

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 13 January 2023  
1.00pm

## European Chamber Music Academy Showcase 2023

### Trio Hélios

Eva Zavaro violin  
Raphaël Jouan cello  
Alexis Gournel piano

Zdeněk Fibich (1850-1900)

Poème from *At Twilight* Op. 39a (1893) *arranged by Jan Kubelík*

Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949)

Piano Trio No. 2 Op. 27 'Quasi una ballata' (1902)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Piano Trio in A minor (1914)

*I. Modéré • II. Pantoum. Assez vite •  
III. Passacaille. Très large • IV. Final. Animé*

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30

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The work by which **Zdeněk Fibich** is now best known is not exactly by him. To discover its origins we have to peel back several layers. But perhaps we should start with a brief overview of the composer. Born in the very middle of the 19th Century (and of Bohemia), Fibich grew up in the wooded estates tended by his Czech father, a forester employed by landed gentry. His mother was Viennese, and his schooling and early career drew on both his Czech and Austro-German heritages. This led to controversy as he tried to forge a career at a time when the Czech people were trying to break free from the Habsburg Empire. His operas were criticised for their Wagnerian aspects, and he was denied important institutional posts.

His first unhappy marriage ended in the early death of his wife, whereupon he entered into a second unhappy marriage with her sister. 20 years later he walked out on her and set up home instead with a former pupil, the much younger Anežka Schulzová. He commemorated his relationship with Schulzová in a series of compositions he called his 'piano diary', *Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences* (1892-8). One of these pieces describes the evening walks he took with his lover. In 1893 he used its melody for a section of his symphonic poem *At Twilight*. Round about 1908 the violinist **Jan Kubelík** extracted this tune to use as an encore, adding introductory music of his own. The *Poème*, to apply Kubelík's title, became a posthumous hit for Fibich, who had died in 1900 aged 49 – it was even adapted as a pop song.

**Vítězslav Novák** regarded his Piano Trio No. 2 as an expression of the aesthetic conflicts going on within him. He studied composition with Antonín Dvořák, and at first appeared committed to the Czech nationalism that his teacher advocated. After his graduation in 1896 he even went out into the rural regions of Moravia and Slovakia to immerse himself in the influence of folksong. Yet he never lost his admiration for the Austro-German music of Brahms and Wagner (themselves supposedly opposing forces); some of his compositions appear to be influenced by Debussy and Ravel; and he became increasingly devoted to the operas of Richard Strauss. Novák's conflicts were external as well as internal, and despite his being welcomed into Prague's musical establishment he had a knack for rubbing people up the wrong way. The situation was not helped when he published an autobiography that not only attempted to settle old scores but also picked new fights with his colleagues.

The Trio dates from 1902, when the composer was uncertain which musical direction to take. This resulted in his adopting an original format that combines a single-movement structure with distinct

internal sections, though perhaps these do not quite constitute a clear-cut four-movement structure as some commentators have suggested. A brief, starkly arresting introduction is followed by a striving and turbulent allegro with tender moments in a Brahmsian manner. The spooky scherzo that follows is modernist by comparison, and lingers on, disconcertingly, in an extended transition into another fast and dramatic section, which revisits moods and motifs already introduced. This cyclical aspect – returning to where we began after all we have been through – seems both fitting to the composer's state of mind and a reflection of an age when old certainties no longer rang true. Appropriately, therefore, the music finally breaks up into fragments that cannot be reconciled.

With typical wit, long before he put pen to paper, **Maurice Ravel** remarked to a friend that 'My Trio is now finished. I only need the themes for it.' However carefully he might have mapped out the structure, the irony of his remark became clear as he struggled to put flesh on the bones. Over the summer of 1914 he worked on the piece at his hideaway of Saint-Jean-de-Luz on the Basque coast, but progress was slow. By July the composer was complaining that he was sick of the Trio, having spent three weeks stuck for inspiration. The impetus to get going again came within a fortnight: on 3 August 1914, France entered the First World War. Keen to sign up, Ravel now worked 'with the clear-headed determination of a madman', as he wrote to Maurice Delage, the same friend whom he had assured that the Trio was complete in his head – all bar the music.

The first movement has an acknowledged Basque influence, reflecting the region in which it was written. It covers a wide emotional range, not through bold contrasts but via continual transition. Then follows a playful waltz-scherzo, whose title, *Pantoum*, refers to a verse form of Malaysian origin adopted by late-19th-century French poets. How much that has to do with the musical structure, and how much the name was chosen purely for its exotic flavour, is a moot point among scholars. Solemn bell-tones from the piano in the *passacaglia* slow-movement suggest we are still in the 'mystic East' and the lands of the gamelan. The opening of the finale returns us to the impressionistic realm of the Trio's beginning, before the movement explodes in a burst of volatile energy that really does suggest the 'determined madman' that Ravel became while writing it. As it turned out, he was rejected for active service on account of his small stature and poor health, but he served instead – with bravery – driving munitions lorries.

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