

JIM AITCHISON PIANO QUINTETS

RODERICK CHADWICK, piano
KREUTZER QUARTET



JIM AITCHISON

PIANO QUINTETS

Roderick Chadwick, piano | Kreutzer Quartet

Piano Quintet No. 1, Margarete

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|----|------|---------------------|-------|
| 1. | I. | Prelude and Chorale | 8:05 |
| 2. | II. | Magic Square | 5:08 |
| 3. | III. | Dance Fugue | 12:50 |

Piano Quintet No. 2, Transience Patterns

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|----|------|----------------|-------|
| 4. | I. | Prelude | 4:31 |
| 5. | II. | Blind Tide | 12:38 |
| 6. | III. | Autumn | 5:26 |
| 7. | IV. | Winter (Fugue) | 7:26 |
| 8. | V. | Spring | 10:39 |

Total Playing Time 66:46

Jim Aitchison, Piano Quintets

My piano quintets emerged from three tributaries: my long collaboration with the Kreutzer Quartet and Roderick Chadwick, a lifelong project to create musical engagements with visual artworks and galleries, and an ongoing fascination with chamber music for piano and strings. Always hovering in my imagination are the chamber masterpieces by Beethoven, Brahms, Fauré, Ravel, Shostakovich, Enescu, and Schnittke. Seen as a somewhat conservative corner of the chamber repertoire, and full of challenges for balancing the textures and timbres of the instruments, there is something about this ensemble: I think perhaps the uneasy combination of exposed, linear string texture and the wholly different mechanics and sonorities of the piano gives a theatre for various kinds of textural and timbral interactions, huge expressive range, and a kind of fragile, compromised grandeur.

My quintets are very different from one another. The first quintet, completed in 2023 after a decade or so in gestation, takes the notion of placing musical polarities in proximity as its basis, in both lesser and greater degrees of conflict. The second quintet, completed in 2024, focuses upon the idea of emergence and change.

They are, however, similar in their proximity to visual artworks and/or places that exhibit art. My early musical interactions with art from 2002 onwards tended to seek quite direct connection with content and fabric from within artworks themselves. In 2002, I created piano music in response to painting by Sir Terry Frost by translating the artist's curves and stripes into musical analogues on paper and thence into what I judged to be approximately equivalent sound. By 2008, I had moved on to not only working with shapes and textures in the work of Antony Gormley but also adding the exploration ideas and concepts that he articulated in and around his sculptures. Between 2012 and 2014 I was working at depth with the art of Gerhard Richter exploring musical analogues to his ideas but now recruiting the structural and making processes that he used, for example, chance, blurring, distancing and multiples.

In my more recent work on the two piano quintets, my approach to interactions with artworks and art spaces became much less direct. Neither of the quintets attempt to convey, 'explain' or illustrate art, and there is no association with, or any kind of endorsement from, artists. Rather, there is an exploration of territory provoked and revealed in me: I am not responding directly to art but rather to the range of my own reactions emerging from experiencing them.

Margarete

My first piano quintet, *Margarete*, was composed with reference to Anselm Kiefer's 1981 painting of the same name. *Margarete* is widely regarded as a pivotal work in Kiefer's decades-long investigation of postwar German identity. It belongs to a sequence of works produced by the artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s responding to Paul Celan's poem *Todesfuge* and its two contrasting central figures: the golden-haired *Margarete*, and the ashen-haired *Shulamith*. I chose to conceive the music as a response to my own experience of Kiefer's *Margarete* and Celan's *Todesfuge*.

In Kiefer's painting, the viewer is presented with an edifice comprised of multiple tall frond-like structures made from straw rising from a twisted mound of the same stained black and white, with small flames set atop each, all set against a textured grey background.

It was both the expressive effect arising from the artwork's form and surface, and the unresolved polarities represented by the *Margarete* and *Shulamith* personas implied in the painting and fundamental to Celan's *Todesfuge* that captured my interest. For the third movement of the quintet, *Dance Fugue*, I decided to address *Todesfuge* more directly. The poem has always been controversial. Adorno's much-quoted dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Prisms, 1955, MIT Press - later qualified) still points to the aesthetic and ethical problems that remain legion. The poem's filmic theatricality, lyrical finesse, and its self-conscious formal conceit have all been criticised as aestheticizing the inexpressible; even Celan himself became uneasy with the reception

of his most famous work. I attempted to tread a line between authentic engagement and an ethical questioning of Kiefer's painting and Celan's text. What I hoped to achieve was an ambiguity, whereby it is not always clear (even to me) whether the music is expressively authentic, or the reverse, or both at the same time.

