

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 16 January 2023  
7.30pm

## Modigliani Quartet

Amaury Coeytaux violin  
Loïc Rio violin  
Laurent Marfaing viola  
François Kieffer cello

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Crisantemi (1890)

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in E D353 (1816)

*I. Allegro con fuoco • II. Andante •  
III. Menuetto. Allegro vivace •  
IV. Rondo. Allegro vivace*

Interval

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my life' (1876)

*I. Allegro vivo appassionato •  
II. Allegro moderato alla polka •  
III. Largo sostenuto • IV. Vivace*

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**Puccini** wrote only a handful of purely instrumental works, and on the evidence of recording catalogues and concert programmes, only one has survived as anything more than a curiosity; the short movement for string quartet that Puccini called *Crisantemi* ('Chrysanthemums'). Prince Amedeo of Savoy - Duke of Aosta, patron of the arts and (for three years in the 1870s) King of Spain - died on the 18 January 1890. *Crisantemi* is an elegy for the Duke; a lyrical and affectingly melancholy 'flower of mourning' lasting barely more than five minutes, and written (or so Puccini told his brother Michele) in just one night. It's frequently heard in a later version for string orchestra, but opera buffs may also recognise it from Act 3 of *Manon Lescaut* (1892) – where, resourceful as ever, Puccini recycled it to accompany the scene of Manon's imprisonment.

'**Schubert, Franz**, crowed for the last time, 26th July 1812'. The 15 year-old Schubert scribbled those words on the 3rd alto part of Peter Winter's Mass in C – marking forever the very note at which his voice broke and his career as a chorister at Vienna's Court Chapel came to a dissonant end. But now his schooldays were numbered; if he could no longer sing, he was expected to knuckle down to Latin and maths. So in November 1813, at the age of 16, he left the Imperial Seminary to train as a primary school teacher. His real vocation, though, was already clear. Back home, with his schoolmaster father and two brothers, he played through the classics of the string quartet repertoire (he took the viola part), and he composed quartets too: some 11 completed works over the course of his teenage years.

This quartet in E major dates from 1816, and it's less an apprentice-work than a journeyman piece: it would be the last quartet that Schubert completed before his masterly final triptych of 1824-6. He's clearly thinking on a more ambitious scale, and this is a work that could only exist in a world after Beethoven's Op. 59 (1806). True, hints of the classical masters still stick to his inspiration, here and there, like fragments of eggshell. The main theme of the *Rondo* finale echoes Mozart's 39th symphony, and the third movement, with its flashes of energy and mood-swinging central trio could almost be the 'really original minuet' of Haydn's dreams. But the key of E major imparts a brilliance (and a technical difficulty) to the first movement that transcends the merely domestic; while the *Andante* second movement, with its haunting horn-call harmonies and the first violin's rapturous final ascent, reveals a young artist with his eyes on infinitely distant and more Romantic horizons.

Programme music came naturally to **Bedřich Smetana**. A child prodigy on the violin, he was an extrovert by nature, and aimed high – 'I wanted to be a Mozart in composition, and a Liszt in technique'. Personal happiness proved more elusive. He lost two

young children within nine months in 1855-6; three years later his beloved first wife Katerina died after ten years of marriage. Meanwhile, syphilis caused him escalating nervous difficulties throughout his adult life, and in the space of a few months in 1874, acute tinnitus developed into severe hearing loss. He retreated from Prague into the peace of the country, where he composed the String Quartet 'From my life' between October and December 1876. By then he could compose for only an hour at a stretch before his condition made concentration impossible.

First performed in private in 1878 (with Dvořák on viola), the Quartet was finally premièred in Prague on 28 March 1879. 'I did not set out to write a Quartet according to recipe or custom in the usual forms', said Smetana. 'My intention was to paint a tone-picture of my life.' In his own words, 'The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning of something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune.' Some listeners have heard the viola's heroic opening solo as a kind of 'fate' motif (it returns at the finale's tragic climax), and the movement as a whole as a recollection of the revolutionary days of the 1848 nationalist risings.

'A quasi-polka brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance music and gave it away left, right and centre to other young people, being known myself as a passionate lover of dancing.' In the second theme, Smetana marks the viola *quasi tromba* - 'like a trumpet'. The demure central section evokes 'the aristocratic circles in which I lived long years', and 'the slow movement recalls the happiness of my first love for the girl who later became my wife'. A mournful cello solo begins and ends this third movement: Smetana never ceased to mourn Katerina, and the impassioned central climax is touched with sorrow.

And in the finale, Smetana describes 'the discovery that I could express national ideas in music, and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of my deafness.' The moment when the jaunty slavic dance breaks off, and the violin plays a piercing high E remains one of the most chilling – and haunting – moments in Romantic chamber music: 'It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which, in 1874, announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke because it was so disastrous to me', observed Smetana, with bitter irony. 'In a sense, it is private and therefore written for four instruments, which should converse together in an intimate circle about the things that so deeply trouble me. Nothing more!'

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