

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 9 February 2022 7.30pm

**Danny Driver** piano

**Chloë Hanslip** violin

**Arditti Quartet**

**Irvine Arditti** violin

**Ralf Ehlers** viola

**Ashot Sarkissjan** violin

**Lucas Fels** cello

**Andrew Zolinsky** piano

**Alec Frank-Gemmill** horn

CLASSIC *f*M

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Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

**György Ligeti** (1923-2006)

3 pieces for 2 pianos (1976)

*Monument • Selbstportrait • Bewegung*

**György Kurtág** (b.1926)

From *Játékok* (pub. 1979)

Köd-kánon (Fog Canon) •

Hommage à Sárközy - Kéz a Kézben (Hand in Hand) •

Hommage à Stravinsky - Harangok (Bells) •

Hommage à Sáy László - Pöttyön pötty (Dot and Spot)

**Conlon Nancarrow** (1912-1997)

From *Studies for Player Piano* (1951-60) arranged by Thomas Adès

Study No. 6 • Study No. 7

## Interval

**György Ligeti**

String Quartet No. 1 'Métamorphoses nocturnes' (1953-4)

*Allegro grazioso – Vivace, capriccioso – Adagio, mesto – Presto –*

*Prestissimo – Andante tranquillo – Tempo di valse, moderato, un poco*

*capriccioso – Subito prestissimo – Allegretto, un poco gioviale –*

*Prestissimo – Ad libitum, senza misura – Lento*

Trio for violin, horn and piano (1982)

*I. Andantino con tenerezza • II. Vivacissimo molto ritmico •*

*III. Alla marcia • IV. Lamento. Adagio*

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It is rare for any successful counter-culture not to enter the mainstream it once set out to subvert. Many composers of modern music, for want of a better name, had moved from their place among post-war Europe's cultural disruptors to join the established order by the 1970s, collectively harvesting lucrative commissions and public funds to create what in hindsight appears to be a cosy club of musical powerbrokers and opinion-formers. **György Ligeti** could easily have followed the trend, especially so after the acclaimed first staging of his only opera *Le Grand Macabre* in 1978. Instead he withdrew from composition and, apart from two short pieces for harpsichord, wrote almost nothing for five years while contemplating fresh ideas and providing space for his already complex musical language to evolve.

'This evening's programme encompasses Ligeti's chamber music with piano from an important period in the development of his music,' notes Danny Driver. 'It also includes his early 'Métamorphoses nocturnes' as well as works for piano by other composers that have connections to Ligeti. The 3 Pieces for 2 pianos from 1976 are his first substantial piano works since *Musica ricercata* from the early 1950s. They coincided with Ligeti's permanent appointment to the Musikhochschule in Hamburg, where he finally had a piano to work on after years of moving between Berlin and Vienna. He became reacquainted with the piano through playing chamber music classics with his Hamburg students. These 3 Pieces contain traces of his late style, which emerged fully in 1982 with the Horn Trio.'

*Játékok* ('Games') is the collective name given to eight volumes of piano pieces by Ligeti's younger compatriot and friend, **György Kurtág**. Begun in 1973 and originally intended to offer children a way of making music unencumbered by the conventional notation of the standard piano repertoire, they opened their composer's mind to the creative forces of unselfconscious spontaneity, intuition and improvisation. Danny Driver has chosen a selection of 'Games' from the collection's fourth volume, first published in 1979, pieces that combine radical experiment with respect for the traditions of a musical past spanning everything from Gregorian chant to the music of Bach, Schumann, Bartók and Webern.

During the 1970s Ligeti played a leading part in rescuing the music of **Conlon Nancarrow** from obscurity. The American maverick had been censured in the United States for his membership of the communist party and participation on the Republican side, as a member of the Lincoln Brigade, against General Franco's nationalist forces during the Spanish Civil War (1936-9). Nancarrow moved to Mexico City in 1940, survived there with the aid of an inheritance and took Mexican citizenship in 1956. He had been a trumpeter in his youth, playing with jazz bands and classical ensembles, and subsequently enrolled as a student at the Cincinnati Conservatory. It was here that he developed a lasting fascination for rhythmic complexity after hearing a performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Having failed to graduate, Nancarrow took private lessons in composition from Nicolas Slonimsky, Roger Sessions and Walter Piston.

Nancarrow's early works for piano soon became too difficult for even the most dexterous of pianists. The composer, in search of a practical answer to the problem of performing his music, was inspired by Henry Cowell's pioneering book *New Musical Resources* to buy a player piano and bespoke roll-punching machine. The technology enabled him to create around 50 studies for player piano, breathtaking and often overwhelming in their range of rhythmic invention and mathematical ingenuity. Their rediscovery, observed Ligeti, was 'something great and important for all music history!' Nancarrow's music, he continued, 'is so utterly original, enjoyable, perfectly constructed, but at the same time emotional ... for me it's the best music of any composer living today.'

Thomas Adès's transcriptions of Nancarrow's Studies Nos. 6 & 7, first performed in 2011, fall within the grasp of two pianists, albeit those with an unshakeable sense of rhythmic pulse. The bluesy Study No. 6 is built around a bass line restated throughout the piece in constantly changing form by the second pianist's left hand; Study No. 7, meanwhile, opens with what sounds like scale practice en masse at a music school. The composition's irresistible fragmentary melodies are held together by reiterated irregular rhythmic patterns and formal repetition.

'The machine-like nature of Nancarrow's music, the things that are seemingly divorced from human emotion, actually have a powerful emotional resonance,' notes Danny Driver. 'His Studies pointed Ligeti towards a type of heightened musical expression that ideally suits human virtuosity.' Those qualities surface in the metrical complexity and playfulness of Ligeti's Horn Trio, the final piece in tonight's programme, which also pays homage to Brahms, the instrumentation of his Horn Trio of 1865 and the rich emotions and individualism of Romantic music.

Regarding his First String Quartet long after its composition in 1953-4, Ligeti observed that the work contained 'certain characteristics of my later music'. These included its foundation in the process of formal transformation (or metamorphosis). The piece, the composer explains, may be 'considered as having just one movement or also as a sequence of many short movements that melt into one another without pause or which abruptly cut one another off.' Ligeti subjects a melodic idea built from two major seconds and their transposition by a semitone to continuous transformation, the results breathless at times, meditative and calm at others. Despite containing the seeds of his mature work, the quartet evokes an earlier period of musical expressionism. 'It is not tonal music,' notes Ligeti, 'but it is not radically atonal, either. The piece still belongs firmly to the Bartók tradition (remember my situation as a composer in Hungary at the beginning of the fifties), yet despite the Bartók-like tone (especially in the rhythm) and despite some touches of Stravinsky and Alban Berg, I trust that the First String Quartet is still personal work.'

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