



Phaedra Ensemble

Gavin Bryars at 80
with special guest Laura Jurd

**HOWARD
ASSEMBLY
ROOM**

Sat 2 Dec 2023
6.45pm

Programme

Gavin Bryars in conversation with **Dominic Gray**, Projects Director, Opera North

Gavin Bryars (b. 1943) String Quartet No.4 (2019-20)

Laura Jurd (b. 1990) New Work for String Quartet + Improvised Trumpet (2023)

INTERVAL

Gavin Bryars (b. 1943) *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969–)

Gavin Bryars Text by **Juan Muñoz** (1953-2001) *A Man in a Room, Gambling* (1997)

Gavin Bryars 1, 2, 1-2-3-4 (1971)

Artists

Phaedra Ensemble
Zahra Benjounis violin
Phillip Granell violin
Miguel Sobrinho viola
Sergio Serra cello

With special guests:

Laura Jurd
Gavin Bryars

Audio mixing and Visuals by **Jamie Hamilton**

Supported by Arts Council England, PRSF and
The Vaughan Williams Foundation

Gavin Bryars String Quartet No. 4 (2019-20)

There is a gap of over 22 years between my third and fourth string quartets, and this new one is inevitably conditioned by the evolution of my work through that period. During that time, I have written a great deal of music originating in mediaeval and renaissance forms. For example, I am on my seventh book of madrigals, much of which sets Petrarca and since 2002 I have composed new versions of the entire collection of the 12th century *Laude Cortonese* manuscripts resulting in 54 works for voices. Curiously enough, however, although I have written much for strings over the years, whether for orchestra or in chamber music, I have often omitted violins! Indeed, at the heart of my own ensemble is a quartet of strings, two violas, cello and double bass – as a bass player I have a strong feeling for the lower sonorities – but these four string instruments are not a string quartet. The string quartet, more than any other ensemble format, is defined by the four instruments that have maintained a historical pedigree from Haydn through to Shostakovich and beyond, and any composer embarking on a string quartet does so in the light of its history.

The differences between my fourth quartet and the others is strongly conditioned by aspects of early music. In many places the harmonic range is greatly simplified, especially at the beginning and towards the end. Often the instruments are played without vibrato, or are bowed *sul tasto* to give a quasi-baroque sound, or quasi ponticello like a consort of viols (and I have a number of works for viol consort too). There are solo lines for individual instruments that have the quality of a vocal *lauda*, and, at the same time, there are sections where instruments share melodic material, like extended vocal lines, maintaining the essential extended four-way conversational character that has been the essence of the ensemble throughout its long and rich history.

The fourth string quartet is dedicated to my friend Carlo Boccadoro, and to the Smith Quartet, who have played all my quartets, and who I have known and worked with for many years.

© Gavin Bryars



Gavin Bryars

The Sinking of the Titanic (1969)

This piece originated in a sketch written for an exhibition in support of beleaguered art students at Portsmouth in 1969. Working as I was in an art college environment I was interested to see what might be the musical equivalent of a work of conceptual art. It was not until 1972 that I made a performing version of the piece for part of an evening of my work at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, and during the next three years I performed the piece several times. In 1975 I made a recorded version for the first of the ten records produced for Brian Eno's *Obscure* label. In 1990 I re-recorded the piece 'live' at the Printemps de Bourges festival when the availability of an extraordinary space – the town's disused water tower dating from the Napoleonic period – and the rediscovery of the wreck by Dr. Ballard made me think again about the music. In any case the piece has always been an open one, being based on data about the disaster but taking account of any new information that came to hand after the initial writing.

All the materials used in the piece are derived from research and speculations about the sinking of the 'unsinkable' luxury liner. On April 14 1912 the Titanic struck an iceberg at 11.40 PM in the North Atlantic and sank at 2.20 AM on April 15th. Of the 2201 people on board only 711 were to reach New York. The initial starting point for the piece was the reported fact of the band having played a hymn tune in the final moments of the ship's sinking. A number of other features of the disaster which generate musical or sounding performance material, or which 'take the mind to other regions', are also included. The final hymn played during those last five minutes of the ship's life was identified in an account by Harold Bride, the junior wireless operator:

'... from aft came the tunes of the band... The ship was gradually turning on her nose – just like a duck that goes down for a dive... The band was still playing. I guess all of the band went down. They were playing "Autumn" then. I swam with all my might. I suppose I was 150 feet away when the Titanic, on her nose, with her after-quarter sticking straight up in the air, began to settle slowly... The way the band kept playing was a noble thing... the last I saw of the band, when I was floating out in the sea with my lifebelt on, it was still on deck playing "Autumn". How they ever did it I cannot imagine.'

