

BEETHOVEN BARTÓK NOW

Solem
LATES

welcome to **BBN: Experiments**

“Art demands of us that we shall not stand still.” In these ten short words written to his friend, the violinist Karl Holz, Beethoven reveals the artistic sentiment perhaps most true to his core beliefs, most significant in his musical identity. The **Grosse Fugue** sits at the edge of human understanding, and at the forefront of human artistic achievement. A wild and ferocious beast, at times only just contained within its formal limits, it is a work that has challenged audiences and performers alike since its conception.

Bartók’s folk music collecting in the early part of the twentieth century imbued him with a love and fascination for the music, and the way of life, of the peasant people around Hungary and Eastern Europe. In his **44 Duos for Two Violins** (some of which will be heard tonight in their original and transcribed for viola and cello) we hear the essence of that folk music in an undiluted form; in the **Third Quartet**, we hear the composer experimenting with that material, considering, extending, and developing it.

As well as appreciating the pure daring and bold-

ness of these composers, key to tonight’s programme too is hearing the stories behind the experiments in the form of the composers’ writings. In the context of Beethoven’s struggle with his deafness, compounded by upheaval in his personal life, the **Grosse Fugue** can be viewed as a work of enormous defiance and dignity. Bartók’s **Third Quartet**, similarly, can be seen as a sorrowful reflection of a world disrupted by war, but simultaneously as a celebration of the people and the folk music he loved.

Composer, singer, cellist Ayanna Witter-Johnson has written a new work commissioned for BBN: Experiments. **Island Suite** is a deeply personal work, about “the foundation of knowing who you are and where you come from”. Drawing inspiration from Bartók’s desire to find a true Hungarian voice by delving into folk music, Witter-Johnson has looked to her own Jamaican roots, taking motivation from the rich culture of the island, particularly and pertinently, the tradition of storytelling. In doing so, Witter-Johnson has experimented with the quartet form itself, creating a masterful piece of music-theatre.

Bartók

44 Duos excerpts

No. 1. Teasing Song; No. 4. Midsummer Night Song; No. 27. Limping Dance; No. 32. Dance from Máramaros; No. 28. Sorrow

Bartók

Quartet No. 3

First Part, Second Part, Recapitulation of the First Part, Coda

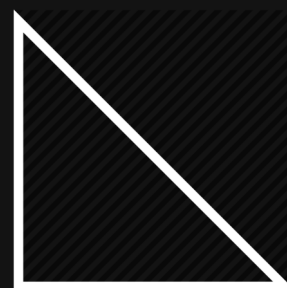
Beethoven

Grosse Fugue, Op. 133

Witter-Johnson

Island Suite

1. Sound the Abeng! 2. Dem Kyaahn Kech Dem! 3. Fire-Back! 4. The Manifesto 5. Echoes of the Past 6. Saturday Night 7. Interlude 8. Linstead Market 9. Remembering 10. Postlude



Many of Bartók's **44 Duos for Two Violins**, composed in 1931, were based on his early work collecting the folk music of the various peoples of Eastern Europe. In this sense he was at the cutting edge of experimentation – moving away from the Central European tradition and seeking a true Hungarian voice. In these miniatures, Bartók captures the sounds and scenes of the places he visited: pieces such as *Limping Dance* and *A Midsummer Night Song*, both heard tonight, have such a strong sense of identity packed into their modest framework – immediately taking the listener into a village scene. The language of this music, its rhythms and patterns, embedded its way into Bartók's own compositional voice.

Readings from letters to Erich Moritz von Hornbostel 1912; Irma Freund, 1908; Dumitru G Kiriac 1910; Janos Busita 1912; Etelka Freund 1911; Janos Busitia 1917; Janos Busitia, 1931.

Coupled with the celebration of folk music, is a devastating sense of loss in Bartók's **Third Quartet**, written in 1926. The post-war years were perhaps more destructive than the war itself in the places where he had previously worked, as geopolitics caused huge disruption to the lives of the people he had encountered on his travels.