In composing this quintet, I wanted each movement to explore the overall idea of polarisation – formal and expressive – offering multiple perspectives that might combine in the listener's perception into a broader experience. The first movement presents the sacred and the corporeal simultaneously; the second juxtaposes impersonal calculation with limited compositional improvisation; and the third (in contrast to the others) alternates successive episodes aspiring to purity of form with crude parody.

I: Prelude and Chorale

The first movement juxtaposes two archetypal musical figures: Wagner's Tristan motif and Bach's chorale harmonization of *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*. Wagner is an obvious point of reference in relation to Kiefer: the monumental scale and cultural weight of his music within German culture makes it a useful musical parallel to Kiefer's own monumentalising artistic approach. The Tristan motif itself, with its famous unresolved chord, I read as a broadly applicable metaphor for all kinds of idealised earthly longing, precisely the of the sort that Kiefer makes use of in the context of his examination of German identity.

Bach's chorale harmonization of *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* carries a different but equally potent set of associations with a kind of spiritual longing and transcendence. Its slow canon unfolds at a glacial pace, functioning almost like a cantus firmus against which the restless Tristan fragments strive upwards. The combination is presented twice, once with the piano taking the Wagner material and strings the Bach, then reversed, with the piano in stark octaves plays the chorale-canon while the strings take over the Tristan fragments. The second canon is transposed by a tritone, creating a new harmonic filter: the slow-moving Bach lines act as moving pedals, re-colouring the harmony of the Tristan figures.

The movement builds to a large climax at which everything seems to point toward a declamatory, unambiguous statement of the Tristan chord sequence. But this is a feint: the opening half-diminished Tristan chord gives way, most unexpectedly, to the opening of another Bach chorale harmonization, *Es ist genug*. The interruption delivers another question rather than any sense of resolution.

II: Magic Square

I did not confine myself only to Kiefer's painting to create a response to Margarete. The second movement takes Albrecht Dürer's enigmatic engraving *Melencolia I* as a prism through which to view both Kiefer and Celan. Kiefer has engaged many times with Dürer across his own oeuvre, often referring to the mysterious solid in *Melencolia I*. Dürer's melancholic angel, surrounded by inert instruments of making and measurement, provides a sobering metaphor for creative futility and, in the context of Kiefer and Celan, the horrifying implications of unfettered systemisation.

In this movement, I drew upon the symbolism of the magic square, using its numbers to generate a fixed sequence of 34 pitches, each assigned a duration, dynamic, and timbral quality. This series was derived from tracing vertical, horizontal, and diagonal pathways through the square. Alongside it runs a second voice employing limited chance: a 'compositional improvisation' in which I responded intuitively to the same ordered sequence, using improvised repeated notes to simply 'count' the various numbers. Though presented simultaneously, the voices were initially brought together with no attempt at traditional contrapuntal accommodation, each with its own set of goals, uninterested in the other.

Fascinating to me were the expressive outcomes that chance provided from so many random abutments, and the second stage of composing this music involved lightly 'orchestrating' these moments. In this way, I found myself partly nodding distantly to the serial procedures of the postwar generation (Messiaen's *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* is an obvious precedent), while at the same time deliberately undermining the system,

allowing failures and accidents to affect the result. This duality – system and anti-system – seemed a fitting way of referring to Kiefer’s method of appropriating cultural artefacts and recontextualising them.

III: Dance Fugue

The third movement, Dance Fugue, is defined architecturally by the juxtaposition of two distinct musical identities presented one after the other: fugue and dance, both of which are present in Celan’s poem. These take the form of an incomplete double fugue and a distorted reimagining of Brahms’ *Hungarian Dance No. 5*. The fugue material began life as a more conventional contrapuntal working-out, but was gradually hollowed and distorted, leaving a spare texture responding to the opening atmosphere of *Todesfuge*. A second fugue subject, derived from the countersubject of the first, emerges at speed only to disappear into the oncoming dance.

Brahms believed he was presenting authentic folk material in *Hungarian Dance No. 5*, but in fact unwittingly appropriated the music from Béla Kéler. This mischaracterised authenticity gave me a further point of contact with Kiefer’s theatrical appropriation strategies. I destabilised the music further by forcing the duple-metre csárdás into a frenzied waltz.

