

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 March 2025
7.30pm

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

Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) 1b from *Livre pour quatuor* (1948-9)
Eva-Maria Houben (b.1955) Nothing More (2019)
*I. Adagio appassionato • II. Presto - quasi delirando •
III. Misterioso • IV. Allegretto gioviale • V. Largo tenebroso*

Pierre Boulez 3c from *Livre pour quatuor*
Anton Webern (1883-1945) Six Bagatelles Op. 9 (1910-13)
*I. Mässig • II. Leicht bewegt • III. Ziemlich fließend •
IV. Sehr langsam • V. Ausserst langsam • VI. Fließend*

John Cage (1912-1992) String Quartet in Four Parts (1949-50)
*I. Quietly flowing along • II. Slowly rocking •
III. Nearly stationary • IV. Quodlibet*

Interval

Pierre Boulez 1a from *Livre pour quatuor*
Austin Wulliman (b.1982) Escape Rites (2024)
Anthony Cheung (b.1982) Twice Removed (2024)
Commissioned by JACK Quartet with the support of the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation, 92nd Street Y and Wigmore Hall.
I. Stretto House (after Steven Holl/Béla Bartók) • II. 830 Fireplace Road (after John Yau/Jackson Pollock) • III. Meditation on Motion (after Dean Rader/Cy Twombly) • IV. Journey to Mount Tamalpais (after Etel Adnan)

Pierre Boulez 2 from *Livre pour quatuor*



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Framing and punctuating this concert is a recently recovered ancestor. **Pierre Boulez** devoted 16 months of his explosively active early 20s to his 'Livre pour quatuor', but then withdrew it when it proved too challenging for the quartet players of the 50s and 60s. With the arrival of a new generation, he released it again in 1985. Its first movement is in two panels, labelled in the sketches 'Variation 1' and 'Variation 2'. Boulez reversed their order in the finished score, where Movement 1b transmits the original shorter, simpler half. Slow lines, as if reaching out, are cut off by violent gestures, but persist into some kind of compromise, until a repetition slams the door.

Strongly in the background of Boulez's Quartet is Webern, and the same goes for 'nothing more' (2019) by the German composer **Eva Maria Houben**, who belongs to the loose confederation of Wandelweiser minimalists. Commissioned to write a serial quartet by the American violinist-composer Erik Carlson, she produced five short movements using the 12-note row of Webern's Op. 28 Quartet, but in very much her own ways. The first movement is all in harmonics, sometimes played on two or three strings of the same instrument and so differing a little in tuning. Then comes a *pizzicato presto* bringing forward the row's minor seconds. The third movement is a line of minor seconds juxtaposing normal and harmonic sounds; the fourth comes nearest to Webern; and the fifth has each player presenting a 'quiet chant'.

Then we return to the Boulez quartet for a slow movement, 3c, music of austere sumptuousness in its weave of *tenutos*, trills and tendrils.

Passing through **Webern** face-to-face – the three-and-a-half minutes in toto of the 'Six Bagatelles', from the time when Schoenberg and he were testing the waters of atonality – we arrive at a piece by another composer for whom Webern's example of quietness and restraint was crucial: **John Cage**.

Cage began his Quartet in the summer of 1949, when he was in Paris, where Boulez was completing his. The two works could hardly be more different. Cage's title refers not to instrumental lines but to movements. Where texture is concerned, the Quartet is most often in just one part, to which the four instruments variously contribute. Each has a small repertory ('gamut' was Cage's term) of notes and chords, so that the same figures and harmonies keep recurring. Also consistent is the colour, since Cage asks for vibrato-free playing, which suggests the viol consorts of long ago or folk fiddlers.

What changes, from movement to movement, is the particular choice of elements and also the degree of variety, imagined as paralleling the cycle of the seasons. Just as the same trees are stark in winter but richly foliated in the summer, so in the winter movement here (the third) a few chords keep returning, always on one or other of the two half-note beats, whereas the same chords appear in comparatively livelier contexts in other

movements – though nothing here is at all fast, in keeping with Cage's wish for tranquillity. A 'quodlibet' is a medley of popular tunes; Cage's short example for Spring has some of his fixed sounds coming together at last in something like a folk melody.

The programme's second half begins with the other part of the Boulez opening movement, a five-minute essay in stillness interrupted.

We continue with two new pieces written for the JACK, the first by one of its members: **Austin Wulliman**, who opens the door – or clicks on the switch, as the initiating gesture might suggest – into a world retuned. Just intonation provides for iridescence and strange consonances, struck across by fierce Bartók *pizzicatos* and other quasi-noises. An introductory section, hurried along, leads to a passage in walking (or should that be 'waking'?) rhythm, which in turn, as rising scales appear, arrives at the central 'Escape Rites'. The rites become a dance and, with the return of the scales, go on into the final third of the work. A G chord might seem a culmination, but the piece, which plays for a little over 20 minutes, has another place to go.

That kind of hasty synopsis might be one way to approach the work, but Wulliman offers alternatively a metaphor in prose: '...But I ask of the sea: long to see its waves crashing. As I approach, the blue-green colors of my oasis dull to a metallic blur. The wind a knife's edge into my bleared eyes. From below the surface, shafts of artificial light emerge. Power indicators of unseen machines from another time, rising endlessly ... narrow spotlights pushing into the sky. My heart quickens. These climbing pixels build a hard-edged latticework of digital snow, blinding me...'

Anthony Cheung's 'Twice Removed' also translates one art form into another, starting from works where this has already happened once. The first movement is based on Steven Holl's *Stretto House in Dallas*, itself responding to Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta. For his next point of departure Cheung took John Yau's poem *830 Fireplace Road*, which makes a sort of sonnet from the words in a saying of Jackson Pollock's: 'When I'm in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing'. 'Pollock's drip technique,' Cheung notes, 'has some bearing on the timbres of the instruments here.' His third movement traces through a poem by Dean Rader to a Cy Twombly painting in which a fine white line keeps circling across a dark grey ground. 'The last movement,' he writes, 'is quite different in mood and source. It reflects on moments, both verbal and visual, from Etel Adnan's Journey to Mount Tamalpais.'

The conclusion, however, is restlessness and urgency in the second movement of Boulez's 'Livre pour quatuor', an 11-minute dialogue of *arco* and *pizzicato* with an emphatic finish.

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