

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 March 2025
3.00pm

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

Elliott Carter (1908-2012)

String Quartet No. 5 (1995)

*Introduction • Giocoso • Interlude I • Lento espressivo •
Interlude II • Presto scorrevole • Interlude III •
Allegro energico • Interlude IV • Adagio sereno •
Interlude V • Capriccioso*

Eduardo Aguilar (b.1991)

HYPER (2021)

Helmut Lachenmann (b.1935)

String Quartet No. 3 'Grido' (2001)



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Elliott Carter's Fifth Quartet, also his last, depends in nature and form on his long experience of the genre, as his own note partly discloses: 'One of the fascinations of attending rehearsals of chamber music, when excellent players try out fragments of what they later will play in the ensemble, then play it, and then stop abruptly to discuss how to improve, is that this pattern is so similar to our inner experience of forming, ordering, focussing, and bringing to fruition – and then dismissing – our feelings and ideas. These patterns of human behaviour form the basis of the Fifth String Quartet. Its introduction presents the players, one by one, trying out fragments of later passages from one of the six short, contrasting ensemble movements, at the same time maintaining a dialogue with each other. Between each of the movements the players discuss in different ways what has been played and what will be played. In this score the matter of human cooperation with its many aspects of feeling and thought was a very important consideration.'

All that remains to be said is that what Carter calls the 'ensemble movements' (as distinct from the 'introduction' and 'interludes', where the players work much more as soloists) follow a palindromic path from playfulness through sobriety (both slow movements being drifts of harmony) to speed and back, that the musicians, in typical Carter fashion, retain their identities – and especially their rhythmic identities – even when joining together, that the finale is a pizzicato piece, and that the music really comprises one big, 20-minute movement streaming through diverse phases.

Brought up in a rural area of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, **Eduardo Aguilar** came to music with an outsider's perceptions, tuned not to any particular repertory but to the sounds and spaces around him. His 10-minute HYPER, which he wrote for the JACK, has a score that dispenses with anything resembling conventional notation to prescribe actions on the strings – and beyond. It would be best to observe and absorb the experience with no guide in the way.

Introducing his Third Quartet, **Helmut Lachenmann** recalled how he began his adventures with the string quartet, 30 years before, like Robinson Crusoe, coming upon a raw world (of instrumental noises in his case) and cultivating it. What should the castaway do next? Find another desert island? The question is left in the air. Yes, Lachenmann seems to suggest, every composition is a fresh start. And no, previous achievements cannot be gainsaid.

His Third Quartet by no means denies the achievements – precarious achievements – of its predecessors. Sounds are still being discovered at the limits, in muted whisperings, in harmonics, in eighth-tones and other small intervals used to generate acoustic beats, in grating sonorities and even, in the middle of the piece and at the very end, in whispered phonemes. The Italian title, meaning 'shout' as a noun or

'I shout', comes from the initials of the first names of members of the Arditti Quartet as at the time of the first performance and appealed to the composer's sense of paradox, for the work's dynamic character is more that of a whisper or a faint song.

At the beginning, there might be the impression of the echo of someone having cried out, with the second violin, viola, and cello all up in a high register, the first violin very soon cutting in below, everything generating the sensation that this, right away, is a situation of supreme intensity. Despite the first violin's incursion, or perhaps because of it, the high sound is maintained, at once invigorating and piercing, like ozone-rich air. Lachenmann has a house above Italy's Lago Maggiore, and sometimes in his music, as here, one may have the sense of the dazzling white and the tight chill of winter in the mountains.

Within seconds of this initiation, we recognise that things are happening up there – sounds are sliding down, fluttering, edging along through small intervals – but at the same time something is staying the same. The second violin is holding on to its note – or, rather, to its sound. For its character, this sound has to be up in an elevated register, and it has to be not totally stable, endangered, slowly fluctuating in dynamic level, and being joined or countered now and then by sounds from the other instruments. The first violin intermittently touches the same sound, the cello takes over for a while, and neighbouring sounds come forward searingly at certain moments. By such means is the sound kept alive, ringing on, throughout the first minute of the 25-minute piece.

In that first minute we are being taught how to listen – how to listen differently. Not notes but sounds are making this music, exerting themselves as if of their own will, in response to tensions contained in their nature and in how they relate to one another and interact. We are being given, in that continuing high sound, a point, which will turn out to have been the starting point of a slow, slow melody that unfolds through the composition from beginning to end, the rope we can hold on to as we traverse the cliff face.

The melody passes through many points where the music tentatively and impermanently stabilizes around a single note or, more rarely, a consonant chord. Its slow progress – not essentially changed in the central part of the work, where movement is almost continuous in jittery fast notes – suggests the music is proceeding with great difficulty, against almost insuperable odds. Danger – the danger of repeating what has already been achieved and the danger of incoherence – is everywhere. But that, of course, is what makes the moment-to-moment continuity of this quartet so gripping.

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