

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 21 October 2023  
7.30pm

## Heath Quartet

Sara Wolstenholme violin  
Juliette Roos violin  
Gary Pomeroy viola  
Christopher Murray cello

- Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr* BWV662 (1747-8)  
*O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde* BWV622 (c.1708-17)
- Joseph Haydn** (1732-1809) *String Quartet in E flat Op. 9 No. 2* (c.1769)  
*I. Moderato • II. Menuetto • III. Adagio - Cantabile • IV. Allegro molto*
- Josef Suk** (1874-1935) *Meditation on an old Bohemian Chorale (St Wenceslas) Op. 35a* (1914)  
*Interval*
- Franz Schubert** (1797-1828) *String Quartet in D minor D810 'Death and the Maiden'* (1824)  
*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Presto*

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The two pieces by **JS Bach** in tonight's concert were composed as chorale preludes for organ. Such preludes were arrangements of the hymn tunes ('chorales') sung in Lutheran churches. Although the word 'prelude' might imply that these instrumental pieces were played as introductions to congregational singing, no conclusive evidence has yet come to light about the liturgical function of such music. Late in life, Bach chose and edited favourite chorale preludes for publication, the onset of blindness meaning he eventually had to dictate to an assistant.

The chorale *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr* was written as a Lutheran alternative to the Catholic 'Gloria' section of the Mass, and would thus have been sung every Sunday. The composer may have been Nikolaus Decius (c.1485–1541). Of Bach's many settings of it, BWV662 is one of the most serene, unusually carrying a tempo indication: *adagio*. The chorale *O Mensch, beweine dein Sünde gross* has a tune by Matthias Greiter, and a text by Sebald Heyden exhorting us to lament our sins. Bach used the chorale in both his *St John* and *St Matthew* Passions.

**Haydn's** six Opus 9 quartets were written between 1768 and 1770. They are unjustly overlooked, along with the Opus 17 set, because of the sudden advance the composer made with his Opus 20. One of the most marked features of the Op. 20s is the more equal distribution of musical interest between all four parts. By contrast Haydn almost always gives the starring role to the first violin in Op. 9 – but with good reason. A fellow employee of the composer's in the Eszterházy court was the excellent violinist Luigi Tomasini, who became leader of the resident orchestra. We may confidently assume he played the top line in these quartets, with Haydn on second fiddle.

Though still named 'divertimenti' by the composer, the Op. 9 quartets are of greater substance and complexity than their predecessors. The format is standardised as a four-movement sequence, with a fairly weighty first movement followed by a minuet, a slow movement and a lively finale. No. 2 in E flat follows this pattern and, like its companions, gives Tomasini an operatic solo role in the slow movement.

The hymn 'Svatý Václav' ('St Wenceslas') has been sung in Czech churches since the 12th Century. During the 19th Century, its plea to Bohemia's patron saint to protect his people chimed with the rising spirit of nationalism. Bohemia had been ruled by Austria since the mid-17th Century. By 1914, as Europe stood on the brink of the First World War, feelings of trepidation were tempered by hopes that the yoke of foreign oppression might be thrown off at last.

These conflicting emotions play out in **Josef Suk's** *Meditation* on the tune, first performed in the opening months of war. Suk was second violinist in the

Bohemian Quartet, who were required to play the Austrian national anthem before every performance. His new work was therefore a patriotic response to that, as well as a prayer for better times to come.

At the end of March 1824, **Schubert** wrote to his friend the painter Leopold Kupelwieser:

Imagine a man who can never regain his health, whose consequent and utter despair makes matters worse instead of better; imagine, I say, a man whose shining hopes have come to nothing, to whom the prospect of love and friendship brings only anguish ... and then ask yourself if this isn't the epitome of a miserable wretch.

It was at this time that the 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet was composed. Schubert had partly recovered from a spell of very bad health brought on by syphilis. He must have known that an early death was likely, and would at times seem more of a welcome release than a fearful prospect. But he also recognised that it was fruitless to regard its imminence as inevitable.

That dichotomy is at the heart of the D minor Quartet, in its unforgettably eerie slow movement. Schubert turned to a song he had written in 1817, a setting of a poem by Matthias Claudius in which the figure of Death woos a young girl. She protests that she is too young to fall into his clutches, but Death replies, 'Give me your hand, you lovely, gentle creature. I am a friend ... you shall sleep softly in my arms.' In the Quartet, Schubert does not quote the maiden's music, only that of Death.

Together with its predecessor, the 'Rosamunde' Quartet, this work was a totally different kettle of fish from the pretty little quartets Schubert had written for his family to play years earlier. This music was meant to make an impression on the public. The very opening grabs the listener by the throat – a tearing unison, followed by a bubbling up of energy, soon followed by a watchful and ominous quietness as if some demon is waiting to pounce.

The *Andante* second movement takes Death's starkly fascinating theme through a series of variations, of which the most fatally seductive is in the warm and comforting realm of G major. The *Scherzo* makes a bolder contrast between the present reality of pain, anger and anxiety and, in the trio section, a peace that is either out of reach or achievable only by paying the ultimate price.

The finale, a sonata-rondo, is based on the rhythm of the tarantella, an Italian dance supposed to imitate the convulsive madness brought on by a tarantula bite. In Schubert's version there is a feeling of being pursued, and the chances of escape are lessened when the pace increases just before the end.

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