WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 21 January 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Rubinstein Circle

Pavel Haas Quartet
Veronika Jarůšková violin
Marek Zwiebel violin
Šimon Truszka viola
Peter Jarůšek cello

Boris Giltburg piano

Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)
5 Pieces for String Quartet (1923)
Alla Valse viennese • Alla Serenata • Alla Czeca • Alla Tango milonga • Alla Tarantella

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)
String Quartet No. 5 (1938)
I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Adagio • III. Allegro vivo • IV. Lento - Allegro

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor Op. 60 (1855-75)
I. Allegro non troppo • II. Scherzo. Allegro • III. Andante • IV. Finale. Allegro comodo

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Erwin Schulhoff was many things. He was born in Prague, and trained in Dresden (with Max Reger) and Paris (with Claude Debussy). He was a soldier of the Habsburg Empire, and a jazz pianist in Weimar Berlin; a wit, a modernist and a provocateur. As Schulhoff himself put it, 'I have a tremendous passion for the fashionable dances and there are times when I go dancing night after night with dance hostesses…purely out of rhythmic enthusiasm and subconscious sensuality; this gives my creative work a phenomenal impulse, because in my consciousness I am incredibly earthly, even animalistic'.

The five pieces – effectively a dance suite - for string quartet (1923) raised eyebrows when they were premièred at the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Salzburg on 8 August 1924. Schulhoff applies his sardonic humour to the expected central European stereotypes: a spiky mock-Viennese waltz and a Bartók-like parody of Czech folk music, as well as a nervy, laconic Serenata (the bittersweet spirit of Czech and Moravian folksong permeates its dissonances) and to finish, an electrically-charged Tarantella.

But Schulhoff was a man of his time, and his horizons stretched far beyond Central Europe. Naturally, a work dedicated to Darius Milhaud would have to include some homage to South America. The haunting, impassioned *Tango Milonga* provides just that – and rather surprisingly, turns out to be the heart of the whole suite. 'Not all composers, old or young, have the good sense not to take themselves, now and again, too seriously', wrote the American critic Olin Downes from Salzburg. Later that night, he reported finding Schulhoff at the piano in a nearby tavern, playing ragtime 'till the walls tottered'.

Martinů's very first composition was a string quartet, and he always retained a special affinity for the form. 'In pure chamber music, I am always more myself' he told his biographer Miloš Šafránek in 1946. 'In a quartet one feels at home, intimately happy. Outside it is raining and growing dark but the four parts are oblivious to it; they are independent, free, do [what] they like and yet form a harmonious ensemble…'. The world was certainly growing dark in April and May 1938, when Martinů, long resident in Paris, composed his Fifth String Quartet. To many of his fellow Czech expatriates, he seemed almost wilfully oblivious to world politics. And yet in that same year he created his shattering Double Concerto – later seen as a reflection of those ominous times.

String Quartet No. 5, or the Fifth Quartet, shares a comparable emotional intensity and an impassioned, angular energy – but Martinů left little doubt about its inspiration: his tempestuous affair with the young Czech composer Vítězslava Kaprálová. He called her 'Pisnička' ('Little Song'); she called him 'Spaliček' ('Wood Block'), and the score carries the dedication 'à Vitulka' – the intimate, diminutive form of her name. Although Martinů would refer only to its 'stormy inspiration' it's clear that the Fifth Quartet was his own answer to Janáček's *Intimate Letters*, then only 10 years old.

That explains, at least in part, the propulsive rhythmic drive and bristling harmonies of the two outer movements – and the way that hectic emotional energy (at its most relentless in the third movement), breaks, over and again, into music of tenderness, rapture or passionate melancholy. The heart of the quartet – so intense at times that it almost seems to sting – is the Adagio; where Martinů quotes Kaprálová's 'little song', 'The Farewell Handkerchief'. It's a song of lovers' partings; and as war broke over Europe the couple's relationship was on borrowed time. For reasons that he never made clear, Martinů declined to publish the Fifth Quartet until 1958 – when Kaprálová had been dead for 18 years, and he himself had barely a year to live.

The last of **Brahms**'s three piano quartets began as one of his first mature chamber works. In its earliest form it dates from the spring of 1856. Brahms's friend and mentor Robert Schumann had suffered his final mental collapse in February 1854 and the 21-year old composer had rushed to the side of Schumann's wife Clara. In this feverish emotional atmosphere Brahms wrestled with a symphony in D minor, which eventually emerged in 1858 as the First Piano Concerto, and a piano quartet in C sharp minor, which proved more troublesome. After two play-throughs with the violinist Joseph Joachim, Brahms set the quartet aside - returning to it only in 1873, when he refined its form and recast it in the more string-friendly key of C minor.

Nearly 20 years on, he was able to attain some measure of detachment from the raw emotion of his initial inspiration. He even joked about the piece's emotional content with his friend Theodor Billroth, calling it 'a curiosity – perhaps an illustration for the last chapter about the man in the blue coat and yellow waistcoat'. He meant Werther, the hero of Goethe's novel – a young artist who kills himself for love of a friend's wife. The C minor Piano Quartet, then, is emotion recollected - if not in tranquillity - then in maturity. From a dark, rhythmically ambiguous opening the stormy first movement covers an epic emotional range, embracing a noble, expansive second subject - effectively a self-contained set of variations.

There's a clear kinship between that theme and the radiant, heart-easing cello melody that opens the E major Andante, a movement that unfurls into one of the loveliest and most intimate confessions in all of Brahms's chamber music. But despite some brave gestures with a chorale-like second subject, and a last-minute swerve into C major, the finale affirms rather than resolves the work's tragic spirit. That Werther reference aside, there's nothing sentimental or despairing here. The Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, writing of Brahms's Fourth Symphony, captured to perfection Brahms's intensely personal strain of heroic sorrow: 'like a dark well; the longer we look into it, the more brightly the stars shine back'.

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