

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 19 January 2024  
1.00pm

## European Chamber Music Academy Showcase 2024

Supported by a gift from the estates of the late Thomas and Betty Elton in memory of Sigmund Elton

### Chaos String Quartet

Susanne Schäffer violin  
Eszter Kruchió violin  
Sara Marzadori viola  
Bas Jongen cello

### Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

### String Quartet No. 22 in B flat K589 'Prussian' (1790)

*I. Allegro*  
*II. Larghetto*  
*III. Menuetto. Moderato*  
*IV. Allegro assai*

### Alban Berg (1885-1935)

### Lyric Suite (1925-6)

*I. Allegretto gioviale*  
*II. Andante amoroso*  
*III. Allegro misterioso - Trio estatico*  
*IV. Adagio appassionato*  
*V. Presto delirando - Tenebroso*  
*VI. Largo desolato*



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At the beginning of 1789, **Mozart** set off for a tour of northern Germany. This was basically a business trip, in the hope of drumming up commissions or even a court appointment. Mozart was by this time largely dependent on loans from his long-suffering friend and fellow Freemason Michael von Puchberg.

As he made his way home, Mozart wrote to his wife, Constanze, and to Puchberg, assuring them that he had received a commission for six string quartets from Wilhelm II, King of Prussia. There is no court record of him meeting the king or (as he claimed) playing for the queen, so an element of bluff or exaggeration cannot be ruled out. However, the commission was real enough in his mind for him to write three of the quartets. The B flat Quartet K589 was the second of these to be completed, and was entered by the composer into his personal catalogue of works in May 1790. He had written the first of this projected set of six quartets a year earlier, but had then turned his attention to writing the opera *Così fan tutte* – an altogether more tangible commission and source of income.

King Wilhelm, a cellist of some skill, had already commissioned chamber works from Boccherini and Haydn, who had duly given his instrument prominence. Mozart's three 'Prussian' Quartets follow suit and naturally give the other instruments solo opportunities to balance the texture. Perhaps the challenge of writing in this new way helped Mozart convince himself that the monarch wanted quartets from him. He seems to revel in the novel sonorities that result.

The first movement is in the expected sonata form, and it is the cello that has the honour of introducing the second subject. Having juxtaposed his two main subjects, the composer progressively intertwines them in the development section. The slow second movement could almost be a poignant quartet sung by the two pairs of lovers in *Così*. It is followed by a minuet with an extra degree of courtly formality if the *Moderato* marking is observed; the surprisingly lengthy central trio section is contrastingly full of nervous energy and dramatic surprises. The rondo finale is fleet of foot and rich in incident.

Once the three 'Prussian' Quartets were completed, Mozart gave up on his fantasy of royal patronage and sold the works to the publisher Artaria for the sake of immediate cash. By the time the reviews appeared in the music press, the composer had died. The *Wiener Zeitung* said of the Quartets: 'They flowed from the pen of this so-great musical genius not long before his death, and they display all that musical interest in respect of art, beauty, and taste, which must awaken pleasure and admiration not only in the amateur but the true connoisseur also.'

Some works of art gain their reputation because of the story behind them (though that alone is rarely

enough to earn them lasting status). This cannot be said of **Berg's** *Lyric Suite*, since the full circumstances of its inspiration remained a secret for half a century.

The *Suite* was composed between 1925 and 1926 and published with a dedication to Berg's friend and fellow composer Alexander Zemlinsky. In 1925 Berg had travelled to Prague to hear orchestral music from his own opera *Wozzeck* conducted by Zemlinsky. The title 'Lyric Suite' pays homage to Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony*, which is quoted in the fourth movement, and the *Suite* is dedicated to Zemlinsky – so everything seems comfortably straightforward.

Look a little deeper, though, and a more complex picture is revealed. While in Prague, Berg stayed in the suburban villa of Herbert Fuchs-Robettin, a wealthy industrialist with a passion for music. His wife, Hanna, came from a similar moneyed background. Although Berg stayed with them for only a few days, he became infatuated with Hanna. 'It all began with your eyes,' he told her in a letter: '...is even music able to express it?' Berg was himself 14 years into his own marriage.

Whatever his feelings about the inadequacy of music to portray such depth of emotion, he attempted to do exactly that with the *Lyric Suite*. Once we know this, many details fall into place. In its original context, the quote from Zemlinsky's *Symphony* sets the words 'You are mine own'; and worked into the fabric of the *Suite* is a clearly recognisable reference to Wagner's epic hymn to doomed lovers, *Tristan und Isolde*.

Berg's admiration for Zemlinsky was sincere. Thus the smokescreen of the official dedication was enough to keep the true 'programme' of the *Suite* hidden until the late 1970s, when Hanna's daughter Dorothea showed the American composer George Perle her mother's personal copy of the score, which Berg had annotated. When Perle published what he discovered, the world found that the music was full of cryptic references to the lovers: through notes representing their initials, through representations of Hanna and her children, and through the number of letters in their names (even to the extent of being translated into metronome markings!). At about the same time, musicologist Douglass Green identified the full text of a despairing love poem by Baudelaire, spelled out syllable by syllable in the melody of the final movement.

The *Lyric Suite* is composed in accordance with Schoenberg's '12 note' system, but that is mere scaffolding, of little relevance to the completed structure. The emotion that inspired and animated the music is of far greater importance.

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