**Mark Berry**

**Waiting in uncertain hope**

Wolfgang Rihm (b.1952):

*Vigilia*for six voices and ensemble

1 Sonata I 2 ‘Tristis est anima mea’ 3 Sonata II 4 ‘Ecce vidimus cum non habentem speciem’ 5 Sonata III 6 ‘Velum templi scissum est’ 7 Sonata IV 8 ‘Tenebrae factae sunt’ 9 Sonata V

10 ‘Caligaverunt oculi mei a fletu meo’ 11 Sonata VI 12 ‘Recessit pastor noster
13 Sonata VII 14 ‘Aestimatus sum cum descendentibus in lacum’ 15 ‘Miserere’

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809):

*Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze*, in the string quartet arrangement

1 Introduzione: Maestoso ed adagio

2 Sonata I: ‘Pater, dimitte illis, non enim sciunt, quid faciunt’: Largo

3 Sonata II: ‘Amen, dico tibi: hodium mecum eris in paradiso’: Grave e cantabile

4 Sonata III ‘Mulier, ecce filius tuus, et tu, ecce mater tua!’: Grave

5 Sonata IV: ‘Eli, eli lama sabachthani’: Largo

6 Sonata V: ‘Sitio’: Adagio

7 Sonata VI: ‘Consummatum est!’: Lento

8 Sonata VII: ‘Pater! In manus tuas commendo spiritum meum’: Largo

9 ‘Il terremoto’: Presto e con tutta la forza

**Haydn, Rihm, and connecting threads**

‘Concerts as we know them are organized so that one piece follows another, sometimes like alien substances,’ wrote Wolfgang Rihm in a 2005 programme note, adding ‘there is always a secret thread linking our artificial arrangements, from which questions and replies will arise.’ One can understand why he might have said that concerning a programme of Haydn’s Symphony No.95 and the world premiere of his own *Two Other Movements*, alongside Ravel’s *Boléro*, Ernest Chausson’s *Poème* op.25 and Saint-Saëns’ *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*.

In the present case, works by Rihm and Haydn are more obviously connected, yet that too requires a warning. One thread may be evident, but our ears should not rule out the possibility of a secret labyrinth too. Haydn is programmed more often than one might expect with Rihm, a composer fascinated by reckoning with the Classical-Romantic tradition at whose head Haydn in many respects stands. Indeed, one recent book on the piano trio is subtitled ‘from Joseph Haydn to Wolfgang Rihm’. Instrumental, chamber, orchestral and even sacred music – for some now itself a ghost at the musical feast – offer connecting threads, questions and replies both secret and revealed.

**Rihm: Sonata, vigil, and plea for mercy**

If six has often been thought a good number for instrumental collections (Haydn’s string quartets and even his symphonies), Jewish, Christian and other religious traditions have long considered the prime seven a ‘perfect’ number. Scripture takes us from the seven days of Creation, through seven days of Passover, to the seven last words or sayings of Christ on the Cross and, beyond, to seven seals in the Book of Revelation. Christian tradition presents seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, seven heavenly virtues, seven deadly sins, seven sacraments, and more. Rihm initially composed movements of his *Seven Passion Texts* between 2001 and 2006, one by one lightening the darkness of Holy Week vigils, knowingly in the venerable responsorial tradition (for six vocal parts) of Carlo Gesualdo. At the premieres of the sixth and seventh texts, he presented them as part of a larger work, *Vigilia*, now with preceding instrumental ‘Sonatas’, and a closing ‘Miserere’.

Easter is coming, albeit not yet. There will be greater darkness, the greatest of all, entailing God’s death on the Cross and sojourn in Hell. Hence the vigils (the nocturnal hours of watching until Easter morning itself), their texts either straightforwardly depicting, referring to (Peter 1), or foretelling (Isaiah, Lamentations, Jeremiah, Psalms) the four Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion. A sense of uncertainty even in direction seems to hold particular appeal for Rihm, who in 2006 described himself as ‘one who does not pray, but speaks with God’. This stance we hear reflected and developed in *Vigilia*.

Sonatas precede motets, but are no mere preludes. Rather they introduce the text from Scripture and respond to it with a subjectivity rarely if at all present in the motet to come. Clarinet and horn stand apart from the rest of the ensemble (perhaps an updated version of an ancient, largely tenebrous consort): two trombones, tuba, percussion, organ, viola, cello and double bass. There is musical violence here, to counterpoint, if not necessarily straightforwardly to depict, the agonies of Christ on the Cross. This is nowhere more striking than in the antiphonal organ and brass exchanges, mediated by percussion, of Sonata V; likewise from the organ and percussion at the opening of the final Sonata, where horn and clarinet respond as if from the other side of the void. Stinging dynamic contrasts and dissonance – the idea remains just about operative – contrast in turn with less ‘extreme’, more contemplative vocal liturgies, whose melody, rhythm and even harmony owe much to the mediating role of memory in reimagination of ‘early music’. Even a marking of ‘calmo’ (Sonata IV) seems to pertain more to volume and, latterly, to a Stravinskian coolness that is anything but without tension.

