

Malva Quartet  
Wooden Bodies





1. *The Riddle* (Karin Rehnqvist) 7.57
2. *Wooden Bodies* (Tebogo Monnakgotla) 7.50
3. *My Desert, My Rose* (Aleksandra Vrebalov) 7.56
4. *vridna, vågsång* (Lo Kristenson) 12.32
5. *Entr'acte* (Caroline Shaw) 10.53

MALVA QUARTET

Linnea Hällqvist VIOLIN

Knapp Brita Pettersson VIOLIN

Maria Jonsson VIOLA

Maja Molander CELLO

THE LANGUAGE OF the string quartet has been expanding steadily since the mid 1700s. In the last decade, that process has accelerated exponentially, and with extraordinary results. This snapshot of a decade of contemporary creativity within the quartet genre celebrates the Malva String Quartet's appetite for the new and unusual – for novel ways in which the 'wooden bodies' of the ensemble, both human and instrumental, might converse, argue, interact and celebrate. 'All the pieces included either remind us of something we liked before or open up a whole new way of playing,' its members say. They have been directly involved in the creation of some of the works.

KARIN REHNQVIST grew up in the south of Sweden, singing in choirs and playing the violin in an ad-hoc quartet. After moving to the front of the choir as a conductor and studying composition with figures including Brian Ferneyhough, she would become the first woman to hold the composition chair at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. Her interest in folk music resonates through her own direct, communicative and purposeful works.

In 2017, Rehnqvist participated in *50 for the Future*, a pioneering project initiated by the Kronos Quartet with the aim of renewing the string quartet repertoire. Rehnqvist's contribution came in the form of *The Riddle*, a single-movement work that threads a typically simple, folk-like melody on

a journey through the quartet's varied expressive capabilities. 'I try to find ideas that are simple but have complexity inside, so that you can make more out of it,' the composer has said.

The little tune carried along by *The Riddle* fits that description. It is introduced by the viola, while the other instruments 'comment, support, resist', according to the composer's own commentary. The tune finds its way to a polska, a rousing dance that takes off in a purposefully distorted triple time. The melody continues through various landscapes, traversing the entire range of the ensemble from the depths of the cello to the heights of the two violins, which converse in shimmering imitative conversation like two birds.

After that, the music comes back down to earth. We hear the viola melody once more, but given a darker, more expressive character. 'I was looking for a magical, mysterious atmosphere for this piece,' Rehnqvist commented having written it. Once she had found the right idea, it was simply a matter of 'unfurling my antennae and listening to the world.' The clarity of her music allows us to listen in.

TEBOGO MONNAKGOTLA was nominated for the 2018 Nordic Council Music Prize for her engrossing chamber opera *Jean-Joseph*. She has been composer in residence at Swedish Radio and has written extensively for orchestra, chamber ensemble, choir and theatre, collaborating extensively with poets

and forming part of the collective Inversion. Monnakgotla's works explore beauty and ugliness with intelligence and presence.

Her score *Wooden Bodies* from 2018 was commissioned by the Malva Quartet. It is a piece both elusive and tangible, presenting a theatrical interplay between the four 'wooden bodies' of the string quartet which appear to long for unification. The piece opens with a yearning, animalistic viola solo, its music based around the basic interval of the perfect fifth. The score combines collective pulsations and individual monologues in attempting to draw something cohesive from something disparate.

When a cello joins the viola with the same music, the instruments find a way to be together, moving as one through parallel harmonies. After the music builds in tension and collapses into folksy dances, rhythmic patterns seem to draw the four players into a union. They get closer and closer before joining in a gallop of pulsating semiquavers, each giving the other space to celebrate their union individually afterwards.

*My Desert, My Rose* by ALEKSANDRA VREBALOV is another work written for *50 for the Future*. Its composer grew up in the former Yugoslavia, now Serbia, leaving for the USA in 1995 where she studied at the University of Michigan and the San Francisco Conservatory. Vrebalov has worked in all genres but has a particular affinity with the string

quartet, having written for Kronos before delivering *My Desert, My Rose* for the ensemble in 2015. Echoing Monnakgotla's *Wooden Bodies*, Vrebalov describes her starting point for the piece as 'the idea of individuality [in a string quartet]: what one brings to the group, what one gives to the others and what one gets from them.'