In contrast to the earlier movements, there is no vertical coexistence here: the fugue and dance materials are presented sequentially and remain structurally and texturally distinct. The first slow fugue subject reappears briefly in the central section, again followed by the second fugue subject disintegrating into the raucous dance music, culminating in an agitated climax before quietly giving way to a final extended reiteration of the opening fugue which fades into nothingness.



Recording Quintet No. 1 Margarete

Transience Patterns

It is curious that Brahms' music found its way into the finale of the first quintet and then became fundamental to most of the span of the second, but this is where the similarity ends. If the first quintet presented a series of polarisations, the second is concerned with emergence and change of that which emerges.

The second piano quintet began its life in a series of conversations with the indefatigable owner of Tremeneheere Sculpture Gardens in Cornwall, Neil Armstrong, and with the similarly indefatigable violinist and heroic new music champion Peter Sheppard Skærved. The conversations eventually grew into a fully formed project funded by Arts Council England and supported by the Royal Academy of Music and Falmouth University.

A decisive moment occurred when Neil led me deep beneath the woods of the sculpture park into a vast subterranean chamber – an artwork created out of a former Victorian water tank now transformed into a camera obscura by the American artist James Turrell. I remember clutching at the walls and shuffling gingerly along the narrow corridor in complete darkness before arriving in a chamber where the darkness itself felt like a building-sized presence. Only after a prolonged wait did a frail image gradually emerge on the opposite wall, revealing trees and sky from above the surface. This experience made me reconsider completely how I related to light and darkness, and the trees, water, and sky that inhabited the space around me at Tremeneheere.

I began by considering what kind of musical device might be thought of as observing itself in a state of perpetual emergence and change and arrived at the idea of exploring canon. After a long search through many existing canons, I came across Brahms' *Mir lächelt kein Frühling*, a so-called enigma or puzzle canon, where, given only one voice, performers are invited to try to work out how the other voices are required to interact with it. In the case of the Brahms, each entry of a new voice must be a semitone lower in pitch and key than the last. In contrast to the simple rounds of our childhoods, this canon seemed to me

bewilderingly subtle, and the harmonic framework so sophisticated that the move down by one semitone for every entry is hardly perceptible. The subject matter of the short text is sobering in its bleakness (“For me, no springtime smiles/For me, no sun shines/For me, no flower blooms/For me, all is over!”). From this, it was a short step to conceive an idea of a whole quintet based upon the canon, passed through different filters by allusion to the different seasons.

My first sketches for the quintet included plans for an initial barcarolle emerging incrementally from darkness, and then for four sets of variations on the Brahms canon, one set for each season. The final version, prompted by superb insight from the musicians, saw my arrangement of *Mir lächelt kein Frühling* placed at the beginning, followed by the enormous slowly unfolding barcarolle movement and then three movements related to seasons, *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring*, functioning as a three-part set of different responses to the canon (Summer seemed redundant with its place occupied emphatically by the barcarolle). As things turned out, calling these movements sets of ‘variations’ in a traditional formal sense is misleading and so I use the term ‘responses’ instead.

Part I

I. Prelude

This introductory movement serves to simply expose *Mir lächelt kein Frühling* and is my own arrangement of Brahms’ original vocal canon but done consciously in anticipation of the final coda at the end of the quintet.

II. Blind Tide

Blind Tide does not engage with *Mir lächelt kein Frühling* at all but rather is intended to take the listener through a kind of hugely extended threshold in preparation for the substantial changes brought to bear upon Brahms’ canon in the movements of part II.

When developing *Blind Tide*, I orientated towards the sense of dark marine undulation I had felt while at Tremmenheere Sculpture Park with Neil Armstrong and so composing a kind of barcarolle felt appropriate. It takes a long time for the outlines of the barcarolle to appear gradually from the darkness before receding.

Part II (responses to Mir lächelt kein Frühling)

Mir lächelt kein Frühling structures Part II of the quintet in a variety of ways, across all three movements, *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring*. Its role is not one of traditional variations, but of transformations in expressive character and structural design.

III. Autumn

Autumn takes only the melody from the canon and uses it in a form reduced to a skeletal contour distilled into a six-note motif. This figure never appears complete in the texture, nor is it treated with formal variation. Rather, it functions like an unheard cantus firmus that affects the surrounding lines. The result is a stark lament with a passing resemblance to the *Dies irae*.