The **First Part** begins in a cold, near-desolate world, where fragments of a distant tune are offered. Bartók takes us by the hand as if inspecting an unknown entity from all angles, trying out new versions of this melody set against an ever-changing backdrop. We hear the tune in full only at the culmination of the First Part; the music of this opening is therefore a sort of development in reverse, as if layers are shed away to reveal a soulful and simple melody. Based on a pentatonic scale, a key feature of folk music around the world, it is played by the second violin and viola humming in unison. A stamping dance takes over in the **Second Part** as twists and turns fill the air. Sometimes flat-footed, sometimes scurrying, dance tunes pile on top of each other, forcing changes in tempo and metre. The energy and vitality of the music reaches an almost ritualistic intensity, with the four instruments wailing and barking together, before dissipating into a **Recapitulation of the First Part**. The music feels more introverted here than before, introspective rather than inquisitive, and there is no return of that soulful melody. A very quiet, very quick segue leads to a fast and frantic **Coda**, which sees a return of the rhythms of the Second Part, and in turn, a final triumphant dance.

Readings from *Heiligenstadt Testament*, 1802; and letters to Moritz Schlesinger 1826; Karl Holz 1826.

Beethoven's Grosse Fugue Op. 133, composed in 1825 had an uneasy birth. Originally written as the final movement to the Op. 130 quartet, Beethoven was uncharacteristically persuaded by his publishers [via Karl Holz, a friend and second violinist of the Schuppanzigh Quartet who had premiered the work,] to write a more friendly Finale to the Op. 130, and publish the Grosse Fugue as a standalone piece.

Igor Stravinsky, himself an ever-experimental, ever-evolving composer, called the Grosse Fugue "an absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever." At times violent and aggressive, at times tender – ultimately, this work speaks to triumph in the face of adversity.

Musicologists have argued over how to analyse the form of the Grosse Fugue, and really there is no perfect description. Given its scope, however, the work can perhaps be most easily viewed via a symphonic lens – i.e. in four movements - to help dispel its seemingly impenetrable nature.

The opening statement, played in unison between the four instruments, is angular and aggressive. It is these notes from out of which everything ahead will evolve. Breathless fragments, not yet fully formed, complete the Overture.

What follows is the first Fugue, or first movement; starting with an argument between two voices, the first violin and viola, quickly these ideas are imitated by the other parts and developed, creating a multi-layered interweaving texture, each lurching turn building a sense of danger and chaos. After what feels like a furious explosion of energy, the music gives way to an intensely quiet passage, taking the place of a slow second movement: a sea of tranquillity amidst the storm.

The mood is broken by an almost comic rendition of the main subject, like a Scherzo movement, dancing and light of foot. Quickly though, another Fugue lurches us back into a furious character. But this time, each gear shift, rather than lurching into a darker and more hectic world, seems to take us upwards, or towards some sort of triumph over the chaos. Eventually it feels we reach that triumph in a quasi-finale movement, except - when fragments from the overture are repeated, as if shouting, and then whispering, into a chasm - we are left not knowing which way the music will turn, until the briefest coda defiantly brings the Grosse Fugue to its end in the triumphant home key.

The mysterious sound of the Abeng, a traditional horn instrument of Jamaica, opens **Island Suite**, taking us to a distant, historic, perhaps mythological world. Interweaving narration with music for the five instruments - sometimes melodic, sometimes percussive – Witter-Johnson tells the story of Queen Nanny, the leader of the Windward Maroons, a community in Jamaica of formerly enslaved Africans. After the opening segments, *The Manifesto* feels suddenly much more reflective; as each of the four quartet members perform expressive solos, Witter-Johnson's narration turns inwards asking "Whose stories do I tell?". The music that follows is soulful but sparse before *Saturday Night* begins joyfully to tell the story of the composer's own life. A beautifully honest rendition of *Linstead Market* feels like a bridge between the past and the present, because, as the narration of the *Postlude* tells us: "Oral histories must be spoken to stay alive".

