

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 18 September 2023
7.30pm

Schumann Quartet

Erik Schumann violin
Ken Schumann violin
Veit Benedikt Hertenstein viola
Mark Schumann cello

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in E Op. 80 (1876)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •
III. Allegro scherzando • IV. Finale. Allegro con brio*

Viktor Ullmann (1898-1944)

String Quartet No. 3 Op. 46 (1943)

*Allegro moderato - Presto - Largo -
Allegro vivace e ritmico*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in A minor D804 'Rosamunde' (1824)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Andante •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro moderato*

CLASSIC *fm* Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25



Our Audience Fund provides essential unrestricted support for our artistic and learning programmes, connecting thousands of people with music locally, nationally, and internationally. We rely on the generosity of our audience to raise £150,000 each year to support this work. Your gifts are, and continue to be, indispensable.

To donate, please visit <https://wigmore-hall.org.uk/support-us/wigmore-hall-audience-fund>

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • wigmore-hall.org.uk • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



All three works in this evening's concert were written at a time when their composers had recently undergone particularly traumatic experiences. Dvořák wrote his E major quartet only a few months after the death of his infant daughter Josefa; Ullmann produced his Quartet No. 3 shortly after his incarceration in the Terezín (Theresienstadt) concentration camp in 1942; Schubert began work on his A minor quartet at a time when he was still struggling to come to terms with a life-changing diagnosis of syphilis. These three quartets attest to the power of music to provide an outlet for feelings of despair as well as a means of escape from the grim realities of everyday life.

Dvořák composed two chamber works in the shadow of the death of his second child – the Piano Trio in G minor Op. 26, and the present quartet – and both are imbued with an atmosphere of nostalgia and melancholy. The quartet may be in a major key, but there is a good deal of exploration of minor keys and little of the joyful élan that is so often a defining characteristic of Dvořák's music.

The two main themes of the first movement have a gently plaintive quality, and the overall mood is one of quiet resignation. The second movement is inspired by the traditional Slavonic lament known as the *dumka*. Dvořák often modelled his slow movements on the *dumka*, usually following the standard pattern of alternating sections in contrasting tempi – most notably in the Dumky Trio Op. 90. But whereas in the later work the predominantly introspective mood is regularly leavened with more cheerful episodes, in the slow movement of the quartet a lamenting tone prevails throughout. The third movement, a wistful waltz, does have a contrasting middle section – a vigorous trio in C sharp minor. The *Finale* begins with an extended solo for viola (Dvořák's own instrument); it also begins in an unrelated minor key, and the music takes several pages to settle into the home key of E major. This movement contains some exquisitely tender passages, but the bold assertiveness of the opening viola solo finally gains the upper hand and the work ends on a defiantly positive note.

Nostalgic melancholy is also the dominant mood of the **Ullmann** quartet performed this evening. The composer wrote it soon after being deported to the so-called 'model ghetto' of Terezín, where he was confined for two years before being sent to his death in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Ullmann's pre-Terezín career had followed a somewhat erratic trajectory: during the 1920s he enjoyed moderate success as a conductor and composer in former Czechoslovakia and Switzerland, but then switched to a different track and spent several years running an anthroposophical bookshop in Stuttgart. In 1933 he left Germany and settled in Prague, where for the next few years he eked out a

living as a freelance composer, conductor, journalist and educator. It was no doubt the experience he gained in these varied roles that led Terezín's *Freizeitgestaltung* ('Leisure Time Authority') to put him in charge of musical activities at the camp.

He also had more time to compose, and his output in the camp was at least as prolific as at any other period of his life. Despite the grimness of his surroundings, Ullmann found that the relative freedom to focus on creative work enabled him to draw on a hitherto untapped reserve of spiritual strength. As he declared in his essay *Goethe und Ghetto*: 'It must be emphasised that Theresienstadt has served to enhance, not to impede, my musical activities, that by no means did we sit weeping on the banks of the waters of Babylon, and that our endeavour with respect to Arts was commensurate with our will to live.' The yearning quality of the opening of the String Quartet No. 3 – which recurs at several points in the work – could certainly be interpreted as evidence of this desire.

Ullmann's veneration of Goethe was allied to his philosophy of spiritual humanism; it also provides a link to **Schubert**, who was inspired by the poetry of Goethe to produce some supreme masterworks. The A minor Quartet begins with a veiled allusion to one of Schubert's greatest Goethe's settings, 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' (1814). In this song, Gretchen sits at her spinning-wheel and bemoans her seduction by Faust, singing 'My peace is gone, my heart is heavy, I'll never find it again' over a restless accompaniment figure that suggests both the motion of the wheel and the singer's unsettled state of mind. The opening of the quartet, with its incessantly turning accompaniment and poignant violin melody, closely mirrors the texture of the song.

Schubert had contracted syphilis towards the end of 1822, and the illness henceforth cast a dark shadow over his life. Shortly after the première of the A minor quartet in March 1824, he wrote a bleak letter to a friend in which he quoted the opening words of 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', suggesting that these words summed up his own mental state at the time and that he feared he too might never again find peace of mind. The first three movements of the quartet – the second movement based on a theme taken from Schubert's incidental music for the play *Rosamunde* – are suffused with a tender melancholy that could be seen as an expression of regret for the lost world of the composer's youth. It is not until the finale that the mood lightens slightly: like its predecessors, this movement begins *pianissimo*, but is characterised by rather more jaunty rhythms, though the two *fortissimo* chords that bring the work to an end seem almost perfunctory in nature.

© Paula Kennedy 2023

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.