

WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 7 February 2026

JACK Quartet

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

11.30am

Catherine Lamb (b.1982)

Two blooms (2009)

3.00pm

Hans Abrahamsen (b.1952)

Quartet No. 4 (2012)

I. Light and airy (High in the Sky Singing)
II. With motion (Dance of Light)
III. Dark, heavy and earthy (with a heavy groove)
IV. Gently Rocking (with utmost sensitivity, babbling)

Wolfgang Rihm (1952-2024)

String Quartet No. 3 'Im Innersten' (1976)

*I. Schroff • II. • III. • IV. Äusserst gedehnt •
V. • Zwischenspiel, senza tempo • VI.*

7.30pm

Helmut Lachenmann (b.1935)

String Quartet No. 3 'Grido' (2001)

Mes Adieux (2021-2)

Interval

String Quartet No. 1 'Gran Torso' (1971)

String Quartet No. 2 'Reigen seliger Geister' (1989)



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11.30am

Catherine Lamb Two blooms

Catherine Lamb composed this first string quartet in 2009, just three years after completing her studies at CalArts with James Tenney, to whom she dedicated the score. With its unusual requirements of the musicians – extended tones played without vibrato and tuned in just intonation with eighth-tone precision – the piece remained unperformed until 2015, when a group from the London Contemporary Orchestra presented it at the Festival Hall. The JACK took it up soon after, commissioned a second quartet (*divisio spiralis*, 2019), and recorded both works in 2021.

Lamb hears the piece as crystalline, for just as a crystal grows along dead straight lines to occupy more and more space, so here the music grows along what one might call live straight lines – lines fizzing very often with dissonances, beats and difference tones – to occupy more and more time. However, her subtitle, ‘two blooms’, suggests also a more organic kind of growth, where two groups of tones are set on paths of change that start from a unison, on middle C, and 45 minutes later reach a grand consonance.

The two groups may be heard together or separately, the effect being of two transparent curtains that may overlap or draw back to reveal one another. There are also short breaks along the way, less frequent as the work continues. Another gradual change is in the density of the harmony, which becomes more abrasive until its final clearing. The players must maintain true tuning and must play not only the notes but the interference patterns: the beats, ranging in speed from a throb to a flickering; the high difference tones that also come from how two tones react together; and the super-high harmonics that are intensified because all the instruments’ strings are tuned to C or G.

In a note to performers prefacing the score, Lamb proposes not only how to make the music but also what it will sound like and feel like:

time is slow so that tones fill the space
tones are held in relation to one another
tones are quiet, clear and smooth;
 blooming over time
 in isolation
 and
 in fusion

3.00pm

Hans Abrahamsen Quartet No. 4

Wolfgang Rihm String Quartet No. 3 ‘Im Innersten’

1952 was an excellent year for composers, those born then, besides these two, including Kaija Saariaho, Oliver Knussen, Gerald Barry, Heiner Goebbels and Philippe Manoury (not to mention John Williams). It is hard to see common features here, least of all between Abrahamsen and Rihm. Both began early, producing their first acknowledged works in their teens; both studied with prominent composers of the previous generation, Rihm with Stockhausen, Abrahamsen with Ligeti. But where Rihm took off, to average a bewildering ten works a year for half a century, Abrahamsen has always composed slowly, and went through periods of silence. Their quartet outputs tell the story in microcosm: four from Abrahamsen, 13 numbered works from Rihm, with other pieces besides.

Abrahamsen wrote his Fourth Quartet in 2012, its ‘basic idea’, he states in his own programme note ‘very clear’ to him: ‘It had to be quiet and soft music, or to put it in a German term: “hoch im Himmel gesungen” (Sung high in heaven).’

That is certainly how the first movement goes, initiated by the first violinist depressing strings in two places to bring out superhigh harmonics, at the top of the piano keyboard and beyond – though, depending on what harmonics are being played, the intonation may be delicately off. This, together with the register, gives the impression of tiny bells more than bowed strings. The melody rotates through just seven different notes, but yields no sense of a modal root, being so high. Abrahamsen then extends from it not by development but by addition. The melody is repeated, lightly varied and in a different rhythm and tempo, with a counter-melody from the second violin. Third time round, with more change, the viola chimes in. The cello comes in just to provide a point of arrival. Then it all happens again with a new, white-note melody and the same sequence of one-two-three contrapuntal parts, in sections that grow in length.

In the second movement, they become faster, and the music is now in four parts throughout as well as consistently white-note. To begin with, the violins are lower down in the heights, not playing harmonics any more, but still far above the viola and cello, who strike their strings with the wood of the bow in a busier rhythm. The pairs keep switching sides in terms of rhythmic character. A crescendo takes the movement into its coda.

