

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 March 2025
11.30am

This concert is supported by American Friends of Wigmore Hall

JACK Quartet

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

Philip Glass (b.1937) String Quartet No. 5 (1991)
I. • II. • III. • IV. • V.

Heinz Holliger (b.1939) String Quartet No. 2 (2007)



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Today's concerts are set to run smoothly and strangely from some of the great ancestors of the contemporary string quartet to newer minds. We start with **Philip Glass**, who wrote his First Quartet when he was in his 20s, in 1966, and then left the genre alone a while. The next four all came between 1984 and 1991, and by the time he reached the last of them, he remarked: 'I was thinking that I had really gone beyond the need to write a serious string quartet and that I could write a quartet that is about musicality, which in a certain way is the most serious subject.'

The work, which remained for more than twenty years Glass's last quartet, is not only about musicality – in performance as in composition – but also about modality, which is no doubt just as serious a subject, though treated here with airy freshness. Of the five movements, played without a break, the first is – until its final chord, which will lead elsewhere – white-note music, with an arpeggio that springs up from E Phrygian (the quartet's home key) and a song phrase, out of whose elements of a lifting third and a reclining scale fragment the whole piece seems to flow as naturally as water.

After this introductory page, lasting only a minute or so, the quartet moves up a gear for its second movement, which features robust syncopations over background oscillations in a kind of verse-refrain form. Again, we are in largely white-note territory, though the harmony shifts around even when the bass remains the same, as it does for almost half the movement.

The centrepiece – faster, longer, more varied – is a dynamic cross-cutting of episodes that recur either varied or as they were. Syncopation rules here too, along with some typically Glassian subversive chord changes. When all the circles have been completed there comes a slightly slower coda.

Next comes the calm contrast of music that is not only slower again – markedly so in its outermost sections – but also far more homogeneous, keeping the players together rhythmically and in register, the violins barely reaching above the staff until the first of them wings up in the closing section.

The Finale is another big fast movement, now set to the pace of semiquavers that whirl around or rush up and down scales, once more in music that moves through repeating or returning segments with continuous drive. Its destination turns out to be somewhere we have been before, a destination that is tested, avoided for a while (a second turbulence of semiquavers lands with majestic affirmation at one point, soon reprised, in C major), but ultimately accepted.

Heinz Holliger takes us to quite another universe. Besides having been the world's foremost oboist for several decades, Holliger is one of the world's foremost composers. He wrote his Second Quartet for the quartet led by Thomas Zehetmair and dedicated it to Elliott Carter, the senior composer perhaps highest in his esteem, even though Carter's classicism is remote from

the wildness of his own music, as we may judge this afternoon. One innovation he adopts from Carter is polyphony of velocities, where the players are performing at different speeds. However, Holliger does not give the instruments distinct characters in the ways Carter does; they are, rather, a foursome undergoing the same experiences, the same maelstroms on the way to a curious ending.

Holliger prefaces his score with a short note in which he surely speaks for many – if not all – of the composers whose quartets we hear today: 'There is hardly another musical genre which is so burdened by its history as the string quartet. Whoever composes for this ensemble is inevitably senses the sceptical and critical stares of the great composers. This can have a paralysing and intimidating effect. Perhaps that is the reason why I have only now dared to rise once more to the great challenge, 34 years after my First String Quartet, which has widely been considered very extreme.'

This No. 2 is in six linked movements, and has the instruments slightly alienated from the start in their tuning: the first violin plays with its upper two strings a semitone flat, the second violin with its lower two strings thus, while the viola has its top string a semitone down and the cello both its lower strings. The players are all engaged almost continuously.

The first movement is something like a *sonata allegro*, with main material that is icy and jagged, careering in forceful outbursts in rhythmic unison. This prefigures and is eventually supplanted by a hushed polyphonic murmur of slides and figures, which goes into a 'development section', a pause, and a broken quasi-reprise.

Trails of *tremolo* then initiate a kind of dense, yearning polyphony that might seem to answer the superscription, a late fragment of Hölderlin, from the time when he was calling himself 'Scardanelli': '... as clouds surround time ...'. Holliger's long fascination with the poet resulted in another of his major works, the Scardanelli-Zyklus (1975–91).

This music settles towards a quiet 'figured canon' where each of the instruments moves almost entirely within its bottom register. A thread of long notes is passed from instrument to instrument as tremolos take over.

From these, with trills and quarter-tone tuning, Holliger conjures his 'flickering' fourth movement, which grows and goes through *pizzicato* moments, soft or forceful, to explode as the wild 'Heterophonies' of the short fifth movement, again under the sign of Scardanelli.

This abrupt music puts up some resistance to the extraordinary finale, which might give us yet another image of clouds surrounding the times but also responds to the 'singable residue' of which Paul Celan writes: 'what remains, after all, to still sing'.

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