Each musician is given complete freedom to toy and improvise with a series of pitch patterns at the start of the piece. Those freedoms become narrower and narrower as the music proceeds, until the four musicians lock-in to one other rhythmically and harmonically. When they are completely united, the musical energy they generate proves too much for the structure to hold; the music spins out of control and disintegrates. Again, the musicians are left to determine precisely how. Vrebalov has likened her piece to a simple metaphor for life: 'like a journey of four characters that start in distinctly different places, who, after long searching and occasional, brief meeting points, end up in the same space, time, language.'

Since her studies at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, LO KRISTENSON has focused on music in circular, twisting forms that explore the minute details of resistance, energy, pressure and slow growth. She has described her desire to evoke 'resistance that resists, that pushes down, that gives frustration and weight but also the resistance that gives strength and a kind of wild, angry joy.'

String instruments provide a fertile ground on which to explore those things, especially when combined in a small ensemble. In 2016 Kristenson wrote a half-hour score for violin, viola and double bass titled *vridna, vågsång* (the Swedish words evoke something twisty-turny along with singing waves) that explored the idea of resistance in those instruments, adding vocal sounds too. The following year a revised, shortened, and full quartet version of that piece was created especially for the Malva Quartet.

The piece focuses on two notes, both of which it resists occupying completely as instruments strain outward from it by having their tuning pegs turned. This brings a de-tuned, microtonal quality to the texture while the inclusion of human voices further twists the timbral and luminous kaleidoscope through which the sustained pitches sound, like a living, breathing organism. The piece invites deep listening, giving the impression of being played by the wind, as though its instruments are hanging in trees. According to Kristenson's objectives, time expands space.

CAROLINE SHAW is an American vocalist, violinist, composer and producer who has worked with groups as varied as the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and Kanye West. Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices* won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2013 and the composer has pointed to Beethoven's Op 74 String Quartet as a work she particularly likes to

hear, alongside 'the sound of a janky mandolin.'

*Entr'acte* was written in 2011 after Shaw heard a performance of Haydn's String Quartet Op 77 No 2. She was particularly taken with the performers in question, the Brentano Quartet, and their 'spare and soulful shift' to the D-flat major trio section of the work's Minuet. The work is therefore itself structured like a Minuet & Trio, 'riffing on the classical form but taking it a little further,' in the composer's words. Haydn's particular shift in key represented, for Shaw, being 'suddenly taken to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, Technicolor transition.'

It's easy to sense Baroque and Classical shapes and gestures over the course of *Entr'acte*, not least as it sidles into the three-step of a minuet (albeit a distorted one, like Rehnqvist's polska). The piece seems to look at the whole textural history of the string quartet from the Classical era to Romanticism, modernism and minimalism.

Shaw loves her harmony and rhythm. But as much as she can dream up clear-eyed and original manifestations of both, she loves to destabilise them at the same time. It's the upset geometries of *Entr'acte* that allow her music to fall into the sort of transitions that so enchanted her in Haydn, while also using new and unusual gestures to underline the warm conversation that underpins the entire string quartet tradition.

Andrew Mellor, 2021

#### MALVA QUARTET

The driving force of the Malva Quartet is curiosity. We play music that we are passionate about and we want to provide high quality and intensely communicative musical experiences. When we set our programs we try to push the boundaries, experimenting with sounds and expectations. We love to collaborate with other artists and we have a playful approach to music making and concert creation.

The Malva Quartet embraces sound in all its forms, both harsh and melodic. We cherish the treasury of repertoire created for the string quartet for three centuries while placing a distinct emphasis on music by composers of today.

The Malva Quartet was formed in 2008 during our studies at the Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg. We continued our chamber music studies with Prof. Friedemann Weigle (of the Artemis Quartet) at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler Berlin.

Throughout the years we have had the privilege to work with many composers in Sweden and abroad. In 2018, to celebrate our 10th anniversary, we invited ten composers to write for us. Among the compositions was Tebogo Monnagotla's *Wooden Bodies*. With this piece in mind we created an album that we think reflects the spirit of our ensemble and gives a taste of all the great music written for string quartet today. We hope you will enjoy it!

*Linnea, Brita, Maria and Maja*



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