

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Renaissance Quartet with Randall Goosby

Saturday 4 May 2024, 3pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Price String Quartet No.1 in G

16'

Daniel Hass String Quartet No.1 (Love and Levity)
(European premiere)

35'

Interval

Brahms String Quartet in A minor, Op.51 No.2

32'

Performers

Renaissance Quartet

Randall Goosby *violin*
Jeremiah Blacklow *violin*
Jameel Martin *viola*
Daniel Hass *cello*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours with a 20-minute interval.

Florence Price (1887–1953)

String Quartet No.1 in G (1929)

1. *Allegro*

2. *Andante moderato – Allegretto*

In 1943 Florence Price wrote to the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, looking for support: 'My dear Dr Koussevitzky, To begin with I have two handicaps – those of sex and race...'. Koussevitzky ignored her but Price was undeterred, and by the 1930s she had become the most famous African American woman composer in the world. Her Symphony in E minor won first prize in the Rodman Wanamaker competition in 1932 and was premiered in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony, making her the first Black woman to have an orchestral piece played by a

major US orchestra. When Marian Anderson performed Price's *Songs to the Dark Virgin* (1941) at a concert arranged by Eleanor Roosevelt at the Lincoln Memorial, the *Chicago Daily News* hailed the occasion as 'one of the greatest immediate successes ever won by an American song'.

Even so, the obstacles Price faced on account of the 'handicaps' mentioned in her letter led to the neglect of her music until recently – a situation compounded by the fact that many of her scores were lost until their rediscovery in 2009, when they were found languishing in a dilapidated house. Price's String Quartet No.1 in G is a relatively early work, dating from 1929, just before her career took off. Price's music is often characterised by the combination of Romantic idioms with elements derived from African American spirituals and folk music, and the Quartet is no exception, with a lyricism reminiscent of Tchaikovsky used to articulate traditional thematic material.

The work is cast in two movements and has therefore been assumed to be unfinished. The glorious first movement, in sonata form, opens with a warm, open-air sonority, the spirit of which is echoed in the waltzing secondary theme. The treatment of the instruments is intricate and finely-wrought throughout, with an assured sense of balance and flow. Price guides her forces through more complex terrain – chromaticism, counterpoint – with a sense of ease and inevitability, creating an impression of fluidity that belies the movement's taut structure.

The second movement draws more overtly on vernacular music, with a steady, pentatonic opening that movingly evokes African American spirituals, the first violin singing the melody. The quicker material comprises a minor-key, syncopated section reminiscent of the tango and punctuated by pizzicato. The work ends with delicious harmonies, and with great serenity. Perhaps the finale was never written (or is hiding in another house somewhere); or perhaps Price felt that she had said all she needed to say. In any case, she had shown her mastery of the form in these two movements, and would go on to write a powerful Second String Quartet in 1935.

Daniel Hass (b. 1997)

String Quartet No.1 (Love and Levity) (2021, European premiere)

1. *Adagio – Andante con moto*
2. *Scherzo (Hermit's Waltz)*
3. *Largo*
4. *Allegro Vivace*

Israeli-Canadian cellist and composer Daniel Hass is one of the founding members of the Renaissance String Quartet, with whom he gave the world premiere of his String Quartet No.1 (Love and Levity) in April 2023. Hass' output reflects a diverse musical background, ranging from works in traditional classical forms to arrangements of music by Bob Marley. His String Quartet No.1 encapsulates this cultural range; the structural foundations and lyrical language of the quartet repertoire frame allusions to jazz and contemporary music, often expressed via music of dazzling virtuosity.

The work is in four movements and opens with a harmonically rich slow introduction, before dramatic, propulsive rhythms urge the first movement onwards, the textures putting the listener in mind of an eclectic range of influences from Ravel to Shaker music to minimalism – Hass cites Steve Reich as a composer he admires. Atonality undermines functional harmony; detuning effects undermine pitch.

The second movement sounds like a more experimental Reinhardt and Grappelli, whereas the third is a slowly-unfolding, elegiac meditation. Opening with vigorous pizzicato in all four instruments, the last movement has the skittish energy and folk-like contours of a hoe-down which, as with the first two movements, is wittily filtered through the distorting prism of Hass' imagination.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

String Quartet in A minor, Op.51 No.2 (1873)

1. *Allegro non troppo*
2. *Andante moderato*
3. *Quasi Minuetto, moderato*
4. *Finale: Allegro non assai*

Brahms' two Op.51 String Quartets, like much of his music, were subject to a long and bumpy journey from conception to publication. Brahms' friend, the virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim, is first recorded asking about the quartets in 1865,

after which Clara Schumann alluded to 'two beautiful quartet movements' by Brahms in her diary entry of 10 June 1869. When his publisher Simrock pressed Brahms for the quartets, the composer gave this response: 'Mozart took particular trouble in writing six beautiful quartets, so I will do my very best to turn out one or two passable ones.'

Eventually, the two revised Op.51 Quartets emerged in 1873, described by Brahms in his catalogue as 'written for the second time Summer 1873, Tutzing, begun earlier.' The A minor Quartet, Op.51 No.2, was dedicated to Brahms' friend, the surgeon Theodor Billroth, but it seems likely that it was originally intended for Joachim, since the work's opening theme is based around the notes F-A-E, an apparent reference to Joachim's motto, *Frei, aber einsam* ('Free, but lonely'). Brahms and Joachim experienced tensions in their friendship on a fairly regular basis, and the composer's decision to change the Second Op.51 Quartet's dedicatee may have occurred on account of Joachim's failure to include Brahms' *Deutsches Requiem* in the Schumann Festival of Bonn, of which he was Director.

Following the 'Joachim' motif and a rhythmically distinctive main theme, Brahms marks the second theme with the vivid direction *sempre mezza voce, grazioso ed animato* – literally, 'in a low voice, graceful and animated'. The slow movement's main theme is essentially an inverted version of this second theme, performed at first in a texture of pared-down Classicism recalling Haydn: first-violin melody accompanied by viola and cello in octaves. This blossoms into the full quartet texture, juxtaposed with a more Schubertian outburst of minor-key agitation.

The third movement combines a minuet that also wears its 18th-century precedents on its sleeve, contrasted with a more up-to-date, though delicate, scherzo. The finale features a characteristic Brahmsian device: rhythmic tension between metrical units of two and three, here accentuated by theme and accompaniment engaged in a tussle between these two rhythmic groupings, eventually resolved before the work's resounding, minor-key conclusion. Throughout, this fascinating push-pull between older and newer trends anticipates the words of Arnold Schoenberg in his essay, *Brahms the Progressive*: 'He would have been a pioneer if he had simply returned to Mozart. But he did not live on inherited fortune; he made his own.'

Programme notes © Joanna Wylid, 2024

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