, and in support he built a keyboard instrument having 31 notes to the octave; he also wrote a treatise including a demonstration piece, *Musica prisca caput* ('The Head of Old Music').

Christopher Otto offers a realisation of this in which the neutral third of just intonation (between minor and major) leads a pathway into harmonies that appear increasingly strange by the diatonic standards with which we are familiar, but not within the curved space of Vicentino's alternative reality.

The **Solage** arrangement, also by Otto, goes further and deeper, as well as earlier, to the late 14th Century. *Fumeux fume par fume* ('The smoky one smokes through smoke') has drawn a lot of modern attention for its chromaticism and dissonance, jerky rhythms and low tessitura, not to mention its mysterious text. It is as if smoke blows through - or out of - the song, to obscure both it and its author, about whom nothing is known for sure. Otto begins by delivering the three-part song relatively straight, played by the upper instruments with 'harmonic sprays' from the cello and some microtonal intonation to accentuate the weird harmony. In successive variations the harmonic smoke builds up, to the point of almost suffocating all movement.

Solage and Vicentino might have recognized a kinship with the alchemists of their respective eras, in making esoteric pronouncements and working through the base metal of sound to the pure gold of understanding or enlightenment. Certainly **John Zorn** feels this relationship in his many works bordering the occult, such as this morning's *Necronomicon* and now *The Alchemist* (2011), similar in length and centred on Vicentino's Welsh contemporary John Dee. The music opens in hectic transformation based on the figure heard right at the start. Perhaps this transformation is what leads to outbursts of Beethoven. Moments of stillness - of high harmonics or near-silence - might evoke the angels with whom Dee claimed that his ally Edward Kelley could communicate. The turbulent string quartets of the Second Viennese School and of Bartók provide material for this parade of vivid imagery, rather as if the shapes and colours of Kandinsky had been redrawn as manga.

Born in Turkey, **Cenk Ergün** studied in the United States and a dozen years ago or so began collaborating with the JACK Quartet, who introduced him to Marc Sabat's work with just intonation. This was revelatory, not least in enabling him to navigate between western

music and that of his Turkish childhood and background. 'Working with frequency ratios,' he has said, 'some of the first things I stumbled upon were constellations of tones constituting fragments of modes or scales in the Turkish *makam*' (i.e. the system of melody types used in Turkish classical and folk music). *Celare*, which he composed for the JACK in 2014-5, was an early outcome of this discovery, taking its title from the Latin proverb 'Ars est celare artem' ('The art is in concealing art').

He has described the work, which plays for 14 minutes, as 'a gentle and sparse environment in which simple, transparent harmonies resonate at a hazy intersection of early European and Turkish modal music'. By soft steps, set in place by means of a 'Baroque style of gently fading into and out of each bowed note', the way is found to a few bars of performed silence and so to a chordal passage whose narrow intervals create beats. Ergün has described this moment as 'Turkish music with the piano pedal down'. The outcome is an 'unhurried progression of dense sustained chords at the centre of the work'. From this extraordinary musical state, the piece begins to return along very much the same route, but soon finds an alternative destination.

In the formative past of the modern string quartet, **Helmut Lachenmann's** first, *Gran Torso*, testified to the excitement - and the wariness - he felt in redefining the ensemble and the genre at the beginning of the 1970s. Nearly 20 years later he was a different composer, ready to admit more normal sounds, as well as more evident connections with the rhythms, shapes and harmonies of other music - even with the titles, in the case of this Second Quartet (1989), whose subtitle is the normal German form for the 'Dance of the Blessed Spirits' in Gluck's Orpheus opera (though there is no specific reference to Gluck's music). In his attitude of exploring and testing, however, he was still very much the same.

A good deal of the work, which plays continuously for 25 minutes or so, is whisper-thin; the basic technique, the composer has noted, is a 'pressureless *flautando*', in which 'notes function more like shadows of sound'. One may often get the impression that the music is not so much speaking as listening, that it is reporting on and responding to events somewhere beyond: crucial events, with which this is our only - and therefore invaluable - contact. There is, in other words, a curiously tangible transcendence. Lachenmann himself writes of 'the reappropriation of interval constellations...so that their realization will enable the natural acoustic edges of the produced tones - their timbral articulation, their muting, how they fade, how the vibrating strings are stopped (for example, also the alteration of the noise component by sliding the bow between the bridge and the fingerboard) - to create, through the "dead" tone-structure, a reborn object of experience.' The blessed spirits dance again, otherwise.

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