



Igor Cat

Casals Quartet & Fiona Shaw

Friday 1 February 2019 7.30pm,
Milton Court Concert Hall

Haydn The Seven Last Words of Christ

interspersed with readings from Colm Tóibín's
The Testament of Mary (published by Penguin);
grateful thanks to Colm Tóibín

There will be no interval

Fiona Shaw narrator

Casals String Quartet

Abel Tomàs violin (*leader*)

Vera Martínez Mehner violin

Jonathan Brown viola

Arnau Tomàs cello



Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's concert given by one of the most exciting string quartets around today: the Barcelona-based Casals Quartet.

The quartet delights in creating thought-provoking juxtapositions of old and new, placing great works of the past in a more contemporary setting. Today they have joined with one of the greatest actors of her generation – Fiona Shaw.

Together they present Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ* in a new context by interspersing them with readings from Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*. This is a work that Fiona Shaw has previously brought vividly to life in a highly acclaimed

stage version which has been seen at the Barbican Theatre. It tells the story of Christ's Passion through the eyes of his mother, the Virgin Mary, and matches in intensity the seven slow movements that make up Haydn's *Seven Last Words*. It promises to be an intense and moving experience.

The Casals Quartet will return this Sunday for *Hungariana* – a celebration and exploration of the music of Bartók, Ligeti and Kurtág in collaboration with video designer Amelia Kosminsky and creative director Gerard McBurney. The day begins at 11am here at Milton Court and will surely be every bit as extraordinary as tonight's concert.

Huw Humphreys
Head of Music, Barbican

The Testament of Mary: Colm Tóibín's heretical pietà

Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ* has been performed using a variety of poetry and prose to replace the original texts, which were from the penitential liturgy for Good Friday. Nowadays, the work is more frequently performed in the concert hall than in the religious context for which it was conceived; the music creates a contemplative space that can accompany a variety of modes of reflection, whether Christian, agnostic or atheist.

To modern ears – saturated by the hyper-emotionalism of late-Romantic music – Haydn's response to the gospel texts may seem relatively detached. He eschews explicit representation of the harrowing circumstances of the crucifixion, other than in the concluding 'Earthquake' (a welcome explosion of sublimated tension). His music achieves its effect by understatement: it steps back and provides an emotional space for our personal reflection – rather in the way that Bach's music can seem to express grief, yet somehow be beyond mere mortal grieving.

I felt immediately that Colm Tóibín's novel *The Testament of Mary* has a similar quality of detachment. The rage, scepticism and tenderness that characterise Mary's monologue, as she pieces together her own memories and the actual truths of her son's life and death, almost seem to take place in a state of post-traumatic shock. The author Edmund White memorably called the book 'as tragic as a Spanish pietà, but completely heretical ... Tóibín maintains the dignity of Mary

without subscribing to the myths that have accumulated around her.' That's something of an understatement about the manner in which this short book quietly but radically explodes the central narrative of the Christian tradition. (Surely it would be on the Papal Index of Prohibited Books, had the latter not been abolished in 1966?!) Yet it does so while strengthening, rather than undermining, the profoundly human tragedy at the heart of the story, by shifting the focus onto Mary, Christ's mother.

In 2014 the Barbican presented Deborah Warner's production of the stage play Colm created from his book. Fiona Shaw's intense identification with the character of Mary was unforgettable – described by critics as 'shatteringly brilliant' and 'the performance of a lifetime'. The contemplative space created by Haydn's music feels spiritually attuned to the interiority of suffering in both Colm's text and Fiona's performance. And given Colm's deep connection with Barcelona, there seems to be a magical web of affinities between author, quartet, narrator, text and music.

I hope that this version will give a completely new perspective to Haydn's work. In selecting extracts from the novel to accompany Haydn's music, we have tried to focus on the events around the crucifixion, while still conveying elements of the main narrative so that those who are unfamiliar with the book can get some sense of its central premise.