The opening of the first Sonata with its leading brace of trombones has something about it of the late Renaissance, reimagined through time and paving the way for something more overtly modernist in timbre and gesture. Intervallic construction suggests Webern – and perhaps the early polyphony Webern avidly studied. (Seek and ye shall find, perhaps.) At any rate, the first of seven motets – notwithstanding its text ‘Tristis est anima mea’ – offers seraphic contrast. Likewise in Sonata III, first from brass and then from strings, *agitato* ghosts of Webern and Stockhausen joust in a musical drama denied the ensuing verbal setting of the temple rent in twain. *Pesante* octaves of two trombones and tuba in Sonata VI suggest distilled Bruckner, and woodblock intervention a modernist, even Messiaen-esque intervention, heralding the motet to follow. A lack of dynamic contrasts and markings in the motets as a whole speaks of an unmistakeably modern conception of non-subjective, even ‘expressionless’ early music. The accents of ‘Recessit pastor noster’ correct that even on its own terms, but it remains a contrast worth noting. At any rate, here is apparently timeless liturgy: *a cappella* other than low-key appearances of strings in this motet and percussion in ‘Tenebrae factae sunt’.

Peter Bannister’s comparison of Rihm to the Catholic-Marxist philosopher Gianni Vattimo is revealing. Bannister suggests that Rihm’s harmonic idiom in these pieces may be heard analogously ‘to Vattimo’s “weak thought”’, the thought of a ‘self-confessed “half-believer”’, in that Rihm’s ‘language suggests directionality and simultaneously subverts it at every stage, hinting at “strong structures” but scrupulously avoiding them’. In the ‘Miserere’, more than three times the length of the lengthiest motet, a productive yet provisional synthesis peters out (‘Tunc … tunc…’ – not entirely unlike the ‘ewig … ewig’ of Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*) into alternation between voices and instruments, further suggesting the productive scepticism of Vattimo’s ‘half-believer’. Liturgy has become personally expressive after all, in a plea for forgiveness to which a response from beyond these nights of darkness remains as yet uncertain.

**Haydn: Vigil in sonata, and earthquake**

Rihm’s works for string quartet, dating from an unnumbered work of 1966 to the 2015 *Geste zu Vedova*, run throughout his career. So too do Haydn’s. If not quite the genre’s inventor, he was its first master. The *Sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze* (Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross) was first composed in 1786 for orchestra, with arrangements for string quartet and piano coming the next year (eventually joined by an oratorio version in 1796, with an additional piece of *Harmoniemusik*). The quartet version is now the best known. This is doubtless in part due to an economy of pragmatism concerning performing forces – but chamber conversation imparts intimacy and immediacy, with very much their own dramatic strength.

The so-called seven last words (*ultima septem verba*) – more properly ‘sayings’ since, though brief, they are more than single words – of Christ on the Cross have been a focus of Christian Lenten devotion since the early 16th century. They come from the four canonical Gospels, though none is found in all; they have proved equally popular in Catholic, Protestant and other Christian traditions. The traditional order has been words of forgiveness, salvation, relationship, abandonment, distress, triumph (of a sort) and reunion. Musical settings and responses have ranged from Heinrich Schütz’s *Die sieben Worte Jesu Christi am Kreuz*, through choral works by César Franck and Charles Gounod, to more recent works by Sofia Gubaidulina (cello, bayan, string orchestra) and Tristan Murail (orchestra, chorus, electronics).

Haydn recalled his commission when dictating, 15 years later, a foreword to the score of the oratorio for Breitkopf & Härtel:

About fifteen years ago I was requested by a canon of Cádiz to compose instrumental music on The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross. It was customary at the Cathedral of Cádiz to produce an oratorio every year during Lent ... . 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 thereon. This ended, he left the pulpit, and prostrated himself before the altar. The interval was filled by music. The bishop then in like 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 ten minutes each, and to succeed one another without fatiguing the listeners; indeed, I found it quite impossible to confine myself to the appointed limits.

Haydn asked the Abbé Stadler for his thoughts. ‘I answered’, Stadler relates in his autobiography, ‘that it seemed to me advisable that over the words an appropriate melody should be fitted, which afterwards should be performed only by instruments’, though he did not know whether that had always been Haydn’s intention. Haydn requested permission from the Bishop of Cádiz to exceed the ten-minute limit for his ‘sonatas’ – the same term as Rihm – if necessary, and received it: the Bishop responded that he would limit the length of his homilies to ten minutes each, ensuring scope for musical overrun. The music, though, was intended not for the Cathedral but for the subterranean Oratorio de la Santa Cueva, whose reconditioning, completed in 1756, had been the project of the priest José Saluz de Santamaria, original source of Haydn’s commission as communicated by an intermediary, Don Francisco Micon.

A severe, double-dotted D minor ‘Introduzione’ suggests with its angular melodies and rhythms Crucifixion: late-Baroque iconography surely comprehensible to Haydn’s audience-congregation in Cádiz. Sonata I (identical nomenclature as Rihm) turns to relatively relaxed lyricism in related B flat major. (There is no overall tonic, though surely there is iconography of *Affekt*.) Christ seeks forgiveness for his persecutors, ‘for they know not what they do’. Haydn’s setting is unusually homophonic: if not quite a necessary than a likely consequence of a string of Adagios. His setting of the ‘words’ is straightforwardly, unanswerably melodic, followed by musical response, commentary and development. The second Sonata takes us from stern C minor command – ‘Verily I say unto thee’ – to a promise of salvation with arpeggiated, angelic accompaniment, in pure, heavenly C major: ‘Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise’. E major maternal tenderness, inflected on occasion by visions of surrounding darkness (Sonata III) leads to Christ’s celebrated cry of anguish to His Father, in darkest, deepest F minor: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’

Through agonising thirst, Johannine predestined accomplishment (‘it is finished’), and final commendation into God’s hands in the literally muted (*con sordino*)consolation of E flat major (Sonata VII), Haydn concludes with a brief, terrible C minor earthquake. Its sudden eruption, more fulfilment than contrast or release, leaves us in wait, as with Rihm or with the Passions of Bach. For now, our lot is to contemplate, grief-stricken yet in hope of something redemptive from beyond.