

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 8 July 2023
7.30pm

The String Quartet in New York City

Brooklyn Rider

Johnny Gandelsman violin
Colin Jacobsen violin
Nicholas Cords viola
Michael Nicolas cello

Caroline Shaw (b.1982)

Entr'acte (2011)

Julius Hemphill (1938-1995)

Better Get Hit In Your Soul from *Mingus Gold* (1988)

Colin Jacobsen (b.1978)

BTT (2015)

Interval

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Lullaby (1919 rev. c.1920)

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in F Op. 96 'American' (1893)

I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Lento •

III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Vivace ma non troppo

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Caroline Shaw *Entr'acte*

Entr'acte was written in 2011 after hearing the Brentano String Quartet play Haydn's Op. 77 No. 2 - with their spare and soulful shift to the D flat major trio in the minuet. It is structured like a minuet and trio, riffing on that classical form but taking it a little further. I love the way some music (like the minuets of Op. 77) suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolour transition.

© Caroline Shaw

Hemphill *Better Get Hit In Your Soul* from *Mingus Gold*

Mingus Gold is a 1988 work by saxophonist and composer Julius Hemphill, founding member of the World Saxophone Quartet and an integral voice in the New York City experimental jazz community. This singular work reframes three themes by the legendary bassist/composer Charles Mingus, imbuing them with a unique string quartet lens while simultaneously paying homage to a musical legend. 'Better Get Hit In Your Soul' is the final movement from *Mingus Gold*, the Mingus original appearing on his 1964 album *Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus*.

© Nicholas Cords

Colin Jacobsen *BTT*

BTT started off in my mind as an investigation into and celebration of the incredible creative ferment and experimentation of the 1970s/80s downtown New York scene as embodied by the likes of Glenn Branca, Meredith Monk, Arthur Russell, John Zorn, The Velvet Underground, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, the New York Dolls, Laurie Anderson, Mother Mallard's Portable Masterpiece Company and the Lounge Lizards, to name a few. However, I also found myself thinking about John Cage and Johann Sebastian Bach. This happened in part because a colleague of mine suggested that Cage was really the spiritual father of that whole scene, and I had this thought that he was tapping into the same elemental stuff that Bach did, though coming at it perhaps from an opposite point of view and obviously from a very different era. While Cage is known as a proponent of chaos, one realises that for every musical experiment he made, he set up a system of rules and then looked forward to what unfolded within that system (though often in extreme and unexpected juxtaposition). When we think of Bach and the cosmic order in his fugues, there's a similar setting up of parameters that almost has a pre-determined quality, but then there's that same sense of things unfolding in a natural and larger than human way.

All this to say that most of the musical material in *BTT* emanates from a spelling of B-A-C-H and C-A-G-E (D), which in and of itself sets up an interesting juxtaposition of tonalities. The BACH motif is chromatic and curls in on itself while the CAGE motif has an open and pentatonic feel. Over the course of the piece, the two motifs interact in a variety of ways; sometimes contradicting each other and sometimes in harmony. The resulting eclectic mix of sections may or may not relate to some of the above mentioned musicians.

© Colin Jacobsen

Gershwin *Lullaby*

George Gershwin's *Lullaby* of 1919 was originally written at the piano, prompted by his composition teacher, Hungarian émigré Edward Kilenyi. The one-movement work was subsequently cast for string quartet by Gershwin and was very warmly received in salons convened by Gershwin's circle of friends. While the main melody of *Lullaby* found its way into his opera *Blue Monday*, it wasn't until 1967 that the original string quartet was performed publicly (by the Juilliard String Quartet at the Library of Congress). When *Lullaby* was finally published in 1968, Ira Gershwin commented, 'It may not be the Gershwin of *Rhapsody in Blue*, Concerto in F, and his other concert works, but I find it charming and kind.'

© Nicholas Cords

Dvořák *String Quartet in F Op. 96 'American'*

'Nothing must be too low or too insignificant for the musician. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or blind organ-grinder. I myself am often so fascinated by these people that I can scarcely tear myself away, for every now and then I catch a strain or hear the fragments of a recurring melodic theme that sound like the voice of the people. These things are worth preserving, and no one should be above making a lavish use of all such suggestions. It is a sign of barrenness, indeed, when such characteristic bits of music exist and are not heeded by the learned musicians of the age.'

'Music in America' by Antonin Dvořák - *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, February 1895

We end the programme with the beloved 'American' String Quartet Op. 96 of Antonín Dvořák. Dvořák's tenure as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City from 1892-5 gave him a unique perspective on musical life in America that was to have a profound effect on his

creative output. Dvořák spent the summer of 1893 in the community of Spillville, Iowa. Finding comfort in the welcoming community of the Czech immigrants who settled the small hamlet, Dvořák found this setting musically fruitful. There, he completed many career-defining works including the 'New World' Symphony and the 'American' String Quintet. The 'American' String Quartet was completed in a mere three days that summer, thanks in part to his agreeable surroundings. Dvořák scribbled on the final page of the manuscript: 'Finished on 10 June, 1893 in Spillville. I'm satisfied. Thank God. It went quickly.'

There are many iconic features about this quartet. The slow movement, though not a direct quote, is much inspired by Dvořák's love of African American Spirituals, which he considered to be America's most quintessential music. In a *Harper's Magazine* article in 1895, Dvořák commented that 'The most potent as well as the most beautiful among them, according to my estimation, are certain of the so-called plantation melodies and slave songs, all of which are distinguished by unusual and subtle harmonies...'. Other distinguishing features of the quartet include a scherzo movement that mimics a birdsong he heard while in America, and outer movements that seem to be at least partially inspired by his fascination with trains (Dvořák, while in New York, was known to have spent many hours in rapt attention observing the trains coming and going).

It is worthwhile to note that Dvořák, who spent much of his life forging a Bohemian national musical

style out of the Austro-German tradition that he was taught, would come to America for a short period of three years and come up with some of the most treasured works in the classical canon. These works represent the successful intersection of the Austro-German tradition, the national style of his homeland, and an assimilation of his experience in America. It is not an exaggeration to make the claim that some of the most compelling music throughout history has been the by-product of converging influences, later synthesised by a singular artistic vision.

One parting thought: Dvořák was instrumental in opening the door for the American composer to look to indigenous sources for musical inspiration rather than towards the European continent. From the same *Harper's Magazine* article of 1895: 'My own duty as a teacher, I conceive, is not so much to interpret Beethoven, Wagner, or other masters of the past, but to give what encouragement I can to the young musicians of America... I myself, as I have always declared, believe firmly that the music that is most characteristic of the nation whence it springs is entitled to the highest consideration.' It is interesting to ponder the indirect role of Dvořák in the history of jazz: his student in New York, Will Marion Cook, was to become a mentor to Duke Ellington. It is also perfectly possible to muse that Dvořák emancipated many future generations of American composers - perhaps we are still feeling the ripple he set in motion?

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