

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 12 February 2024
7.30pm

Pavel Haas Quartet

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

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)

String Quartet No. 3 (1929)
I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Vivo

Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915-1940)

String Quartet No. 1 Op. 8 (1935-6)
I. Con brio • II. Lento • III. Allegro con variazioni

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in C Op. 61 (1881)
*I. Allegro • II. Poco adagio e molto cantabile •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivo • IV. Finale. Vivace*



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Though Martinů and Kaprálová represent different generations of Czech 20th-century composers, it was almost inevitable that their paths would eventually converge, given their shared origins in the Czech provinces and the fact that both were drawn irresistibly to French culture. Despite being firmly grounded in the musical tradition of their common homeland, both saw Paris as a city in which they could spread their wings and experience much more exciting artistic stimuli than they could expect to encounter within the narrower confines of Czech cultural life.

The first few years of **Martinů's** life were spent in the extremely confined environment of the tower of St James's church in the small town of Polička, where his father performed the dual role of bell-ringer and fire-watcher. He started to learn the violin as a child and at the age of 15 was accepted as a student at the Prague Conservatory, but struggled to conform to the strict regime imposed there. He soon realised that his true vocation lay in composing, and after being bowled over by the music of Debussy began to dream of moving to France.

By the time he finally succeeded in leaving Prague for Paris in the autumn of 1923, Martinů was already in his early thirties and had written his first mature string quartet, in which the influence of Debussy and Ravel can be heard. Soon after his arrival in the French capital, he began to study privately with Albert Roussel, and over the next few years he was exposed to other kinds of music that were then all the rage in Paris – notably the music of Stravinsky and jazz.

The String Quartet No. 3 (1929) was one of the last works that Martinů composed during his jazz phase. In addition to the influence of jazz (most noticeable in the syncopated rhythms of the outer movements and the bluesy atmosphere of the *Andante*), the ironic spikiness of contemporary French composers (especially those belonging to *Les Six*) and the more uncompromising modernism of Stravinsky and Bartók can also be discerned. The central section of the *Viva*, which features a jaunty melody first played by the viola and accompanied by harmonics in the first violin and pizzicato chords in the cello, bears more than a passing resemblance to some of Bartók's quartet writing. At the same time, the more lyrical episodes in the *Allegro* also contain clear hints of the sustained melodic style inspired by Czech folk music that Martinů was to develop during the 1930s.

Though he continued to be based in Paris, by the early 30s he was feeling more and more the pull of his homeland, and as his fame there grew, he made increasingly regular visits to Czechoslovakia for performances of his works. It was during a visit to Prague in April 1937 that he first encountered **Kaprálová**, who was then only 22 but had already notched up an impressive catalogue of works, including piano pieces, numerous songs, a piano concerto and the String Quartet, which she wrote when

she was just 20 and newly graduated from the Brno Conservatory.

This extremely gifted young woman made an indelible impression on Martinů at their first meeting, and he encouraged her to apply for a French government scholarship so that she could continue her studies in Paris. In October 1937, Kaprálová arrived in the French capital, where she began to take private lessons in composition with Martinů. The two were soon inseparable, and a close relationship – both artistic and personal – developed between them.

Kaprálová went back to Czechoslovakia at the end of her scholarship, but by then Hitler's designs on her country were becoming all too apparent, and she returned to Paris in January 1939, only a couple of months before German troops marched into Prague. Just over a year later France too succumbed to Nazi aggression: in May 1940 German soldiers crossed the border into France, and the by then seriously ill composer was evacuated from Paris to the southern city of Montpellier, where she died on 16 June, two days after the occupation of Paris.

No hint of these future tragic events clouds Kaprálová's String Quartet, much of which was written during the summer holidays of 1935, spent in the idyllic surroundings of the Czech-Moravian Highlands. Its melodic and rhythmic style are clearly influenced by Moravian folk music, but the harmonic language also suggests the influence of French music, notably that of Ravel (there are distinct echoes of Ravel's quartet in the second theme of the first movement). All in all, the work shows Kaprálová confidently flexing her creative muscles before embarking on the next stage of what seemed certain to be a brilliant career.

Dvořák's String Quartet in C dates from the same period as his opera *Dimitrij*. In October 1881, the composer had just finished sketching out the opera when he discovered that the Hellmesberger Quartet, which had commissioned a new quartet from him, was planning to give the première of the work at Vienna's Ringtheater on 15 December. Dvořák hastily set his opera aside and switched to writing a quartet instead, completing it on 10 November. Sadly, in the event the work's first performance had to be postponed after the Ringtheater was destroyed by a deadly fire on 8 December.

Given that the work was intended for Vienna, where there was some prejudice against what many considered to be provincial Bohemian culture, Dvořák may well have decided to tone down the more obviously Czech elements of his musical language. Whether or not this was his intention, an unmistakably Bohemian character still shines through in both the trio of the *Scherzo* and the *Finale*.

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