

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 7 December 2024
7.30pm

Elias String Quartet

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

Robin Ireland viola

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quintet No. 5 in D K593

*I. Larghetto - Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto:
Allegretto • IV. Allegro*

Sally Beamish (b.1956)

Epilogue

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

String Quintet in G minor K516

*I. Allegro • II. Menuetto: Allegretto • III. Adagio
ma non troppo • IV. Adagio - Allegro*

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Mozart wrote his first string quintet with a second viola in 1773, when he was 17. Only much later, however, did his relationship with the genre take off, in three works of 1787–8 and two more that were almost certainly his last full-length instrumental works.

K593, in D major, dating from December 1790, was the first of this final pair. It starts with a slow introduction that has the cello letting droplets fall (though the gesture rises) to cause ripples in the levitating quartet of violins and violas. Accelerating energy becomes slow, steady. In an even broader rhythm, the pairing of idea and response replicates and shifts. The cello figure, no more than an arpeggio with a rhythmic kick, initiates much more than a brief adagio, for allusions to it keep cropping up, in the allegro that follows, with its second subject locked in counterpoint and its surprise final twist. Indeed, the references go on to the end. Such a mirrored surface is part of what makes the work luminous, and ineffable. We have entered a state of, to quote Scott Burnham in his wonderful book *Mozart's Grace*, 'otherworldly calm'.

In this state, the categories and conventions are observed, but from a remove. The slow movement makes a feature of the beautiful interplay available within the quintet between an upper trio, led by the first violin, and a lower, led by the first viola. It is also in a standard form, in which two subjects are exposed and recapitulated without an intervening development section. However, a great crisis leads to a passage where, over throbbing violas, the other instruments begin to go separate ways. As for the rest, syncopation unsettles the minuet, and the finale wears two masks, so that it can swivel from hilariousness to majesty.

Sally Beamish wrote her single, one-movement viola quintet, *Epilogue*, in 2011 for the Uppsala Chamber Soloists. Asked for a piece that could take its place in a programme of nocturnal music, she had not only a commission but a prompt: 'I took as my starting point the idea of the evening meeting that ends many Quaker events. This takes the form of a silent gathering: a chance to collect thoughts and to be together after the activities of the day. Often, there are many impressions still racing in one's head, but these subside into quiet contemplation, with occasional ministry given spontaneously'.

'The central theme', the composer goes on, 'is Tallis's Canon, which is sometimes sung at the end of Quaker worship as a prelude to night. All the material relates to this very simple melody'.

Normally sung to the words 'All Praise to Thee, My God this Night', or some near variant, the melody fully arrives around halfway through the eight-minute composition.

To go back to Beamish's note: 'The piece starts with the idea of quiet breathing, with interjections by individual instruments. These become more restless and insistent, until the canon is introduced by the violas, and the mood is once again calm, settling into very soft repeated pairs of chords—again, like breathing. The music builds from here into a unified climax, from where animated solos gradually merge into a second statement of the canon, this time beginning on high violins, and bringing the music to a close'.

We return to Mozart at an earlier point, when he composed his G minor quintet, entered it in his catalogue as finished on 16 May, 1787. This was only three and a half years before the D major quintet, but miles away. Instead of sovereign aloofness we have the sounds of stress: an abundance of the minor key, sudden stabs of pain and, on the rhythmic side, palpitations. G minor had this effect on Mozart; there are close comparisons with the G minor symphony (No. 40) of the following year. Or it may be that such expressive matter called up in his mind G minor as the appropriate key.

The work begins immediately in panic mode: a short motif (again a rising arpeggio, but so different) is answered by a falling chromatic scale, but not answered enough, and so there is a moment of confusion and a hasty close. We have to start again, another way, but with no more success. Everything is upset, not by distance this time but by immediacy, how the music boils. The second subject arrives still in G minor before righting itself to the expected major tonality. A coda leaves us with G minor buzzing in our ears to the end.

By turning now to the minuet, Mozart is able to keep it going. Dissonances (diminished chords) bully their way in on weak beats and so disrupt the dance. The trio is in G major but refers back to the minuet, so that the relief it brings is limited.

The hesitations of the slow movement, which is formally similar to that of the D minor quintet, have the same effect. The imagery of breath stopping, tears falling, is everywhere. 'No one else', Tchaikovsky wrote to his patroness, 'has ever known as well how to interpret so exquisitely in music the sense of resigned and inconsolable sorrow'.

And the grief continues, in what is not so much an introduction to the finale as a separate movement, back in G minor. It stumbles into G major for the finale proper, This is the place for ebullience, but it fails to happen. The music remembers all too well where it has been. Any smiles now have to come through tears.

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