

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 15 June 2023
7.30pm

Pavel Haas Quartet

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

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in G Op. 106 (1895)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio ma non troppo •
III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Andante sostenuto -
Allegro con fuoco*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in G D887 (1826)

*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Andante un poco moto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio. Allegretto •
IV. Allegro assai*



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Both Schubert and Dvořák wrote quartets for most of their careers. Schubert completed 15 in 16 years, while Dvořák took more than twice as long (34 years) to write his 14. For both men, these works trace a trajectory from apprentice years to mastery. Tonight, we hear them at their peak in Schubert's final and Dvořák's penultimate quartets. Written pretty much 70 years apart, they share a key, but where Dvořák found mostly joy in it, Schubert found storms and drama.

As a passionate admirer of Schubert, Dvořák wrote about him for New York's *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* a couple of years before composing Op. 106. He enthuses: 'Schubert's chamber music, especially his string quartets... must be ranked among the very best of their kind in all musical literature.' He observes that Schubert 'does not try to give his chamber music an orchestral character, yet he attains a marvellous variety of beautiful tonal effects... his flow of melody is spontaneous, incessant, and irrepressible...' True as that is of Schubert, it equally well describes Dvořák's best work: a wonderful incidence of one composer admiring in another exactly the qualities he brought to his own music.

In May 1895, **Dvořák** returned to his homeland from the United States after what had been a demanding few years. He gave himself a summer of leisure: 'I am basking in God's nature and I am contentedly idle...' he wrote to close friend Alois Gobl. The first music he wrote after this idle idyll was tonight's quartet, and it is imbued with a sense of contentment. As ever, when he did set to work, Dvořák was fast and completed the quartet in around a month: testament to his impressive facility for translating the music he heard in his head onto the score. From the very outset, he offers 'a marvellous variety of beautiful tonal effects,' and his handling of colour and texture is breathtaking. Minute attention to detail leads him to cover some pages densely with fleeting adjustments in volume, attack, phrasing and momentum. His sensitivity to the nuances of string playing is everywhere evident. At one point he asks the cellist to play a melody on the upper strings while holding low C on the bottom string, even though he could easily have given that melody to the viola: the subtly different quality this double-stop brings to the moment is typically Dvořákian, and similar moments are legion. As a listener, paying special attention to this is very rewarding, even at the risk of focusing on nuts and bolts at the expense of the meaning of the music. That said, the miracle of this piece is that none of his detail obstructs Dvořák's characteristic fluency and thought, that 'spontaneous, incessant, and irrepressible' flow that few other composers ever achieve.

There is no subtext or story to Op. 106 that we know of, but there is one feature which suggests something

of a reminiscence. In the last movement, around five minutes in, Dvořák interrupts the flow to bring back the music of the very opening bars of the quartet. It is a brief flashback, but somehow poignant and touching.

In his article, Dvořák dwells on **Schubert's** lack of success in the opera house, something he put down to '...the nature of his genius, which was lyrical, and not dramatic, or, at any rate, not theatrical.' Listening to the String Quartet in G D887 brings home how difficult it is to write about music, even for someone as great as Dvořák - because while his view is fully supported by listening to any Schubert opera, this quartet is nothing if not dramatic, not to say theatrical. The time Schubert spent not writing great opera was far from wasted, as the sound world of several of his later chamber works (above all his Octet) owes a great deal to what he learned in failing. In particular, the operas of Carl Maria von Weber taught him techniques to heighten emotional intensity with dramatic crescendos, tremolando strings, stabbing chords, sudden changes of dynamic and momentum, melodies that sound like operatic recitative and diminished chords. It is a sound world you will find in no quartets before Schubert's, and you hear all of those devices within minutes of D887's beginning. If anything, the music becomes yet more extraordinary in its second movement. Here, Schubert juxtaposes two kinds of material: the mournful song of the opening section, then the turbulent, jagged fury that erupts around three minutes in. This climaxes in bars which would surely have startled any of his contemporaries even more than they do us; he writes what could be described as a repeated, violent exclamation for the first violin and viola, shifting the harmony around it each time it sounds so that it becomes ever stranger and somehow more anguished. Schubert's work holds many expressions of despair and desperation, but few match this for its startling drama and disregard for 'normal' harmony of his day.

D887 was written in 11 days in June 1826, so more than two years before Schubert's death, yet it is believed that he never heard it played. The last movement may have been performed in 1828, but not the whole thing. One year later, an unsung hero of the string quartet, Joseph Hellmesberger, was born into a noted musical family. He went on to found the Hellmesberger Quartet in 1849, and was instrumental in reviving interest in much quartet repertoire through performances and making it available in new editions. He led the full première of D887 on 8 December 1850 in Vienna, 22 years after Schubert's death. In a nice final link between these two marvellous composers, he also went to commission Dvořák's eleventh Quartet 30 years later.

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