

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 11 October 2021 1.00pm

Aris Quartet

Anna Katharina Wildermuth violin

Noémi Zipperling violin

Caspar Vinzens viola

Lukas Sieber cello



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)

5 Pieces for String Quartet (1923)

*Alla Valse viennese • Alla Serenata • Alla Czeca •
Alla Tango milonga • Alla Tarantella*

György Kurtág (b.1926)

Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervánszky Op. 28 (1988-9)

*I. Largo • II. Più andante • III. Sostenuto, quasi giusto •
IV. Grave, molto sostenuto • V. Presto • VI. Molto agitato •
VII. Sehr fließend • VIII. Lento • IX. Largo • X. Sehr fließend •
XI. Sostenuto • XII. Sostenuto, quasi giusto • XIII. Sostenuto, con slancio •
XIV. Disperato, vivo • XV. Larghetto*

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 3 in D Op. 44 No. 1 (1838)

*I. Molto allegro vivace • II. Menuetto. Un poco allegretto •
III. Andante espressivo ma con moto • IV. Presto con brio*

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Born into a prosperous German-Jewish family in Prague in 1894, **Schulhoff** was hailed by Dvořák as a musical prodigy. He entered the Prague Conservatory at the age of ten, before going on to study composition in Vienna, Leipzig and Cologne. After the war, his musical language changed radically, and he became one of the first European composers to be captivated by jazz. He was also influenced by the Dada movement, particularly the bleakly satirical caricatures of the Berlin artist George Grosz. Written in Prague in 1923 and dedicated to the French composer Darius Milhaud, his *5 Pieces for String Quartet* were premiered at the Festival of the International Society for New Music in Salzburg on 8 August 1924. In form, they are modelled on a Baroque dance suite and suggest the influence of neo-classicism, although their tone can be as bleak as it can be playful. Taken together, they map a cosmopolitan range of dance forms, taking the listener on an imaginary journey from Austria and Bohemia to Latin America and Southern Italy. First comes a 'Viennese Waltz', as ironic and uncanny as Ravel's *La valse*. Then comes a malevolent 'Serenade' that seems more likely to alarm than to seduce. 'Czech Folk Music' revisits Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* from the tangy, modernist perspective of Bartók, and in 'Tango' – the longest movement of the five – Schulhoff pays homage to the sultry intensity of an Argentinian *milonga*. The set concludes with a frenetic 'Tarantella' that captures the energy of interwar European culture, whilst perhaps also foreshadowing the maelstrom that was to overtake the continent in the 1930s and 1940s. As a Jew, a communist, a so-called 'degenerate artist', and – from 1941 – a Soviet citizen, Schulhoff became one of the millions of victims of Nazi ideology and violence. He was arrested in Prague before he could be issued a visa to emigrate to Moscow and died in the Wülzburg concentration camp in Bavaria on 18 August 1942.

György Kurtág's *Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervánszky* was composed in 1988-9, and in its 15 consecutive movements – lasting around a quarter of an hour in performance – it achieves an intensely honed concision and almost transcendent beauty. As its title suggests, the *Officium breve* is a kind of requiem for Kurtág's fellow composer, Endre Szervánszky (1911-77). Szervánszky began his career writing works influenced by the folklorism of Kodály and Bartók, but later turned to the example of Webern's terse and pointillist approach to serialism. Kurtág pays homage to the creative influence that Szervánszky exerted on a younger generation of Hungarian composers in the 1960s and 1970s, deriving the musical material of the *Officium breve* from Szervánszky's Serenade for String Orchestra of 1947-8. Kurtág also alludes to Webern's final completed work, the Cantata No. 2 Op. 31, and

throughout, he employs a number of Webern's rigorous and exacting musical techniques. There are more debts and memories in the *Officium breve* too. Kurtág folds in references to some of his own compositions, and four of the movements are dedicated to departed friends and musical colleagues. It is this fusion of fastidious intellectualism and human emotion that makes *Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervánszky* such a masterpiece of late 20th-century chamber music. Kurtág's fondness for the short fragment means that his eloquence is often more about what goes unsaid than what is written on the page (although the score has a distinctly calligraphic beauty about it too). And the distillation of consonance that emerges in the very final movement, when we finally hear the opening of the 'Arioso' of Szervánszky's Serenade stripped of Kurtág's manipulations and played on muted strings, is all the more affecting because it is so short, unsentimental and inconclusive.

Mendelssohn's three String Quartets Op. 44, were composed in 1837-8 around the time of his marriage to Cécile Jeanrenaud, the daughter of a Huguenot pastor from Frankfurt, and the first of them in particular – in the buoyant, sunlit key of D major – radiates feelings of young love and new life. The opening movement, marked *Molto allegro vivace*, is a skittish rush of exuberant inspiration that harks back to the youthful Octet of 1825. Although the first violin often carries the melodic interest, Mendelssohn's command of counterpoint allows him to dispose the musical material across all four voices with conspicuous generosity. Despite coming after Beethoven and Schubert, Mendelssohn was as much a classicist as he was a Romantic. The well-proportioned minuet shows the composer in elegant, Rococo mood (remember, too, that he had been a prized guest in the aristocratic houses of regency England). The third-movement *Andante* feels like one of Mendelssohn's 'songs without words'. Plentiful pizzicatos in the viola and cello parts, and persistent staccato markings in the second violin's countermelody give it an airy feel, and the lilting phrases of the first violin seldom linger. Like the preceding minuet, its emotional tenor is that of genteel sensibility rather than grand passion. In the Finale Mendelssohn once again revels in his delight at being able to produce flawless counterpoint. Marked *Presto con brio*, it is characterised by the same vivacious dance rhythms that are such a feature of the finale of the 'Italian' Symphony, interspersed with more lyrical moments of reflection.

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