

# Elias String Quartet and Robin Ireland

Thursday 5 December 2024, 7.30pm



The Elias Quartet  
Sara Bitlloch violin  
Donald Grant violin  
Simone van der Giessen viola  
Marie Bitlloch cello  
Robin Ireland viola

Mozart String Quintet No 5 in D K593  
Sally Beamish Epilogue

Interval

Mozart String Quintet in G minor K516

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91)

String Quintet in D, K593

I. Larghetto – Allegro – Larghetto – Primo  
Tempo

II. Adagio

III. Menuetto – Trio

IV. Allegro assai

Mozart wrote his first string quintet with a second viola in 1773, when he was seventeen. 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 (b. 1956)

'Epilogue'

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.'

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

String Quintet in G minor, K516

I. Allegro

II. Menuetto: Allegretto – Trio

III. Adagio ma non troppo

IV. Adagio – Allegro

We return to Mozart at an earlier point, when he composed his G minor quintet, entered it in his catalogue as finished on May 16, 1787. This was only three and a half years before the D major quintet, but miles away. Instead of sovereign aloofness we have the 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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The Elias String Quartet is celebrated for its deep musical understanding and bold performances, which have earned the ensemble an international following and frequent tours across Europe and the US. Their ability to convey profound musical meaning, especially across entire quartet cycles, has made them a fixture in the world's most prestigious concert halls and festivals.

Since their rise to prominence as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists in 2009, the quartet has made Wigmore Hall a second home, having completed cycles there of Beethoven, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. Their innovative Beethoven Project, in which they shared their research and insights on the composer's complete string quartets online, demonstrated their commitment to both musical excellence and audience engagement, with performances at eleven different venues across the UK, including Wigmore Hall.

They are regular visitors to prestigious festivals around the world, with recent visits to

Schubertiade, Rheingau Musik Festival and Bal y Gay Festival, and they perform in the world's great chamber venues, including Carnegie Hall, Library of Congress, Vienna's Musikverein, Berlin Konzerthaus and Amsterdam's Concertgebouw. They recently toured the US and Canada with a complete Beethoven quartet cycle, before taking it to Suntory Hall, Tokyo. This season's highlights include a Mendelssohn programme at the Oslo Quartet Series and visits to Norwich Chamber Music and Turner Sims. The players are keen advocates of contemporary music. Last season they gave the world premiere of Judith Bingham's Clarinet Quintet at the Three Choirs Festival and have commissioned many works from composers such as Emily Howard, Sally Beamish, Colin Matthews and Timo Andres. They also enjoy collaborations with chamber music partners such as Leon Fleisher, Robert Plane, Michael Collins, Joan Rogers and Mark Padmore, and the Jerusalem and Vertavo quartets.

As articulate representatives for classical

music, the players are often invited to perform and discuss music on radio and have appeared on BBC TV's Newsnight programme. They are committed to coaching the next generation of chamber musicians, teaching at the Royal Northern College of Music, where they themselves met and formed in 1998. They also studied at the Hochschule in Cologne with the Alban Berg Quartet. Other mentors included Peter Cropper, Hugh Maguire, György Kurtág, Gábor Takács-Nagy, Henri Dutilleux and Rainer

Schmidt.

The Elias String Quartet's discography includes Schumann and Dvořák piano quintets with Jonathan Biss (Onyx), French harp music with Sandrine Chatron (Ambroisie), Alexander Goehr's Piano Quintet with Daniel Becker (Meridian), Britten quartets (Sonimage), Mendelssohn (ASV Gold) and the complete Beethoven quartets (Wigmore Hall Live).

Robin Ireland was violist with the celebrated Lindsay String Quartet between 1985 and 2005, and with the Primrose Piano Quartet from 2007 till 2015. He was Head of Chamber Music at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire from 2014 till 2021. He now performs as a soloist and freelance chamber musician and continues to teach, coach chamber music and give master classes. He has recorded two CDs for viola and piano with Tim Horton, on the Nimbus label, and in 2024 completed his recording of the six Bach Cello Suites, on viola.

Robin was a student at Cambridge University and at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York. He had a short spell as leader of the Las Palmas Symphony Orchestra while still a violinist and subsequently became a founder member of the Piano Quartet, Domus,

which toured with its own portable concert hall (a geodesic dome) as well as having great success in more conventional venues.

Robin is also a composer, and has a CD of his String Quartet and three Duos, 'Pairings' on the Meridian label. During Covid lockdown, he made arrangements for four violas of the fugues and other movements from Bach's Sonatas for unaccompanied violin and these are available as a recording of a live concert.

Robin now lives in Brittany, and in addition to his work in the UK is exploring new avenues for making music locally, as well as composing and arranging.

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