

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 18 January 2025  
1.00pm

The ECMA Showcase has been supported by a gift from the estates of the late Thomas and Betty Elton in memory of Sigmund Elton

## Javus Quartett

Marie-Therese Schwöllinger violin

Alexandra Moser violin

Marvin Stark viola

Oscar Hagen cello

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

## String Quartet No. 19 in C K465 'Dissonance' (1785)

*I. Adagio - Allegro • II. Andante cantabile •*

*III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro molto*

## Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

## String Quartet in F Op. 96 'American' (1893)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Lento •*

*III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Vivace ma non troppo*



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On 15 January 1785, **Mozart** arranged a private performance of three newly-composed string quartets that he intended to dedicate to Joseph Haydn. Haydn himself was present, and gave the works his seal of approval. Thus encouraged, Mozart wrote a further three quartets; K465, completed on 14 January 1785, rounded off the set of six. The number was significant, since Haydn habitually published his own quartets by the half-dozen.

Though the dedication of the new quartets acknowledged Haydn's transforming influence on the genre, Mozart's genius assured that his own works were no mere imitations. Part of their individuality stems from the interest Mozart had recently taken in Bach's music. The resultant combination of Classical sensitivity and contrapuntal strictness created a flavour too strong for some Viennese critics. One complained: 'He aims too high... one could say that his new quartets are too richly seasoned – whose palate is truly capable of savouring such stuff?'

Even Haydn – a sincere admirer of Mozart's genius – was disconcerted by the opening of K465. 'If Mozart wrote it, he must have meant it,' was his rather ambivalent comment. It is this Adagio introduction that earns the quartet its nickname of 'Dissonance', since its harmonies are chromatic, vague and exploratory. More than one commentator has wondered whether, after consideration, Haydn directly drew on this effect in the famous 'atonal' depiction of chaos that opens his 1798 oratorio *The Creation*. And, after 22 bars of dark uncertainty, Mozart declares 'Let there be light', changes metre from three-four to four-four, and gracefully unfolds a bright and genial sonata-form movement.

The slow movement lives up to its cantabile ('singing') marking. At the close of its initial melody the first violin uses a four-note phrase to open up a dialogue with the cello. This later becomes a softly churning motif in the bass while the music hints at remembered sorrow; the movement ends with acceptance and consolation.

Are the complaining strains of the third movement's Trio section an indication that the foreboding of the first movement's introduction may still come to fruition? Or is this minor-key episode just there for contrast, in line with the abrupt dynamic changes in the outer section? True, the finale does contain a few reminiscences of the 'dissonance' with which the Quartet began, but they are only discernible if you are listening out for them. They never threaten the playfulness and good humour that Mozart invites us to share with him.

In 1892, the 51 year-old **Antonín Dvořák** received an invitation to travel from his native Bohemia to the city of New York. The request came from Mrs Jeannette Thurber, who was investing the money from her family's highly successful grocery business into a brand-new National Conservatory of Music. In her

opinion, Dvořák was the ideal person to organise the venture and to encourage Americans to draw on their own musical heritage as he had drawn on the folk music of his own homeland. He undertook the task with due diligence, developing a personal fascination for Native American and African-American musical idioms at the same time.

New York thus became Dvořák's base for just under three years. Although he was already an experienced traveller, he also suffered from deep pangs of homesickness. Opinions differ as to whether his compositions from the New World enshrine the essence of American music or hark back to the sounds of Bohemia. Folk music across the globe shares many characteristics, especially the use of modal and pentatonic scales. Dvořák himself, however, was adamant that the works from his American period would have sounded quite different if they had been composed anywhere else.

The composer did not give the F major Quartet the title 'American' or any other name. It was composed in the summer of 1893 in the Iowa town of Spillville. Everything about that summer was a relief after New York. Dvořák was in the sort of rural surroundings he preferred. He was surrounded by Czech speakers, as the town had a thriving Bohemian community. And, to complete his happiness, his family had sailed from Europe to join him. One of the few things that threatened his contentment was the insistent tweeting of a particular bird, which he found irritating. Nevertheless, he noted down its song and incorporated it into the third movement of the Quartet. Ornithologists are divided as to which species it was whose representative so tormented Dvořák.

In his buoyant mood he worked quickly, completing the Quartet in 12 days. The accent is on melody throughout, and there is an essential simplicity to the piece. 'I wanted to write something for once that was very melodious and straightforward,' he wrote, 'and dear Papa Haydn kept appearing before my eyes, and that is why it all turned out so simply. And it's good that it did.'

The general outline of the work is conventional: a sonata-form first movement, a plaintive slow movement, a lively scherzo with a more lyrical middle section, and a high-spirited rondo finale. Taking this music apart to subject it to detailed analysis would go against its spirit, but a couple of things are worth listening out for. At the beginning of the first movement, Dvořák gives the lead to the viola, an instrument he played himself to a good standard. And in the finale there is an unexpectedly hymn-like section; the composer attended the chapel in Spillville nearly every day, and played the organ there for services.

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