Paul Keene
Classical Music Programmer, Barbican

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

String Quartets, 'The Seven Last Words of Christ', Op 51 (1787)

Introduzione: Maestoso ed Adagio

1 Largo (Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do)

2 Grave e cantabile (Verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise)

3 Grave (Woman, behold thy son)

4 Largo (My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?)

5 Adagio (Jesus cries out: 'Alas, I thirst')

6 Lento (It is finished)

7 Largo (Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit)

Il Terremoto ('The Earthquake'): Presto e con tutta la forza

By the mid-1780s Haydn was the most celebrated composer of the age, and had found more fame in his lifetime than any previous composer. European publishers fell over each other to acquire his latest symphonies and quartets, while prestigious commissions and invitations poured in not only from Paris and London (one newspaper even proposed that the composer should be rescued from his 'servitude' at the Esterházy court and 'transplanted' to England) but also from as far afield as Madrid and Naples. Among Haydn's most successful works, especially in Catholic countries, was his *Stabat mater* of 1767. Its popularity in Spain may have prompted the request from a priest in Cádiz for a series of orchestral reflections on The Seven Last Words of Christ, to be performed at the annual Passion celebration on Good Friday after the bishop had intoned each 'Word' and delivered a discourse on it.

Haydn finished *The Seven Last Words* in time for performance, both at the Oratorio de la Santa Cueva in Cádiz and the Schlosskirche in Vienna, on Good Friday 1787. To ensure

the music's wider circulation, he quickly made an arrangement for string quartet which has become far more popular than the orchestral original. He also authorised a keyboard arrangement by another hand. We can, though, take with several pinches of salt the story that the priest who commissioned *The Seven Last Words* paid the composer in the form of a cake filled with gold coins.

Haydn was especially proud of the work, pronouncing it one of his most successful and writing to his English publisher William Forster that the music was 'of a kind to arouse the deepest impression on the soul of even the most naïve person'. In both its orchestral and quartet versions *The Seven Last Words* quickly became popular in England, where Haydn's friend Charles Burney deemed it 'perhaps the most sublime composition without words to point out its meaning that has ever been composed'. In 1796, after his second triumphant London visit, Haydn made an arrangement for chorus and orchestra that became known in Britain as 'Haydn's *Passion*'. In the preface to the choral version, published by Breitkopf & Härtel in

1801, he gave a famous account of the work's origin:

About 15 years ago I was asked by a canon of Cádiz to compose instrumental music on The Seven Last Words of our Saviour on the Cross. It was customary at Cádiz Cathedral [ie, the Oratorio de la Santa Cueva] to produce an oratorio every year during Lent, the effect of the performance being greatly enhanced by the following circumstances. The walls, windows and pillars of the church were hung with black cloth, and only one large lamp hanging from the centre of the roof broke the solemn darkness. At midday the doors were closed and the ceremony began. After a short service the bishop ascended the pulpit, pronounced the first of the Seven Words (or sentences) and delivered a discourse on it. When this had finished he left the pulpit and prostrated himself before the altar. The interval was filled by music. The bishop then in similar manner pronounced the second word, then the third, and so on, the orchestra following on the conclusion of each discourse. My composition was subject to these conditions, and it was no easy task to compose seven adagios lasting 10 minutes each, one after the other, without tiring the listeners; indeed, I found it quite impossible to keep to the prescribed duration.

Haydn was only too aware of the danger of monotony in a sequence of sonata-form slow movements designed to foster contemplation and penitential awe at Christ's sacrifice. Yet he rose to the challenge through carefully planned contrasts of tonality (alternating major and minor keys throughout), pulse, metre and texture, while binding the individual Words together by recurrent rhythmic and melodic figures: most obviously the falling thirds, symbolising supplication or resignation, that saturate the First, Third, Fifth and Sixth Words. *The Seven Last Words* are the loftiest, most fervently Catholic music Haydn ever wrote, and a magnificent expression of his reverent yet fundamentally optimistic faith. No work of his could be further from the patronising image of 'Papa' Haydn the amiable funster.

What the string quartet arrangement inevitably loses in colour (including many felicitous woodwind details), majesty and, in the final Earthquake, sheer physical power, it gains in speaking intimacy. The D minor 'Introduzione', with its pervasive dotted rhythms (another of the work's unifying features), graphically evokes the pity and cruelty of the scene. Characteristically for Haydn, the whole movement grows from the opening bars, with their abrupt contrasts of *fortissimo* harshness and pathos. At the start of the development Haydn dips mysteriously from F major to the dusky key of D flat major, before working a forlorn four-note figure through a restless sequence of shifting harmonies.