This Episcopal hymn, then, becomes the principle element of the music and is subject to a variety of treatments and it forms a base over which other material is superimposed. Although I conceived the piece many years ago I continue to enjoy finding new ways of looking at the material in it and welcome opportunities to look at it afresh.

© Gavin Bryars



Gavin Bryars

A Man in a Room, Gambling (1997)

Described by art critic Adrian Searle as 'an extraordinary aural sculpture', *A Man in a Room, Gambling* features the pre-recorded voice of Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz describing, in a series of episodes, different approaches to card trickery and illusion. The ten episodes create a surreal, immersive world, augmented in this performance by video created by composer Jamie Hamilton.

Gavin Bryars

1, 2, 1-2-3-4 (1971)

This piece is for instrumentalists/vocalists, each wearing headphones connected to a portable cassette machine. Each performer hears only the music in their headphones, music which contains 'parts' for their instrument or voice, and plays, along with the cassette, their own instrumental part.

© Gavin Bryars

About the artists

Born in Goole in the West Riding, **Gavin Bryars** became a jazz bassist while studying philosophy at university. This fateful detour began a journey that has taken in the birth of free jazz with Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley, touring with Lee Konitz, studies with John Cage, the founding of the Portsmouth Sinfonia, collaborations with everyone from Brian Eno and Tom Waits to the Spanish artist Juan Muñoz, and his own expansive – and ever-expanding – oeuvre, currently comprising five operas, concertos, quartets and works for small ensembles, and a large body of vocal and choral music. During lockdown in 2020 he recorded an Opera North podcast in conversation with the Poet Laureate Simon Armitage.

Composer-performer **Laura Jurd**'s distinctive voice as an improvising trumpet player is at the heart of everything she creates. Her music celebrates and innovates the rich traditions of jazz and folk music, whilst often reflecting her love of The Beatles and Stravinsky, to name two notable influences. Her compositions dig into something primal, earthy and human, whilst taking twists and turns that both invite surprise and evoke the inevitable. As a composer she has collaborated with the London Sinfonietta, the Festival of New Trumpet Music, the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain and the Ligeti Quartet, to name a few. She regularly performs throughout the UK, Europe and beyond with her Mercury-nominated band Dinosaur, having played the likes of North Sea, Montréal and Molde International Jazz festivals. She can also be heard playing alongside London jazz band Kansas Smitty's and leading a number of exciting projects in UK jazz and improvised music. Recent collaborators include drummer Seb Rochford, pianist Huw Warren and accordionist / sound-artist Martin Green.

Founded in 2014 by violinist Phillip Granell, **Phaedra Ensemble** has evolved from its inception as a string quartet to a larger collective of like-minded performers, drawn from London's diverse musical landscape and focusing on recent and new music, collaboration, and working across genres. Previous UK performances include Kings Place,



the Barbican, Kammer Klang @ Cafe Oto, Royal Festival Hall and Purcell Room, Royal Opera House, and internationally at NYU Arts Center (Abu Dhabi) and La Seine Musicale (Paris). They are regularly broadcast and perform live on BBC Radio 3. Other collaborations include performances with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Caroline Shaw, British singer Ghostpoet, vibraphonist Masayoshi Fujita (Erased Tapes) as well as Iconic American vocalist and Composer Meredith Monk, whose string quartet they have recently recorded for a forthcoming release. 2021 saw the release of their first EP, *O Superman*, featuring works by Laurie Anderson, Leo Chadburn, and Phaedra co-director Jamie Hamilton. Their latest release *Taking a nap, 1 Pound the Rice* is out now, featuring ECM artist and pianist Fred Thomas.

howardassemblyroom.co.uk

Photograph of Gavin Bryars by Kate Mount; photography of Laura Jurd by Dave Stapleton

HOWARD
ASSEMBLY
ROOM



Principal Partner



Major Supporter



Major Education Supporter



opera
north