WIGMORE HALL

Monday 24 June 2024
7.30pm

In celebration of Simon Majaro on the occasion of his 95th birthday, and in memory of Pamela Majaro

Wihan Quartet
Leoš Čepický violin
Jan Schulmeister violin
Jakub Čepický viola
Michal Kaňka cello

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)
String Quartet No. 2 in D minor (1882-3)
I. Allegro • II. Allegro moderato • III. Allegro non più moderato, ma agitato e con fuoco • IV. Presto

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)
String Quartet in F Op. 96 'American' (1893)
I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Lento • III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Vivace ma non troppo

Interval

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)
String Quartet No. 2 'Intimate Letters' (1928)
I. Andante • II. Adagio • III. Moderato • IV. Allegro

Rarely have composers revealed their innermost souls in their music to the extent that Smetana and Janáček did in the works that bookend this evening's concert. **Smetana** had already launched the Czech trend for autobiographical chamber works (which was to reach its apotheosis in Janáček's 'Intimate Letters' quartet) with his first quartet, written in 1876 and tellingly subtitled 'From My Life'. By the time Smetana came to write his second work in this genre, the calamitous loss of hearing that had inspired him to compose the first quartet had worsened to the extent that he was now completely deaf and prey to regular fits of depression. In March 1883 he confided to his editor that he was writing a quartet 'in defiance of the doctors' (who had cautioned him against undertaking anything involving intense mental effort), and that the new work 'continues from where the first one ended, after the catastrophe'. He now found any kind of intellectual activity exhausting, and so the second quartet had to be written in short bursts and its composition was unusually protracted. Despite these struggles, by May 1883 Smetana was able to declare that the quartet was finally ready for publication and that it contained 'melodic moments full of feelings and novelties'.

The work is certainly full of extreme contrasts: Smetana's response to 'the catastrophe' veers from anger and agitation (as in the opening bars of the first and third movements) to passages that suggest resigned acceptance or recollect the happier days of the composer's youth (such as the second movement's bucolic polka). Some contemporary critics saw the quartet's unpredictability and abrupt changes of gear as being symptomatic of Smetana's psychological turbulence, but from today's perspective we can appreciate its originality and see that the many startling turns taken by the music in fact look ahead to the uncompromising modernism of a later generation.

There can hardly be a greater contrast than between the despair that gave rise to Smetana's second quartet and the peace and contentment radiated by **Dvořák**'s F major quartet. This work has come to be known as the 'American' because it was written during the composer's first summer holiday in the United States, when he was finally able to take a break after his first year of teaching at the National Conservatory in New York and relax in congenial surroundings. His secretary in New York was Josef Jan Kovařík, a young American with Czech roots who had studied the violin at the Prague Conservatory. Kovařík told Dvořák about his native village, the Czech settlement of Spillville, Ohio, and urged him to spend the summer there. Already feeling homesick for Bohemia, the composer readily agreed to his secretary's suggestion.

Dvořák was relieved to be able to escape from the pressures of life in New York and very happy that his whole family could now be reunited for the holidays. Four of his six children had remained behind in Prague when the composer and his wife moved to the United States the previous autumn, but they now joined him in Spillville. 'The children arrived safely from Europe and we're all happy together. We like it very much here and, thank God, I'm working hard and I'm healthy and in good spirits,' he wrote to a friend.

Within just a few days of his arrival in Spillville, Dvořák had sketched out the new quartet. 'I am pleased. It all went so quickly!' he noted on the final page of the sketch. As with several other products of the composer's American period, in this work he was aiming to achieve a new simplicity and lightness of touch, and the work's enormous popularity testifies to his success in this endeavour.

Janáček's String Quartet No. 2 is one of the composer's most personal works, in which he used the particularly intimate genre of chamber music to pay tribute to his muse, Kamila Stösslová, with whom he had been obsessed for more than ten years and who had been the model for several of his most alluring operatic heroines. But whereas in previous works the object of his passion had for him embodied all the seductive qualities of the central female figures of his operas, the quartet was inspired by the 700 or so letters he wrote to Kamila, a married woman 38 years his junior.

Yet this mainly epistolary relationship was always peculiarly one-sided. Janáček bombarded Kamila with passionate missives (sometimes writing several a day); her responses were carefully measured and show a clear desire to keep her elderly admirer at arm's length. By the spring of 1928, apparently frustrated at the failure of his decade-long relentless pursuit of Kamila to bear fruit, Janáček embarked on the composition of his quartet, which he vowed would tell the story of 'this love of ours'.

The programme devised by Janáček is a strange mixture of real experiences shared with Kamila, and his fantasies. He told her that the third movement was a portrait of her, in which he saw her as giving birth to a child (something that had become an idée fixe for him). One could argue that the letters Janáček sent to his muse and the music he wrote for her were destined to remain a substitute for the physically intimate relationship that the composer fervently desired but which appears not to have materialised. The late Janáček scholar John Tyrrell suggested that the composer needed a blank canvas on which to project his fantasies, and that Kamila's unattainability acted as a spur to his creativity. We can only speculate on whether such a searingly emotional work as 'Intimate Letters' would have come into being if Janáček's love for his muse had been consummated.