Amy Tress
William Newell
Stephen Upshaw
Stephanie Tress

photo Matthew Johnson



Praised for their “immaculate precision and spirit” (The Strad) and “cultured tone” (Arts Desk), The Solem Quartet has established itself as one of the most innovative and adventurous quartets of its generation. A 2020 awardee of the Jerwood Arts Live Work Fund, the Solem Quartet takes its place amongst some of the UK’s brightest artistic voices. Winners of the prestigious Royal Over-Seas League Ensemble Competition in 2014, they enjoy a busy concert schedule ranging from performances at venues such as London’s Wigmore and Queen Elizabeth Halls, to international chamber music festivals and tours in Europe and Asia.

Passionate about collaborating with the composers of their time, the Quartet have worked closely with Anna Meredith, Colin Matthews and Thomas Adès and recently gave the UK premiere of Jonny Greenwood’s Suite from “There Will be Blood” (for string quartet) at the V&A Museum. Their groundbreaking series ‘Solem Lates’ was created in 2019, with the aim of presenting classical music in a fresh way and reaching broader audiences. Their projects have included bringing music for quartet + electronics to nightclubs around the UK, performing Bartók’s 3rd Quartet from memory, and collaborating with Picturehouse Cinemas to bring Yorgos Lanthimos’ *The Lobster* to life through live score performances alongside the iconic film.

‘The Four Quarters’, the Solem Quartet’s debut album, was released on Orchid Classics in September 2021. Using Thomas Adès’ *The Four Quarters* as a framework – and featuring several arrangements by the ensemble – this CD explores composers’ depictions of night and day and all the moments in between.

Begun in 2021, their *Beethoven Bartók Now* project presents the works of these two giants alongside 6 major commissions, often collaborating with other artists and performers to bring new life to the music. One of the surrounding components of this far-reaching project is *Writing for Quartet*, generously supported by the Royal Philharmonic Society, a biannual workshop for composers of all backgrounds.

Since 2016 they have been Quartet in Residence at the University of Liverpool as well as Ensemble in Residence at Aberystwyth MusicFest.

Ayanna Witter Johnson | @AyannaWJ

Ayanna Witter-Johnson is a multi-talented singer, songwriter, pianist and cellist successfully crossing the boundaries of classical, jazz, reggae and R&B music. Graduating with a first-class degree from both the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music & Dance, and the Manhattan School of Music, Ayanna has been commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra, Gürzenich Orchester, Ligeti Quartet, Kronos Quartet, Philharmonia, Solem Quartet and The Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company to name a few.

As a second-generation Jamaican born in Britain, Ayanna’s virtuosic, maverick cellist and vocal style effortlessly blends classical music with her reggae and soul heritage. It is this unique blend that takes her from performing in venues as diverse as Wigmore Hall in central London to McHughs in Belfast.

Releasing her debut album ‘Road Runner’ in 2019, Ayanna is about to embark on her sophomore album. Additional recorded material includes four EPs which have received numerous airplay on radio stations, including BBC Radio 1, 1xtra, BBC Radio 2, 3, 4, 6, and Jazz FM. TV credits include BBC One, London Live, Channel 4, BBC Proms and a stunning performance on Later...with Jools Holland (BBC1).

Gaining nominations from AIM Awards (Best Live Act) and MOBO Award, Ayanna was also a co-writer and featured artist on Anoushka Shankar’s single ‘Those Words’ from the Grammy-nominated ‘Love Letters’ EP, similarly co-writing and featuring with Nitin Sawhney on his stunning single ‘Movement Variation II’.

Straddling both the classical and black music worlds effortlessly with her musical prowess, enchanting vocals, non-compromising lyrics and ability to deftly reinterpret songs on the cello, Ayanna is the definition of eclectic soul.



photo Bumi Thomas

The Solem Quartet are extremely grateful for financial assistance for *Beethoven Bartók Now* from Carol Nixon, Peter and Veronica Lofthouse, and a number of individual donors, as well as the following organisations:

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