WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 5 November 2026
7.30pm

Elias String Quartet
Sara Bitlloch violin
Donald Grant violin
Simone van der Giessen viola
Marie Bitlloch cello

Sally Beamish (b.1956)	String Quartet No. 3 'Reed Stanzas' (2011)
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	String Quartet in A minor Op. 41 No. 1 (1842) *I. Introduzione. Andante espressivo – Allegro •* *II. Scherzo. Presto – Intermezzo • III. Adagio • IV. Presto*
	Interval
Sally Beamish	String Quartet No. 4 'Nine Fragments' (2018) *I. Choral • II. Musette • III. Unruhig •* *IV. Liebeslied • V. Ängstlich • VI. Witz •* *VII. Klingeln • VIII. Kanon • IX. Spiegel*
Donald Grant (b.1980)	Selection of folk song arrangements

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Sally Beamish String Quartet No. 3 'Reed Stanzas'

Donald Grant, the second violinist in the Elias, is well known as a traditional Scottish fiddle player. I have incorporated this skill into a quartet work, drawing on Donald's Gaelic roots. The 'second violin range' of a quartet is similar to that used by traditional fiddle, inhabiting the throaty, rich soundworld of the lower strings, and the distinctive clarity of the upper strings in their lower positions. This leaves the first violin to explore the heights of the E string, so that the two violins are almost like different instruments.

I wrote part of the Quartet in a cottage overlooking the *machar* of the Isle of Harris, in the Outer Hebrides, listening to Britten's quartets in between working. These works always remind me of my former life as a viola player, and the wind blowing through the reed beds at Snape; a very different, but equally windswept, salt-scented wilderness.

The reed has many different associations. 'The Reed of God': a Christian metaphor for Mary: the channel through which the spirit is breathed. The 'accursed' reed of Celtic belief: the reed through which Jesus was given vinegar to drink, on the cross. And the reeds used in the making of wind instruments, including the bagpipe and accordion. The Sufi poet Rumi describes the reed flute as a symbol of longing and separation: the reed, separated from its home, utters a heart-breaking lament.

'Reed Stanzas' takes the form of variations on a Celtic-inspired theme announced by the second violin, which opens and closes the work in the manner of *Pibroch* (the classical music of the Highland bagpipe). I have explored the intricate ornamentation used in *Pibroch*, highlighting its similarities to birdsong, and to Arabic reed flute (*ney*) playing. The piece also refers to the multiple reeds of the accordion (these days made of metal) – an instrument used in traditional music of many cultures. The idea of the loneliness and vastness of landscape underpins the quartet, while each variation, or 'stanza', has its own metre and mood.

Sally Beamish String Quartet No. 4 'Nine Fragments'

This work is one of the Elias Quartet's three commissions, each taking as its starting point one of the three Schumann Quartets. I was allocated the first, in A minor.

Schumann arranged the first performance of these quartets for his wife Clara's 23rd birthday, and having a 23-year-old daughter myself, I couldn't help being moved by the thought of this young couple who had fought to be allowed to marry, and the great challenges they were to face in their married life. Clara's distress at Robert's mental illness, her struggle to support the family, and her grief throughout her widowhood, are elements that made their way into my own music.

I was interested in the idea that Schumann finished the A minor Quartet (No. 1) last – after writing the other two, and also that later in life, he was troubled by a persistent high 'A' ringing in his ears.

My quartet consists of nine very short, fragmentary movements – each tilting a broken mirror towards a particular passage in Schumann's work, and reflecting widely differing moods; from melancholy to elation.

The first of these is a meditation on the strange and haunting chorale near the end of Schumann's last movement.

This is followed by a *Musette* – commenting on the bagpipe-like passage that precedes the chorale. The fragments in turn reflect on the Schumann while working backwards through his quartet, arriving at *Kanon* which is the 8th fragment, and refers to the canonic opening of the Schumann.

As a coda, the 9th fragment literally reflects the chorale, by playing it backwards, juxtaposed with a reference on the viola to the *Liebeslied*.

My Third String Quartet, 'Reed Stanzas', was also written for the Elias, and it was a great pleasure to write for them again – having recently played my own 2-viola quintet, *Epilogue*, with them.

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Schumann String Quartet in A minor Op. 41 No. 1

We have to keep reminding ourselves how extraordinary it was that Robert Schumann, ardent Romantic, worked to such a rigorous schedule in the early 1840s. All the works he had published before this – two dozen of them – were for piano. He then devoted himself exclusively to songs in 1840, to orchestral scores in 1841, and to chamber pieces in 1842, beginning with three string quartets, which he wrote – and again this is extraordinary – over the course of 19 days (4-22 June).

Schumann's critical writings give us strong clues to his thinking when he came to produce these works. In the first place, it was important to him to bear in mind the genre's heritage and therefore the conditions of seriousness and integrity this heritage imposed. As preparation, he made a thorough study of the quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and of his friend Mendelssohn – less so Schubert, most of whose quartets were as yet unpublished. When all was done, Mendelssohn's admiration was the ultimate seal of approval, and it was to Mendelssohn that Schumann dedicated the works. Meanwhile, during the working process, his other main criterion had to do with quartet texture, how this had to be always 'by turns beautiful and even abstrusely woven conversation among four people'.

Schumann was also concerned in these works, as in the symphonies he had begun writing just before, to increase the continuity and wholeness of a four movement composition, and even, in this case, of a set of compositions. The three quartets, written simultaneously but with the first finished last, are in A minor, F major and A major, marking out a neat harmonic pattern: a step down by a third followed by a return back up to the starting point, but now in the major mode. This pattern is reproduced in miniature within the first quartet, whose opening movement has an introduction in A minor giving way to an *Allegro* in F major, succeeded by another such change from the *Scherzo* to the slow movement, the finale coming round to A major.

The introduction is not entirely in A minor, for its very beginning – a canon initiated by the violins – is more in the Phrygian mode, with, correspondingly, the air of a folk song. As the other instruments join in, A minor is established, and the mournful music moves through increasing tension to a close, at which point the *Allegro* takes over, with its sunny melody in 6/8 time. So easily does this theme dive among the keys that the proper dominant, C major, is only one step among many. Nor is there a clearly identifiable second subject, this function being taken by a passage of rushing quavers sparked off by the viola and hurrying from one decisive triad to another. Schumann replaces contrast with a colourful homogeneity, which works just as well to instigate development and recapitulation. A more intensively pulsed 6/8 takes over for the *Scherzo*, back in A minor, which brings forward Schumann's regard for Mendelssohn, though with a firmness all his own. The trio section, headed *Intermezzo*, is in a gorgeously chromatic and syncopated C major.

Continuing the alternation of keys, the slow movement in F major is a love song of superb harmonic richness. When the cello, in its tenor register, comes in to echo the violin, it is hard not to imagine Robert answering Clara. There is a dramatic middle section before contentment is resumed, now with Clara alone – though, of course, Robert is the one painting her portrait.

The finale duly opens back in A minor, with another sprinkle of Mendelssohnian fairy magic, coupled with folk dancing led by the viola and displays of counterpoint. There is enough energy here to carry the movement on to a finish, but everything stops for a glimpse of another world: a tune in octaves, gloriously turning the key to A major and heard in an atmosphere where the note A is sustained, also in octaves. The viola wants to start the old game, as it did before, but it is too late: the end is in sight.

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