

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 12 June 2023
1.00pm

Pavel Haas Quartet

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

Josef Suk (1874-1935)

Meditation on an old Bohemian Chorale (St Wenceslas)
Op. 35a (1914)

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)

String Quartet No. 2 (1925)
I. Moderato - Allegro vivace • II. Andante • III. Allegro

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957) String Quartet No. 3 in D Op. 34 (1944-5)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto •
III. Sostenuto. Like a Folk Tune • IV. Finale. Allegro*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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The old Bohemian chorale melody 'Svatý Václav' (St Wenceslas), with its plea to the country's patron saint to save the people in their hour of peril, has long had iconic significance for Czech composers. The melody was quoted by Dvořák in his *Hussite Overture* (1883), and it was perhaps inevitable that Dvořák's son-in-law **Suk** should turn to the same theme to express both a plea for salvation and a message of defiance at a time when the empire that had for so long oppressed the Czech people was itself under threat and was calling on its subject nations to rally to its defence.

At the beginning of the First World War, it was made clear to musicians in the lands ruled by Austria that an act of loyalty – in the form of prefacing all concerts with a performance of the imperial anthem of the Habsburg monarchy – was required. This decree irked Suk and his colleagues in the Bohemian Quartet (in which the composer played second violin) and prompted him to write his *Meditation* on the St Wenceslas chorale as a way of signalling where his true loyalties lay. The piece begins with a darkly brooding setting of the opening notes of the chorale, but soon builds to a powerful climax characterised by emphatic repetitions of the melodic cell associated with the words 'Do not let us perish' – a point that certainly would not have been lost on the audience at the first performance, which took place in Prague on 27 September 1914 (the eve of the feast of St Wenceslas).

The St Wenceslas chorale also formed an essential part of **Martinů's** musical consciousness, and when a newly independent Czechoslovakia was founded following Austria's defeat in the First World War, he celebrated this event by composing his *Czech Rhapsody* (1918), based on the same melody as Suk's *Meditation* but more triumphant in character. Although Martinů rejoiced at his homeland's new-found independence, he chafed at the conservative nature of the Prague musical establishment and increasingly felt a need to seek pastures new. He had long been attracted by the freshness and clarity of French music, which for him provided a welcome antidote to the denser textures of the Central European musical tradition, and in 1923 he moved to Paris to study with Roussel – one of the main proponents of the neoclassical style that was then very much in the ascendancy in France.

The String Quartet No. 2, the first quartet Martinů wrote under the tutelage of Roussel, shows the extent to which he had assimilated the lightness and lucidity of neoclassicism while at the same time remaining true to his Czech roots. The frequent use of coiling melodies made up of brief stepwise cells – typical both of Czech folk music and of traditional religious melodies such as the St Wenceslas chorale – are unmistakable evidence of the composer's Czech origins. Over the next few decades, as Martinů became ever more aware of this aspect of his musical identity, such melodies

were to become an increasingly integral part of his language. Another distinctive trait that points to the influence of both neoclassicism and Czech folk music is the quartet's rhythmic vitality, which is particularly evident in the polka-like rhythms of the spirited third movement.

Martinů wrote the work at the request of the Novák-Frank Quartet, led by the composer's great friend Stanislav Novák, whom he met when they were both music students in Prague and under whose leadership he played the violin in the Czech Philharmonic in the early 1920s. The Quartet No. 2 was the first of Martinů's pieces to be issued by the Austrian publisher Universal Edition and helped to bring his name to the attention of an international audience.

In marked contrast to Martinů, who did not establish himself as a composer until he was well into his 30s, **Korngold** seemed destined for a dazzling musical career from a very early age. Indeed, his parents' decision to bestow the middle name 'Wolfgang' on their second son came to seem like a self-fulfilling prophecy, for critics soon began referring to the precocious young composer as 'a 20th-century Mozart'.

Born in Brno, Moravia, Korngold moved to Vienna with his family as a child. Performances of his juvenile works – written even before he was in his teens – caused a sensation in the Austrian capital, and eminent composers such as Mahler predicted a brilliant future for him. By the time Korngold was in his mid-20s, his music was being performed throughout Europe.

With the rise of the Nazi regime in neighbouring Germany, the Jewish Korngold decided to try his hand at composing film scores for Hollywood, and eventually settled permanently in Los Angeles following Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938. Success in Hollywood effectively saved Korngold's life and allowed him to carry on composing, but the relentless pressure of having to churn out one film score after another meant he had very little time to devote to the more serious music that he felt was his true vocation. Sadly, becoming typecast as a film music composer also meant that he later struggled to be taken seriously by the post-war musical establishment.

Towards the end of the Second World War, Korngold began to contemplate retirement from his Hollywood career. He sketched out the String Quartet No. 3 in 1944 and finished it the following year; it was the first piece he had written purely for himself since 1937 and was to be his final chamber work. The quartet presents a fascinating amalgam of the complex chromatic language that he had grown up with in Vienna and the more accessible style – complete with 'big tunes' – that he cultivated in his film scores.

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