

Benjamin Attahir (b.1989) *Al 'Asr* (2018)

Born in Toulouse in 1989, Benjamin Attahir initially learned the violin at the Toulouse conservatory but soon also became passionate about composition and conducting. He continued his studies at the CRR in Paris and then at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris. He is now well-known as a composer, a conductor and a concert violinist. His eclectic compositions combine Eastern and Western traditions, and bring new life to old forms, often with unusual combinations of instruments; they include operas and orchestral music as well as chamber music. For example, a residency at the Villa Medici (2016-2017) enabled him to explore the contemporary reworking of the continuo form in the composition of a chamber opera. With the tuba- and serpent-player Patrick Wibart, he founded the ÆNEA ensemble, which is dedicated to the rediscovery of the French romantic repertoire as well as the development of new works on historical instruments.

The term *Al 'Asr* refers to the 103rd Sūrah (chapter) of the Qur'ān - one of the shortest and most revered. Its three verses reflect on the loss that the passage of time produces if it is not offset by faith, good deeds, patience and truthfulness with others. *Al 'Asr* is also the afternoon prayer in the *salâh*, the daily cycle of Muslim prayer, and Attahir's string quartet is the third work in a varied sequence based on this prayer cycle: *Al Fajr* for piano and large ensemble (Sept 2017); *Adh dhouhr* for serpent and orchestra (Jan 2018); *Al 'Asr* for string quartet (2017-18); *Al Maghrib* for violin and orchestra (2019); *Al 'Icha* for orchestra (2018). Within a Muslim framework Attahir has tried to integrate references to other monotheistic religions by means of Gregorian, Jewish Klezmer and Oriental elements.

The Quatuor Arod gave the world premier of *Al 'Asr* at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris in October 2017; the work is gradually evolving with their successive performances. Attahir says of it:

"*Al 'Asr* is the afternoon prayer. I tried to transcribe musically the atmosphere of this specific moment of the day. Raw light, overwhelming heat, iridescence of the air in contact with the surface of the ground - so many images that accompanied me when writing this piece. But *Al 'Asr* is also the 103rd Sūrah of the Qur'ān, which deals with the passage of time and the future of beings. Its structure in three verses dictated the form of this Quartet, without the sacred text being placed in the foreground. It is always the poetic and allegorical aspect that guided my work."