

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 3 January 2022 7.30pm

Wihan Quartet

Leoš Čepický violin

Jan Schulmeister violin

Jakub Čepický viola

Michal Kaňka cello

In Memory of Pamela Majaro

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Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)

Italian Serenade (1887)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

String Quartet in F (1902-3)

*I. Allegro moderato, très doux • II. Assez vif, très rythmé •
III. Très lent • IV. Vif et agité*

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in E flat Op. 51 (1878-9)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Dumka (Elegia). Andante con moto •
III. Romanza. Andante con moto • IV. Finale. Allegro assai*

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Best known for some 300 songs to texts by poets as diverse as Eichendorff, Goethe, Heine, Heyse, Mörike, and even Michelangelo, **Wolf** had initially wanted to become a composer of opera, just like his hero, Wagner. He also left behind an early String Quartet in D minor, as well as a symphonic poem, *Penthesilea*. Both of these are tempestuous works, suggesting something of his often irascible personality, which earned him the nickname of 'der wilde Wolf'. By contrast, the *Italian Serenade* is a work of charm and grace, written in just three days between 2 and 4 May 1887. Like Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony* or Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence*, it illustrates the allure that the Mediterranean has often held for composers from Europe's North. Yet the lyricism of Wolf's serenade is not the result of a trip to Italy, but stems instead from the world of literature. At the time he composed it, he was immersed in the works of Eichendorff, whose romantic novella, *Memoirs of a Good-for-Nothing*, relates the adventures of an itinerant fiddler on a journey from Vienna to Rome. There is, though, no suggestion that Wolf was deliberately trying to convey any particular details of Eichendorff's narrative. Rather, what he captures is the unfeigned spontaneity of singing and dancing, and in doing so, reveals his own capacity for delight.

Ravel's String Quartet in F is a work of such refinement and dexterity that it seems hard to credit the scandal it provoked on the occasion of its première in Paris on 5 March 1904. Even Fauré – its dedicatee and Ravel's former teacher at the Paris Conservatoire – was underwhelmed, describing its finale as 'stunted, poorly balanced, in fact – a failure'. The reasons behind such incomprehension were, though, less to do with the quartet itself, than with Ravel's reputation at the time. He had already made a name for himself as the composer of such impressionistic piano pieces as *Pavane pour une infante défunte* and *Jeux d'eau*, as well as the ravishing orchestral song cycle, *Shéhérazade*. Yet the five attempts he made from 1900 to win the prestigious Prix de Rome had met with failure, leading to the so-called 'affaire Ravel' of 1905, which pitted the composer's academic detractors against his supporters in the press. To write a quartet seemed a deliberate attempt to prove his orthodox musical credentials. Although Ravel – like Debussy – is sometimes referred to as an 'impressionist', his quartet harks back to the Viennese classics, above all Mozart. It is also an explicit homage to Debussy, whose own quartet of 1893 provided Ravel with a model in terms of both overarching structure and individual musical motifs. Debussy was delighted with the tribute, exclaiming 'in the name of the gods of music and of mine, don't change a single note of your quartet.'

It opens with a classical sonata-form *Allegro*, whose marking of *moderato, très doux* tempers any exuberance, replacing it with a more reflective lyricism instead. As in Debussy's quartet, the scherzo comes second. Marked *Assez vif – très rythmé*, it derives

its dance-like energy from the use of plucked strings, as well as from complex syncopations that some have seen as evocative of Ravel's Basque roots. The third movement – *Très lent* – shows the composer at his most rhapsodic and contemplative, and hints at a profound yet very private emotional interiority, whose details have always eluded biographers. The finale – *Vif et agité* – brings the quartet to a boisterous conclusion. Its rhythmic *élan* – the result of juxtaposing bars with three beats with more unstable bars consisting of five beats – suggests something of Ravel's love of Russian music, and certainly his quartet is as vividly and imaginatively 'orchestrated' as the symphonic scores of Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Ravel was a young man of 28 when he wrote his first – and only – quartet, and its première launched his career as the greatest French composer of his generation. By the time that **Dvořák** wrote his String Quartet in E flat Op. 51, he was nearly 40 and had already completed five symphonies, nine quartets, and a host of other works. Yet his reputation was still largely confined to his native Bohemia, and he was understandably keen to establish himself internationally. He entered a competition for the Austrian State Prize for Composition in 1874, which he duly received on the recommendation of Brahms. He was awarded the prize again in 1876 and 1877, and it was the composition that he submitted for the latter competition – his *Moravian Duets* for two voices and piano – that especially captivated the jury. Brahms persuaded his publisher, Simrock, to commission Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*, originally written for piano duet in 1878 and orchestrated that same year. It was, of course, the *Slavonic Dances* that brought Dvořák to the attention of the world and launched a career that took the composer and his music to Austria, Germany, Britain and America.

In 1879, Jean Becker, leader of the renowned Florentine Quartet, asked Dvořák to compose a string quartet that would – like the *Slavonic Dances* – make use of the melodies and dances of Central Europe. The opening movement eschews any obvious sense of folklore, although some have heard echoes of the polka in its more rhythmic moments. Rather than a conventional minuet and trio, the second movement is as a *dumka*, a melancholy Slavonic ballad, which alternates with a more vigorous Czech folk dance known as the *furiant*. Then follows an affecting *Romanza*, in which Dvořák refuses any obvious evocation of Slavonic folk music, suggesting instead the opera house or the private salon. The *Finale* is based on a Bohemian folk dance known as the *skočná*, whose rustic quality is civilised by Dvořák's deft mastery of form and counterpart.

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