

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 7 July 2025  
1.00pm

Johan Dalene violin  
Andreas Brantelid cello  
Christian Ihle Hadland piano

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Piano Trio in D Op. 1 (1909)

*I. Allegro non troppo, con espressione •  
II. Scherzo. Allegro • III. Larghetto •  
IV. Finale. Allegro molto ed energico*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Piano Trio in A minor (1914)

*I. Modéré • II. Pantoum. Assez vif •  
III. Passacaille. Très large • IV. Final. Animé*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Although this Piano Trio was the first published composition by **Erich Wolfgang Korngold**, it was not the first music he composed. And although it is the work of a 12-year-old, this is a 12-year-old who had already had a ballet performed at the Vienna Opera (to acclaim) and whose catalogue to date numbered several piano pieces, including a sonata. A 'child prodigy' in fact, if such beings genuinely exist in nature; the 'Wolfgang' in his name, alluding to the most famous of all musical prodigies, is an indication that Korngold's parents were determined from the start that their child would be a *wunderkind*.

The dominating parental force was Erich's father, Julius, dubbed 'the dean of European music critics'. A formidable presence in Vienna, he was extremely well connected and, after consultation with Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss, arranged for his son to be tutored by Alexander von Zemlinsky among others. It would have been Julius's decision to reserve the Piano Trio as his son's 'Opus 1', despite Erich's earlier works being fully worthy of publication. Beethoven had opened his published account with a set of piano trios, and the subliminal connection was worth placing in the minds of the public.

Korngold's Trio was begun late in 1909 and completed in April 1910. It received its first performance in Munich, but for the Vienna première Julius secured the endorsement of the city's most prominent musicians: the conductor Bruno Walter on piano, and two principals from the Vienna Philharmonic on violin (Arnold Rosé) and cello (Friedrich Buxbaum). All of them Jews, like the Korngold family, they would be later be forced out of Austria. That is how Korngold ended up in the United States composing film scores – but that's another story.

Despite his youth, in the Piano Trio Korngold demonstrates a complete grasp of the prevailing Viennese taste for fevered emotion. It might seem tasteless to use such terms as 'decadence' or 'eroticism' in these circumstances, but the swoops and surges of the first movement are certainly in that realm. There are also snatches of café music and passages of tetchy, knotty modernism.

Like the opening *Allegro*, the angular *Scherzo* tends to break off its melodies before they have time to breathe. But the trio brings a brief burst of the luxuriant lyricism we have hitherto been denied. There is melody aplenty in the slow movement, which with its softly dissonant piano chords and ambiguous tonality for a while takes us closer to Paris than Vienna – there's a lot of Fauré in this music. The finale brings together the contrasting elements of abrupt gestures and linear tunes that have emerged in the course of the Trio, but they remain in juxtaposition as much as in resolution.

With typical wit, long before he put pen to paper, **Maurice Ravel** remarked to a friend that 'My Trio is now finished. I only need the themes for it.' However carefully he might have mapped out the structure, the irony of his remark became clear as he struggled to put flesh on the bones. Over the summer of 1913 he worked on the piece at his hideaway of St Jean-de-Luz on the Basque coast, but progress was slow. The first movement was eventually completed by March of the following year, but by July the composer was complaining that he was sick of the Trio, having spent three weeks stuck for inspiration.

The impetus to get going again came within a fortnight: on 2 August 1914, France entered the First World War. Keen to get the score finished before signing up, Ravel now worked 'with the clear-headed determination of a madman', as he wrote on 4 August in a letter to Maurice Delage – the same friend whom he had assured in the distant past that the Trio was complete in his head. 'I just keep working so as not to hear anything. [...] But suddenly my hypocrisy overwhelms me and I find myself sobbing over my manuscript paper.'

Yet the anxiety of the times was not carried over into the music of the Trio. The first movement has an acknowledged Basque influence, reflecting the region in which it was written, and also the composer's heritage. His mother was Basque, and he had been born just a few miles away from where he was now working. However, according to Ravel's first biographer – his friend Alexis Roland-Manuel – the first tune was not a traditional Basque melody as the composer believed, but a dance tune brought to St Jean-de-Luz by visiting ice-cream vendors.

This opening movement covers a wide emotional range, not through bold contrasts but via continual transition. Then follows a playful waltz-scherzo, whose title, 'Pantoum', refers to a verse form of Malaysian origin adopted by late-19th-century French poets. How much that has to do with the musical structure, and how much the name was chosen purely for its exotic flavour, is a moot point among scholars. Solemn bell-tones from the piano in the passacaglia slow movement suggest we are still in the mystic East and the lands of the gamelan.

The opening of the finale returns us to the impressionistic atmosphere of the Trio's opening, before the movement explodes in a burst of volatile energy that really does suggest the 'determined madman' that Ravel became while writing it. As it turned out, he was rejected for active service on account of his small stature and poor health, but he served instead – with bravery – driving munitions lorries.

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