IV. Winter (Fugue)

Winter (Fugue) develops a fugue-like texture based upon the original harmonic pattern of the canon continuously repeated, always dropping by a semitone. I composed this movement as a handful of variations that recur many times always trying to construct themselves from a few reiterated subject-like fragments, adding more as they repeat. A turbulent climax evokes Brahms' piano quintets before subsiding into a long coda.

V. Spring

Spring is cast as a series of chaconne variations using my own new harmonization of the distilled six-note motif derived from Brahms' canon melody that I used in *Autumn*. The movement begins with three delicate elegiac variations on this harmonic sequence before

presenting a direct response to Brahms' canon: a canon of my own invention wholly based upon the distilled six-note motif using my harmonic sequence as a framework. Four iterations with increasingly decorated figuration culminate before a defiant, bitter section marked 'Resolute'. A ghostly introspective coda follows, in which traces of the original canon are heard reminiscent of the ending of the *Prelude* from the beginning of the quintet.

The musical works presented here are original compositions by the composer. They are independent creative responses to the composer's personal experiences while encountering certain visual artworks and poetry. No part of these compositions reproduces, adapts, or directly represents any existing work protected by copyright. No association with, or endorsement by, the artists, poets, their estates, or rights holders is intended or should be inferred.

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Recording Quintet No. 2 Transience Patterns

Kreutzer Quartet

The Kreutzer Quartet is acclaimed for its adventurous performances and recordings of works from our time and from the great quartet literature. Their collaboration with Jim Aitchison stretches back for two decades, after its beginning with their first meeting at Tate St Ives.

The quartet's fascination with musical exploration has resulted in cyclic performances and recordings of works ranging from Anton Reicha and David Matthews to Michael Tippett and Roberto Gerhard, on the Metier, Chandos, Guild, Innova, Lorelt, Move, Naxos, New Focus, NMC, Tadzik and Toccata Classics labels. Composers who have written, or are writing, for them include Simon Bainbridge, Laurie Bamon, Gary Carpenter, Gloria Coates, Edward Cowie, Jeremy Dale Roberts, Peter Dickinson, Michael Finnissy, Gregory Fritze, David Gorton, David Hackbridge Johnson, Hafliði Hallgrímsson, Sadie Harrison, Hans Werner Henze, Michael Hersch, George Holloway, David Horne, Nicola LeFanu, John McCabe, David Matthews, Rosalind Page, Paul Pellay, George Rochberg, Poul Ruders, Evis Sammouris, Robert Saxton, Elliott Schwartz, Roger Steptoe, Jeremy Thurlow and Jörg Widmann. The Quartet has held residencies at York University, Lund University and Goldsmiths University of London and has have given hundreds of workshops for young composers, in the UK and internationally. The Quartet has a truly international career, playing at venues ranging from the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, the Bergen Festspillene and Venice Biennale, and the Aldeburgh Festival.

Kreutzer Quartet:

Peter Sheppard Skærved, Mihailo Trandafilovski – violins
Morgan Goff – viola (Quintet 1), James Sleigh – viola (Quintet 2)
Neil Heyde – cello

Roderick Chadwick

Recently described on *Fanfare* as ‘an incredibly musical pianist’, Roderick Chadwick is equally at home in experimental music and chamber music as he is playing landmark solo works of the last 100 years. Born in 1974 in Manchester, and making his BBC radio debut at the 1989 Aldeburgh Festival in a duo and quartet from Chetham’s School, he has since been heard performing Richard Barrett, Ludwig van Beethoven, Laurence Crane, Michael Finnissy, Will Gregory, Sadie Harrison and Betsy Jolas via this medium – and most recently, Bryn Harrison’s *Towards a slowing of the past* with fellow pianist Mark Knoop on the Radio 6 *Freak Zone*. He also gave a live performance with Knoop of *Structures Premier Livre* at the BBC’s Boulez centenary weekend.

As a member of Ensemble Plus Minus he has enjoyed performing music from Braxton to Paxton across the European new music scene: at Ultima, Huddersfield, Borealis and Warsaw Autumn festivals, regularly at London’s Café Oto, Edinburgh Reid Hall, and L’Auditori Barcelona (amongst others). He also has a long-standing association with the Kreutzer Quartet, with memorable performances including Finnissy’s completion of Grieg’s Piano Quintet movement at the 2014 Bergen Festival.

