

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 20 May 2024
7.30pm

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre violin

Harumi Rhodes violin

Richard O'Neill viola

András Fejér cello

Marc-André Hamelin piano

Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)

Italian Serenade (1887)

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Piano Quintet in A minor (c.1935)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante con moto •
III. Juba. Allegro • IV. Scherzo. Allegro*

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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As a temple of song, Wigmore Hall is one place where **Hugo Wolf** is no stranger. The great majority of Wolf's work is for voice and piano, and his Lieder reflect the acute sensitivity of his nature. He did, however, complete an opera and a symphonic poem, as befits a passionate disciple of Wagner and Liszt. Other projects outside the canon of his 350-or-so songs were begun and never finished. The *Italian Serenade* was itself intended as part of a larger project that failed to materialise, since further movements were sketched but abandoned. No such hesitancy affected the composition of the *Serenade*, though, since it was dashed off in three days in May 1887.

Wolf was simultaneously working on song settings of the poet Joseph, Freiherr von Eichendorff, whose novella *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichtes* ('Memoirs of a Ne'er-do-well') concerns a duplicitous violinist. The prominence of the violin part here may refer to the novella's antihero – and at one point in the story, a small orchestra plays a serenade. The 'Italian' addition to Wolf's title was a late thought. Despite the music's generally light-hearted character, a waspish element emerges several times. Was Wolf thinking of *commedia dell'arte* masks, with their grotesque distortions, or of the cynical nature of Eichendorff's outwardly charming 'Ne'er-do-well'? While he wholeheartedly embraced literary allusions in music, in this case the composer chose not to divulge any.

A large quantity of **Florence Price's** music seemed to have vanished for ever until a remarkable discovery in 2009, 54 years after the composer's death. In a dilapidated house outside St Anne, Illinois, a stash of Price's music was discovered, including concertos, symphonies and the A minor Piano Quintet. In her lifetime she had faced a constant struggle to get her music heard; if it had been lost to posterity, her fate would have mirrored that of many female composers before and after her.

She was under no illusions as to the obstacles in her way. Writing to the conductor Serge Koussevitzky in the hope of performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, she said: 'Unfortunately, the work of a woman composer is preconceived by many to be light, froth, lacking in depth, logic, and virility. Add to that the incident of race – I have Colored blood in my veins – and you will understand some of the difficulties that confront one in such a position'. Price was born into a mixed-race family in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887. Although part of her racial heritage was African, she passed herself off as Mexican when studying music at the New England Conservatory in Boston – it was the only way to avoid hateful prejudice. She began to enjoy success as a composer after the family moved to Chicago in 1927, and in 1933

the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed her Symphony in E minor. Public recognition was short-lived, however. In the early 1950s there was a flurry of interest from Europe, and Price planned to visit England and the Continent. However, illness prevented this, and she died after a stroke in 1953.

The score of the A minor Piano Quintet, as discovered in Illinois, bore a pencilled note dated 1952, but the piece is likely to have been composed in the 1930s, as a companion piece to an E minor Quintet from 1935. The influence of Dvořák on American music was still being felt – he had arrived from Prague in New York in 1892 to spend two and a half years as head of the new National Conservatory of Music. American composers expecting to learn European ways from him would have been astonished when he told *The New York Herald*, 'I am now satisfied that the future of music in this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies'. Whatever her compatriots thought, Price was well placed to blend tuneful European Romanticism à la Dvořák with the accents of Spiritual melodies. Her Quintet even includes a *Juba*, an African-influenced dance from the plantations, as its third movement. The movements get progressively shorter, culminating in a high-spirited *Scherzo*.

Dvořák hoped to suppress his Opus 5 Piano Quintet in A, written in 1872, an unhappy time in his life. Fifteen years on, in 1887, things were going much better for him, and he set out on an extensive reworking of that Quintet. Some way in he decided to abandon it and write a brand-new Piano Quintet instead. Inevitably the Op. 5 work was 'rediscovered' long after his death, and was published in 1959. The Op. 81 Piano Quintet that Dvořák wished to present as his sole essay in that medium is now often billed as 'No. 2'. It opens with a cello melody that drifts gently down the river accompanied by guitar strums from the piano. But the mood darkens very soon, and more dramatic music takes over. In this sonata-form movement, themes and fragments of themes appear, disappear and reappear in a state of constant flux. The second movement is labelled *Dumka*, referencing a nostalgic ballad form from Ukraine. The third is a *Scherzo*, though Dvořák also uses the Czech term *Furiant* – which does not signify fury but extroversion. The *Finale* again has sonata form as its background, though there is a profusion of themes and a fugal section that carries most of the dramatic weight. The overriding impression is not of a composer trying to impress us with his ingenuity, but of one bursting to share the ideas that flow from his pen.

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