

WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 1 November 2025
11.30am

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Thomas Larcher Composer in Residence Focus Day

Quatuor Diotima

Yun-Peng Zhao violin
Léo Marillier violin
Franck Chevalier viola
Alexis Descharmes cello

Thomas Larcher (b.1963)

String Quartet No. 5 'out of the bluest blue' (2022-3) *UK première*

Co-commissioned by Quatuor Diotima, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Philharmonie de Paris, Wigmore Hall and the Black Diamond Series, Copenhagen

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

String Quartet in F (1902-3)

*I. Allegro moderato, très doux • II. Assez vif, très rythmé •
III. Très lent • IV. Vif et agité*



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The title of Larcher's latest string quartet, *out of the bluest blue*, is partly inspired through a personal connection but also in reference to the shades of colour we find in music, for instance the 'blues'. Written in ternary form, the piece opens and closes with a chorale, contrasted by a tumultuous and aggressive central passage.

Beginning with a C major chord, the organic development of the first movement transitions through many harmonic languages, reaching an almost atonal context at times to fully transform the sound world of the chorale line. Throughout this opening section, Larcher explores the creation of longer lines that maintain constant development whilst remaining within the limitations of a chorale structure.

The rhythmically-dominated second movement is less concerned with counterpoint and instead the ensemble acts simultaneously, flowing through fast and tricky passages one after the other with a manic quality. Much of the material plays with quotes from the first movement and themes we originally heard softly, as though from a distance, are now harsh and driving before returning to more emotional and freer passages at the closing of the quartet.

This play between slow and fast movements has often fascinated Larcher over the years and *out of the bluest blue* returns to this idea, exploring how such strict juxtaposition can be used to shape larger musical forms.

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Ravel completed his String Quartet in F in 1903 at the age of 28 while still studying at the Paris Conservatoire. It was his first large-scale chamber work and remains his only string quartet. Dedicated to his teacher Gabriel Fauré, Ravel's quartet articulates a formal clarity of classical formal models, but moreover reveals the influence of Debussy, particularly his quartet from just a decade before, which Ravel knew well. While Fauré himself was critical of the quartet, especially its finale, Debussy, by contrast, praised it warmly, writing to Ravel: 'in the name of the gods of music, and in mine, do not touch a single note of what you have written in your quartet.'

The quartet is indeed often compared with Debussy's string quartet, composed a decade prior, which, like Ravel's, is the composer's only contribution to the quartet genre. Both pieces employ novel harmonic languages and string sonorities; both adopt a cyclic design in which themes recur across movements; both place pizzicato scherzos and impressionistic slow movements at the centre of the structure. Yet their treatment of material differs. Debussy continually transforms a single germinal idea in a process of fluid variation, whereas Ravel tends to leave themes more intact, and instead varies their setting more in terms of colouristic modal harmonies, and textural invention.

Ravel's quartet follows a traditional four-movement design, with a recurring theme that constantly transforms throughout each movement in a cyclical fashion. The opening movement, *Allegro moderato – très doux* (very sweet), adopts sonata form, but with distinctive Ravelian fluidity. The first theme of the first violin unfolds in long arching phrases, diatonic yet coloured with modal inflections and chromatic sidesteps. The second theme, in the relative minor, initially doubled by the violin and viola two octaves apart is more rhythmically flexible (marked by a triplet upbeat) and gradually narrower in melodic range.

The second movement, *Assez vif – très rythmé* (rather lively, very rhythmic) is a scherzo built from pizzicato patterns. Its rhythmic surface is driven by cross-rhythms, alternating and overlapping between 6/8 and 3/4, further complicated by triplets against duplets and rapid tremolos. The trio section offers contrast, with a slower, legato theme in the lower strings tinged with Iberian inflections. Ravel avoids the conventional break between scherzo and trio: the new material is itself a transformation of the scherzo's themes, and the return of the pizzicato emerges seamlessly, creeping back into place rather than restarting.

The nocturnal third movement, *Très lent* (very slow) serves as the quartet's emotional centre. A *cantabile* theme emerges from the lower strings, gradually coalescing against a harmonic background coloured by added-note harmonies, and modal inflections. Intermittently, fragments of earlier movements intrude like hazy flashbacks. At two points the texture thins to near silence: a low cello line underpins barely audible upper strings, creating a moment of breathless stillness. From this hush, the music rises into an impassioned outcry, swirling and incandescent, before finally returning to calm, whereupon the opening theme returns and concludes the movement's nightscape.

The finale, *Vif et agité* (fast and agitated), begins with an urgent, syncopated figure in unison that recurs throughout as a structural refrain. The harmonic rhythm accelerates, with abrupt modulations, dense and propulsive textures. Here the cyclic principle is most emphatic: themes from earlier movements resurface, now re-energised and drawn into the finale's agitated flow. Lyric asides briefly interrupt, but the thrust drives further forward, toward the coda where the quartet gathers in unison rhythms and harmonic force, closing with blazing F major.

The quartet's première in 1904 divided opinion, but today it is regarded as one of the central chamber works of the 20th Century and of Ravel's *œuvre*. Its charm reflects its embodiment of contrasting compositional impulses. Ravel never returned to the quartet medium, but this single statement remains definitive.

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