He has published writings on the music of Gloria Coates, Edward Cowie and Olivier Messiaen, including *Olivier Messiaen’s Catalogue d’oiseaux: From Conception to Performance* with Peter Hill in the Cambridge University Press ‘Music in Context’ series. He played two shared recitals with Dame Gillian Weir in Westminster Cathedral’s fêted Messiaen 90th anniversary series, and played movements from the *Catalogue* in an outdoor concert at Music in PyeongChang 2023, South Korea. His recording of the cycle, plus linked repertoire, on Divine Art has reached its final instalment, and a concurrent series of Edward Cowie’s *Bird Portrait* and Piano Sonata cycles has also won acclaim.

As soloist he has performed Lachenmann at the first London Contemporary Music Festival, given the first performance of Jeremy Dale Roberts’s epic *Tombeau* since

Stephen Kovacevich in the 1960s, and Jim Aitchison's *Portraits for a Study on Disklavier* simultaneous relay across southern England. Since being made Reader at the Royal Academy of Music in 2013 he has taught modules bridging performance and scholarship, and is on a lifelong mission to uncouple the words 'dry' and 'academic'.



Roderick Chadwick © Claire Shovelton

Jim Aitchison

Jim Aitchison is a composer known for creating musical responses to the work of major visual artists, and he is a visual artist in his own right. His first significant work in this area was with Sir Terry Frost for the US pianist Andrew Russo, premiered at the Van Cliburn *Modern at the Modern* concert series in Dallas in 2002. His collaboration with Peter Sheppard Skærved and the Kreutzer Quartet began at Tate St Ives in 2005, responding to sculpture by Richard Deacon, and paintings by John Hoyland in 2007, for whom he composed his string quartet, *Four Trajectories after John Hoyland*. In 2008, as a Henry Moore Fellow at the Royal Academy of Music, he composed *Fugue Refractions* for the Henry Moore Institute with violinist Philippa Mo, and *Memory Field* after sculpture by Antony Gormley, performed by countertenor Nicholas Clapton and the Kreutzer Quartet at the artist's King's Cross studio.

In 2008–09, Tate Modern commissioned him to respond to their large-scale Mark Rothko exhibition, and during this period he also created a response to Doris Salcedo's iconic *Shibboleth* installation, performed by Peter Sheppard Skærved in the Turbine Hall. In 2012, Tate Media published *Shadows of Light II (after Mark Rothko)* as part of the Rothko Room multimedia tour at Tate Modern, and since then *Shadows of Light II* has been performed by the NewEar Ensemble in Kansas City, USA.

In other projects, he has composed musical responses to Anish Kapoor for the Royal Academy's large-scale exhibition, working with Peter Sheppard Skærved, Neil Heyde, and Michael Thompson. In 2014, while an Honorary Research Fellow at the Royal Academy of Music, he created a large, geographically distributed response to the art of Gerhard Richter funded by Arts Council England, working with curator Paul Moorhouse, Roderick Chadwick, and the Kreutzer Quartet, in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Music, Falmouth University, Yamaha UK, and Goldsmiths. In 2017, he was commissioned by the New Art Centre, Roche Court, and Poole Museum, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to create music in response to sculpture by Anthony Caro for the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

In 2020, he made his filmmaking debut with *Contrapunctus*, a piece of video music about disconnection and psychotherapeutic harm, for the Social Distancing Festival in Toronto. In 2023–24, Arts Council England supported his large-scale new music project based at Tremeneheere Sculpture Gardens in Cornwall, working with Peter Sheppard Skærved, Roderick Chadwick, and the Kreutzer Quartet, with support from Falmouth University and Research England.

Recently, he has completed a new clarinet quintet for Linda Merrick CBE and the Kreutzer Quartet, commissioned by the Marchus Trust. His music is published by Composers Edition.

www.jimaitchison.org





Recording Quintet No. 1 Margarete

L-R: Roderick Chadwick, Neil Heyde, Jim Aitchison, Morgan Goff, Mihailo Trandafilovski,
Peter Sheppard Skærved



Kreutzer Quartet and Jim Aitchison giving a workshop on the Quintets at Falmouth University

Front row L-R: Peter Sheppard Skærved, Mihailo Trandafilovski, Roderick Chadwick, Jim Sleight, Neil Heyde and composer, Jim Aitchison

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