

Peter Fribbins – The Zong Affair (2011, première)

*Misterioso – Allegro feroce – Drammatico ma tenebre (Poco meno mosso ma flessibile) – Allegro feroce*

Commissioned by the Turner Ensemble with funds provided by the Angell Trust, *The Zong Affair* is scored along 'Beethoven septet' lines and was inspired by J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship* (c. 1840). The painting's subtitle, *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on*, reveals its grim subject. (The tipping point in how such mass killings, which were then entirely legal, were perceived was the 1781 Zong Affair—the Zong being one of many British slave ships of the time.) A short work in one movement, the music nevertheless evolves in four main directions. The *Misterioso* introduction sets the scene with eerie sustained sounds, punctuated by *pizzicato*. Woven into its fabric is a folksong of the time—source material warped beyond recognition by its present context. The double bass comes to the fore in the larger-scale *Allegro feroce*. The septet then divides as the woodwinds soar above the strings and horn with a protesting line. Their roles switch to colouristic effect before the rhythmic unison of the ensemble (that is, with the same rhythms, if not pitches) heralds new ideas: its musical fragments are a bridge to a more lyrical counterpoint, accompanied by a string ostinato. Another substantial passage, marked *Drammatico ma tenebre (Poco meno mosso ma flessibile)*, is a lull, rekindling the atmosphere of the introduction. The solo horn, imitated pitifully by the viola, soon unfolds its uncertain melody within the foreboding, polarised texture. The *Allegro feroce* duly returns, even fiercer than before, but capped by a gentle, if mournful, postscript.