As the Latin text under the first violin part makes explicit, each of the Words opens with a theme determined by the sound and rhythm of the text, drawn variously from the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. After the bleak *pianissimo* close of the 'Introduzione', the music of the First Sonata, in B flat major, is by turns urgently imploring and soothing, though its moments of lyrical calm are always precarious. In the recapitulation Haydn expands the darkly chromatic passage at the end of the exposition into a climax of passionately rising sequences: typical of his desire to reinterpret and intensify, rather than merely restate, in the final sections of each Word.

There is another inspired thematic transformation in the Second Word, where the C minor funeral march warms to E flat major for a glimpse of paradise: a broad *cantabile* for first violin underpinned by murmuring semiquavers in the second. After the hesitations and anxious tonal wanderings of the development, the recapitulation settles immediately into C major for a still more radiant vision of paradise.

The tenderly 'feminine' theme of the Third Sonata in E major, based on falling thirds, is shaped by the text 'Mulier, ecce filius tuus' (Woman, behold thy son). Yet the music's serenity is faintly undermined by syncopations and an underlying harmonic tension, with resolving cadences postponed longer than the ear expects. The majestic progression

to a remote key in the recapitulation, with a crescendo from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, is paralleled by the breathtaking distant modulations in the Fourth and Fifth Words.

Throughout *The Seven Last Words* Haydn calculates his sequence of tonalities for maximum dramatic effect. The F minor opening of the Fourth Sonata sounds all the more shocking after the compassionate E major close of the Third. Reflecting the despair of the text, this is music of extreme chromatic disturbance. Haydn also evokes a vivid sense of loneliness and abandonment in the mournful unaccompanied figures for first violin. This is the only Word to end disconsolately in the minor key.

The Fifth, in A major, sets the first violin's two-note phrases, corresponding to the word 'Sitió' (and recalling the 'Mulier' motif at the opening of the Third Sonata), against desolate, desiccated pizzicato depicting Christ's thirst. The music then erupts in a violent *tutti* that counterpoints lashing quavers for the two violins and a painfully contorted motif for viola and cello.

The catharsis comes with the Sixth Sonata, 'Consummatum est', in G minor. Haydn makes

inspired use of the opening motto, based on descending thirds: as an underlay to the consolatory major-key melody, and as a mainspring of the searing, proto-Beethovenian contrapuntal development (a foretaste here of the Funeral March in the 'Eroica' Symphony). After a climax of excruciating intensity, the development elides with the recapitulation, which slips almost at once from G minor to G major. Anguish has yielded to a spirit of hope and reconciliation.

The final Word, in E flat major – a mellow key for strings – consolidates this newly won acceptance with the most serenely diatonic music in the work. The two violins are now muted: a beautiful contrast of colour that seems to symbolise Christ's weakened voice as he nears death. Towards the end the textures grow barer and more fragmentary, culminating in a haunting evocation of ebbing life over a repeated cello pedal. The mood is then shattered by the C minor 'Terremoto', marked to be played *Presto e con tutta la forza*, and depicting in a series of convulsive shocks St Matthew's description of how 'the earth did quake; the rocks were rent; the graves opened'.

Programme note © Richard Wigmore

About the performers

Igor Cot



Casals Quartet

Abel Tomàs violin (leader)

Vera Martínez Mehner violin

Jonathan Brown viola

Arnau Tomàs cello

The Casals Quartet was founded in 1997 at the Escuela Reina Sofía in Madrid. It celebrated its 20th-anniversary season with the launch of an especially ambitious multi-year project: a six-concert series of the complete Beethoven quartets, accompanied by six newly commissioned works, performed in cities throughout Europe, Asia and Latin America. Highlights of coming seasons include cycles of the late Mozart quartets, as well as the current 'Hungariana' project focusing on the music of Bartók, Ligeti and Kurtág, which the quartet will perform here on Sunday.

Since winning first prizes at the London and Brahms–Hamburg competitions, the quartet has been a regular guest at the world's most prestigious concert halls, including Carnegie Hall, the Cologne Philharmonie, Cité de la Musique in Paris, Schubertiade in Schwarzenberg and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, among many others.

The quartet has compiled a substantial discography, including 12 discs for Harmonia

Mundi which range from Spanish composers Arriaga and Toldrà via cornerstones of the repertoire such as Mozart, Haydn, Schubert and Brahms, through to Debussy, Ravel and Zemlinsky; the ensemble has also released a live Blue-Ray recording of the complete Schubert quartets for Neu Records. Last year it released the first of a three-volume recording of the Beethoven quartets to great critical acclaim; the second will be released in 2019 and the final instalment in 2020, to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth.