For the composer, the pizzicatos all through the third movement sound like ‘big black raindrops falling to the ground’. There is also the effect, as in other works of his, of a limping rhythm. We are in ‘the dark and grainy counterpart to the first movement’, where

the one-two-three sequences go from the cello up, leaving the first violin just for the receiving gesture at the end of each half.

In a similar way, 'the fourth movement corresponds to the second. It was planned as a dark and heavy counterpart but it turned out to be like the "babbling" music of a child.'

'My Fourth String Quartet has become in its way a serene and cool piece', Abrahamsen concludes. 'So the quartet has been finished happily after more than twenty years, for it was back in 1990 that I was commissioned by the Witten Festival for New Chamber Music to write the piece for the Arditti.'

Rihm wrote his Third Quartet in 1976 for the 75th birthday of Alfred Schlee, head of Universal Edition, his publishing house for the half century and more of his prodigious creative life. The piece was first played the following year at Royan by the Bern String Quartet, who also introduced other important works of the time, notably Lachenmann's *Gran torso*.

Where Rihm's first two quartets had been teenage compositions not lasting more than ten minutes, in No. 3 he addressed himself to the classic scale of around half an hour. Written fast, in six and a half springtime weeks, the work seems to grow into that scale. Its first movement, opening abruptly, is restless from avoiding rest, from exiting situations of simplicity that open up: unisons, tonal harmonies. Behaving so, it exhausts itself in two minutes, mid-cadence.

The second movement soon reaches similar levels of intensity before being released, halfway through, by its arrival in a Mahlerian adagio. The escape, though, is short-lived.

In terms of tempo, the third movement goes in the reverse direction, from a muted andante, as if trying the angle of slow movement another way, to a hectic fling, all in two minutes again.

The fourth movement is slow all through, 'extremely stretched', as the marking has it, to the point intermittently of breakage.

More erratic in tempo, the fifth movement twice reaches moments where all the instruments are way above the treble staff. It snaps off for a brief and extremely quiet interlude of sustained chords.

The outcome is yet another slow movement, ten minutes long and far removed from the Mahler quasi-quotation of the second movement. Despair and desperation now have to go another way, through sudden assertions that go nowhere in a landscape of ruins.

7.30pm

Helmut Lachenmann String Quartet No. 3 'Grido'

Mes Adieux

Interval

String Quartet No. 1 'Gran Torso'

String Quartet No. 2 'Reigen seliger Geister'

Introducing his Third Quartet (2001), Helmut Lachenmann recalled how he began his adventures with the string quartet, in *Gran torso*, 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 susurrations, 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 here, 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 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 a piece that plays for 25 (similar in length, then, to the other works here).

In that first minute we are being taught how to listen – how to listen differently, in a way that will be useful for this work and those to follow. 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 stabilises 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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The span of Lachenmann's chamber music for strings is extended to half a century and brought near the present by the JACK's inclusion of his second string trio, *Mes Adieux* (2021-2). Where his first trio, composed in 1965, came from before the 'musique concrète instrumentale' period, this second comes from after. *GOT LOST* (2007-8) carried the endeavour to the last stronghold, that of the Lied, and at the same time introduced a new playfulness, not inappropriate for a composer into his seventies. His works since then have been various, with *My Melodies* (2008-18), for orchestra led by eight horns, and *Mes Adieux* the most substantial.

The trio begins with sounds that are quite definitely notes, departing into the scintillant high treble having left traces of former times (a common chord), sly humour and perhaps self-disgust. When, after three minutes or so, the music has gone and stayed gone, though faintly rustling up there, the old Lachenmann tricks begin to reawaken – the noises, the vocal sounds. The work then stays in a *pianissimo* zone before coming up again for air, as it were.

To quote the composer: 'In my most recent works it is not a question of venturing into the unknown, as before, but into the known. Listening becomes observation, and also self-observation, during the encounter – which often will also be the disconcerting collision – between our own structure and that of the work. In this new string trio, the encounter is with something that is perfectly familiar but that, seen in a new light, has become both foreign and on the point of taking its leave with a certain smiling "serenity."'

