WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 1 February 2023
7.30pm

Pavel Haas Quartet
Veronika Jarůšková violin
Marek Zwiebel violin
Dana Zemtsov viola
Peter Jarůšek cello
Boris Giltburg piano

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) — String Quartet No. 7 'Concerto da camera' (1947)
I. Poco allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivo

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) — String Quartet No. 4 BB95 (1928)
I. Allegro • II. Prestissimo, con sordino • III. Non troppo lento • IV. Allegretto pizzicato • V. Allegro molto

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) — Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Op. 81 (1887)
I. Allegro ma non tanto • II. Dumka. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo 'Furiant'. Molto vivace - Poco tranquillo • IV. Finale. Allegro

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Many composers reach a point in their careers when they find themselves at a stylistic crossroads, and the two works in the first half of this evening's programme illustrate this perfectly, as they show two near-contemporaries, the Czech Bohuslav Martinů and the Hungarian Béla Bartók, both seeking new paths in the development of their musical language.

For much of his career Martinů considered himself to be a 'neo-Baroque' composer, and most of the music he wrote during the 1930s is characterised by the rhythmic vitality and contrasting textures of the Baroque concerto grosso. The upheavals of the late 1930s and early 1940s – both on the world stage and in his own private life – are reflected in the intense emotional turbulence of works such as the Double Concerto and the String Quartet No. 5, but by the mid 1940s he increasingly felt a desire to express himself with greater clarity and concision.

Martinů was long haunted by the memory of a performance of Haydn's *Sinfonia Concertante* in Paris in the 1930s, when he had immediately been struck by what he described as the 'simplicity and perfection' of this work. As a result of this revelatory experience, over the years he became convinced that these were the qualities he should aim for in his own music. The String Quartet No. 7, written in New York in 1947, is one of the first works in which he adopted a simplified, more 'classical' style. It is also one of his most optimistic works and exudes the joy he felt at once again immersing himself in the string quartet medium. The previous year, on returning to the genre after a gap of more than eight years, Martinů confided in his biographer Miloš Šafránek: 'I cannot express what pleasure it gives me… to handle these four parts. In a quartet one feels so much at home. Outside it is raining and darkness is coming on, but these four parts take no heed of it, are independent, free, do what they like and still form a harmonious ensemble.' Writing the String Quartet No. 7 clearly gave Martinů at least as much pleasure as the composition of No. 6 had done, if not more.

The textures of Bartók's String Quartet No. 4 (1928) are undeniably more complex than those of Martinů's No. 7, but the work still reveals its composer's striving for clarity of structure and concision of musical thought. It is the first major work in which Bartók adopted an extended arch form: the two thematically related outer movements frame a pair of mercurial scherzo-like movements, which in turn enclose a rhapsodic slow movement. The composer himself referred to the first and fifth movements as the 'outer shell' of the work and the second and fourth movements as the 'inner shell'. Internal symmetries abound within this quartet, in terms of both recurring motifs and instrumental effects.

The slow movement lies at the heart of the work and is a perfect example of the 'night music' genre that Bartók had first tried out a couple of years earlier in the piano suite *Out of Doors*. A notable later example can be found in the Concerto for Orchestra – another five-section work in arch form with a 'night music' movement at its core. The quartet's slow movement has a ravishing beauty, which arises out of the cello's long, improvisatory melody, the mysterious harmonies that accompany it and the first violin's bird-like twitterings.

The distinctive rhythms of the slow movement's cello melody strongly suggest the influence of Hungarian folk music, as does the introduction of a special instrumental effect: in the fourth movement, the players are sometimes instructed to pluck the string so vigorously that it bounces off the fingerboard, mimicking the often harsh sound of folk fiddling. Before very long, this 'snapped pizzicato' acquired the alternative name of 'Bartók pizzicato'.

Like Martinů's String Quartet No. 7, Dvořák's Piano Quintet No. 2 (1887) is one of the composer's happiest works. Written at his rural retreat at Vysoká, it bears witness to his pleasure at being able to relax in such congenial surroundings and his delight in the natural beauties of the Bohemian countryside.

From the early 1880s onwards, Dvořák and his family were regular guests at the country chateau of Count Kounic and his wife Josefina (who happened to be the composer's sister-in-law). In 1884, following his great success in England, Dvořák had become wealthy enough to buy a small plot of land from the Count. Here, he had a modest villa built, which from that time on served as his family's summer home. They spent practically all their holidays at this rural idyll, where the composer found the atmosphere more conducive to creativity than anywhere else.

His feeling of contentment at Vysoká is abundantly clear from the Piano Quintet No. 2, one of the many pieces he composed there during the last two decades of his life. The quintet was described by Dvořák's early biographer Alec Robertson as 'simply one of the most perfect chamber music works in existence'; 80 years later, few would disagree with this assessment. From the glorious opening cello theme through the wistful *Dumka* and infectiously vivacious *Scherzo* to the sheer joie-de-vivre of the *Finale*, the quintet has few equals in terms of melodic abundance and warm-hearted lyricism. In these respects it stands comparison with one of the most popular chamber music works of all time: Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet. Dvořák was a great admirer of Schubert, and with the Piano Quintet No. 2 he achieves the same level of spontaneous melodic invention as his great musical idol.

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