An award from the Borletti–Buitoni Trust enabled the quartet to begin a collection of matching Baroque and Classical period bows which it uses for works from Purcell through to Schubert, refining its ability to distinguish between diverse musical styles. In addition, the quartet has been profoundly influenced by its work with living composers, especially György Kurtág, and has given the world premiere of quartets written by leading Spanish composers, including a new concerto for string quartet and orchestra by Francisco Coll, premiered with the Orquesta Nacional de España.

In recognition of its unique contributions to cultural life within Catalonia and throughout Spain,

the members of the Casals Quartet have been acknowledged as cultural ambassadors by the Generalitat of Catalonia and the Institut Ramon Llull, as well as Spain's Ministerio de Cultura. Past awards include the Premio Nacional de Música, the Premi Nacional de Cultura de Catalunya and the Premi Ciutat Barcelona. The quartet performs yearly on the extraordinary collection of decorated Stradivarius instruments in the Royal Palace in Madrid, where it will be quartet-in-residence in 2020.

In addition to giving much sought-after masterclasses, the ensemble is quartet-in-residence at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya in Barcelona, where all four members live.



Fiona Shaw

Fiona Shaw narrator

Fiona Shaw's theatre credits include *The Testament of Mary* here at the Barbican and at the Walter Kerr Theatre; *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* at Brooklyn Academy of Music; *Scenes from an Execution*, *London Assurance*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Happy Days*, *The Powerbook*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Way of the World*, *Machinal*, *The Rivals* and *The Good Person of Sichuan* at the National Theatre; *John Gabriel Borkman* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and BAM; *Woman and Scarecrow* at the Royal Court Theatre; *Footfalls* at the Garrick Theatre; the narrator in *Dido and Aeneas* in Vienna and Paris; *Julius Caesar* at the Barbican; *Medea* at the Abbey Theatre and in the USA; *The Waste Land* in Dublin and on tour internationally; *Hedda Gabler*

in Dublin and at the Playhouse Theatre; *As You Like It* at the Old Vic Theatre; and, with the Royal Shakespeare Company *Electra*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hyde Park*, *The New Inn*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Mephisto*, *Philistines* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

She has worked with many leading stage directors, including Deborah Warner, Phyllida Lloyd, Nicholas Hytner, Tom Cairns, James Macdonald, Stephen Daldry, Howard Davies, Adrian Noble and Peter Wood.

She is also active as a theatre and opera director, including *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Riders to the Sea* (English National Opera); *The Rape of Lucretia* (Glyndebourne), *Eugene Onegin* (Metropolitan Opera, New York), *Elegy for Young Lovers* (Young Vic); *Widowers' Houses* (National Theatre) and *Hamlet* (Abbey Theatre, Dublin).

She has appeared extensively in film, where her credits include *Colette*, *Lizzie*, *The Hippopotamus*, five of the *Harry Potter* films, *Dorian Gray*, *The Tree of Life*, *Fracture*, *Catch and Release*, *The Black Dahlia*, *Midsummer Dream*, *Close your Eyes*, *The Triumph of Love*, *The Last September*, *The Avengers*, *The Butcher Boy*, *Anna Karenina*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Waste Land*, *Undercover Blues*, *Super Mario Bros*, *The Big Fish*, *London Kills Me*, *Three Men and a Little Lady*, *Mountains of the Moon*, *My Left Foot*, *Sacred Hearts* and *The Man who Shot Christmas*.

Most recently she has been seen on television in the BBC's *Mrs Wilson* and *Killing Eve*. Prior to that she has appeared on a variety of channels including ITV, NBC, HBO, BBC and others in *Channel Zero*, *Inside No 9*, *Emerald City*, *Maigret*, *Miss Marple: Greenshaw's Folly*, *True Blood*, *Trial and Retribution XIV*, *Empire*, *The Seventh Stream*, *Mind Games*, *Gormenghast*, *RKO 281*, *Richard II*, *Persuasion*, *Seascape*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales – Twelfth Night*, *Maria's Child*, *For the Greater Good*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Love Song*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: The Crooked Man* and *My Life in Books*.

Fiona Shaw has received many awards, including a CBE in 2001, two Laurence Olivier Awards, two London Critics Circle Theatre Awards, and two London Evening Standard Awards, as well as a nomination for a Tony award.