*

'What I want is always the same', Lachenmann wrote in 1971, the year he began his first string quartet, *Gran Torso*: 'art as a foretaste of freedom in an age without freedom'. In order to offer that foretaste, art would have to cross previously accepted boundaries, to demonstrate that limits are often just habits and that, always, more is possible – and more is useful – than we had ever imagined. Lachenmann had recently identified a whole continent of new territory in what he called 'instrumental musique concrète', where sounds may be drawn from the instrument in all kinds of unusual ways. Many composers and improvisers in the 1950s and 60s had introduced new instrumental practices, but generally as extensions or transgressions that, being such, kept the norms implicitly in place. Lachenmann wanted a wider democracy of sounds, within which those that had been regarded as marginal, exceptional, could function in richer and more manifold ways if they were treated as regular material. Thinking thus made possible a rush of creativity that culminated in *Gran Torso*, which he completed in 1972.

When new sounds are placed in an old context, they will often appear intrusive, distorted, even brutal. But one of the most striking features of *Gran Torso* is its gentleness, in terms not only of its dynamic level (which borders on silence, especially in the middle of the piece) but also of how the sounds comport themselves and interconnect. Strange as the soundscape may be, Lachenmann keeps the fundamental principles that music is about finding shape and continuity, about revealing the unexpected and touching the familiar, and that the string quartet, in particular, is about conversation (but of sounds more than lines) much more than it is about convention. Irregular techniques, on instruments that are retuned (though with one or two strings as normal), are prescribed in great detail, and in great variety; they bring forward sounds that are as highly differentiated as those of a classical quartet, and as open to use – by the composer and by the performers – in creating gestures, phrases, even melodies. One instrument can interrupt another, join it, undermine it, or whatever. The exploration of an area can lead into that of another, as we find here when, about a third of the way into the piece, the cello falls almost silent for a while, after which the viola carries the work's strained line forwards. And there is certainly the possibility of an ending that feels final.

This is one of the many paradoxes of *Gran Torso*, that the new sounds, in being new, seem to allow form to be projected as elegantly as in a quartet by Haydn. One might regard the first minute of the piece, separated from the rest by ten seconds of silence, as setting out the premises – sounds, expansions of sounds, routes from one sound to another, even motifs – on which the rest of the composition will be based. At the same time, however, any understanding of the music as coherent is purposely compromised, not just

by the unfamiliarity of the sounds but also by the unfamiliarity, and uncertainty, of their relationships. We may feel, for instance, that the second violin's upward sweep at the start raises the curtain on a phrase that ends with the cello's siren-like oscillation, a phrase within which the viola, with its threefold repetition of a super-high note, is sending out a signal, fruitlessly. But all these things could be interpreted in many different ways, and their value as initial data is highly debatable. One might just as well understand the work as constant invention. It is as if the composer has placed crampons on a cliff-face to assist the performers in negotiating a climb, in which they will be followed by their listeners. The challenge is new all the time, and the beauty.

Stillness is also important along the way. The long pause after the first minute may remind us that this is a 'big torso', a mere part, the composer has suggested, of what might be possible if all its 'structural areas' were to be thoroughly developed. This chunk is a project, not fully realised or fully realisable. In a way, Lachenmann's two subsequent quartets enlarge on this project, realise certain aspects of its potential. But the work itself remains magnificently alone.

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Gran Torso testifies to the excitement – and the wariness – Lachenmann felt in redefining the ensemble and the genre, at a time when modernist composers were avoiding a form so redolent of tradition. Nearly 20 years later, that situation had very much changed, and Lachenmann was a different composer, ready to admit more normal sounds, as well as more evident connections with the rhythms, shapes and harmonies of other music – even with the titles, in

the case of this Second Quartet (1989), whose subtitle is the normal German form for the 'Dance of the Blessed Spirits' in Gluck's *Orpheus* opera (though there is no specific reference to Gluck's music). In his attitude of exploring and testing, however, he was still very much the same.

A good deal of this Second Quartet is whisper-thin; the basic technique, the composer has noted, is a 'pressureless flautando', in which 'notes function more like shadows of sound', bringing us close to the sound world of his opera *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* (The Little Match Girl), which he was soon to begin. As in the opera, too, one may often get the impression that the music is not so much speaking as listening, that it is reporting on and responding to events somewhere beyond: crucial events, with which this is our only – and therefore invaluable – contact. There is, in other words, a curiously tangible transcendence.

'Following the adventure in my first string quartet *Gran Torso* with extraterritorial ways of playing the instrument', Lachenmann wrote, 'here the reappropriation of interval constellations...so that their realization will enable the natural acoustic edges of the produced tones – their timbral articulation, their muting, how they fade, how the vibrating strings are stopped (for example, also the alteration of the noise component by sliding the bow between the bridge and the fingerboard) – to create, through the "dead" tone-structure, a reborn object of experience.' The blessed spirits, then, are the normal (i.e. inherited) musical sounds, which here dance again, otherwise.

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