

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 10 November 2024
7.30pm

Pavel Haas Quartet

Veronika Jarůšková violin
Marek Zwiebel violin
Šimon Truszka viola
Peter Jarůšek cello

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

From Cypresses B152 (1865, rev. 1887)

*Já vím, že v sladké nadeji • V té sladké moci očí
tvých • Zde hledím na ten drahý list • Nad krajem
vévodi lehký spánek*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 22 in B flat K589 'Prussian' (1790)

*I. Allegro • II. Larghetto • III. Menuetto. Moderato
IV. Allegro assai*

Interval

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

String Quartet No. 3 in E flat minor Op. 30 (1876)

*I. Andante sostenuto – Allegro moderato •
II. Allegretto vivo e scherzando • III. Andante
funebre e doloroso, ma con moto • IV. Finale.
Allegro non troppo e risoluto*



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The two Slavonic works that begin and end this evening's programme both arose from a need to come to terms with loss – in the first case a sense of loss associated with the unfulfilled longing generated by unrequited love, and in the second prompted by the premature death of a cherished friend and respected colleague.

Dvořák was a struggling young composer with only a handful of works to his name when he first encountered the rising actress Josefína Čermáková, who secured her first starring role at Prague's Provisional Theatre when he was still just a humble viola player in the orchestra there. Though Dvořák was soon smitten with her, she remained insensible to his ardour and eventually he transferred his affections to her younger sister Anna, who in due course became his wife.

Soon after meeting Josefína, Dvořák came across the collection of verses *Cypresses* by Gustav Pflieger-Moravský (1833-75). The poems' sentimental language appealed to the lovesick composer, and in July 1865 he set the whole of one section (entitled 'Songs') to music. Though he later described the song cycle as 'this unripe fruit of mine' and it remained unpublished during his lifetime, the fact that he re-used several motifs from it in other works suggests that it continued to hold a special place in his heart. In 1887 he arranged 12 of the songs for string quartet and called this new version 'Echo of Songs', but it wasn't until 1921 that the quartet version was published and received its current title.

Though a relatively early work with its rich melodic invention and warm harmonic colouring, *Cypresses* gives more than a hint of Dvořák's mature musical language. In most of the quartet arrangements, the vocal line is transferred to one instrument (usually the violin), with the other three instruments sharing the accompaniment between them. But occasionally the viola – Dvořák's own instrument – is allocated some of the most ardent melodies (as in two of the numbers that make up this evening's selection), perhaps acknowledging the special circumstances that gave rise to this work.

The story behind **Mozart's** String Quartet No. 22 also contains an element of rejection, though in this case it was the composer's need for financial security that was at stake rather than his emotional equilibrium. By 1789, Mozart's precarious situation had become so acute that he desperately needed to secure some form of royal patronage, and so that spring he travelled to Potsdam in the hope of obtaining an audience with Friedrich Wilhelm II, the King of Prussia, who had acquired the reputation of being a patron of the arts, especially in the field of music.

Unfortunately, no offer of employment or firm commission for an important work materialised during

the composer's visit to the Prussian court. He played for Friedrich Wilhelm and came away with a small cash gift and a vague undertaking to compose a set of six quartets for the king and the same number of piano sonatas for his daughter, but nothing more definite than that. Mozart wrote the first quartet, K575 in D, immediately on his return to Vienna, but other projects (including the composition of *Così fan tutte*) then intervened and almost a year elapsed before he found time to write the next two, K589 in B flat and K590 in F.

Despite the inconclusive nature of the understanding he had reached with Friedrich Wilhelm, Mozart still went out of his way to produce music that would appeal to the king, who was a keen amateur cellist. All three of the so-called 'Prussian' quartets feature prominent cello parts, often in a high register, so that the instrument is liberated from its usual role in the classical repertoire of providing a solid bass line. Mozart complained that these works were the product of 'exhausting labour', but the resentment he felt at having saddled himself with what he described as 'a troublesome task' is belied by the sunny nature of K589 and its two companions. Sadly, he did not live to complete the set.

Tchaikovsky's String Quartet in E flat minor – his third and last work in the genre – was written as a memorial for his friend and fellow professor at the Moscow Conservatory, the Czech violinist Ferdinand Laub (1832-75). The Prague-born Laub was destined to be a violin virtuoso from an early age, and by the time he took up the Moscow post in 1866 had enjoyed a brilliant career across Europe. Tchaikovsky had a profound respect for his artistry (he referred to Laub as 'the best violinist of our time') and invited him to give the first performances of his first two quartets. Laub's faltering health forced him to step down from his post at the Moscow Conservatory in 1874, and he died the following year in the health resort of Gries-San Quirino, on the outskirts of the northern Italian city of Bolzano.

Tchaikovsky's choice of the unusual key of E flat minor provides the first indication that this is a deeply serious work – an impression soon confirmed by the all-pervading melancholy of the first movement, described by the composer's biographer David Brown as 'an immense *valse triste*'. The sprightly rhythms of the second movement bring to mind the Czech polka and may well have been intended as a deliberate allusion to Laub's Bohemian roots. The third movement is imbued with a funereal atmosphere that apparently reduced the audience at the first performance to tears. Tchaikovsky faced a dilemma over what kind of music could possibly follow such a relentless outpouring of grief, and in the end opted for a complete contrast of mood, with a vigorously assertive *Finale* whose energy barely flags from the first bar to the last.

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