

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 9 November 2021 7.30pm

Takács Quartet



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) String Quartet in D minor K421 (1783)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Menuetto and Trio. Allegretto • IV. Allegretto ma non troppo

Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013) Ainsi la nuit (1973-6)
Introduction • I. Nocturne • Parenthèse 1 • II. Miroir d'espace • Parenthèse 2 • III. Litanies • Parenthèse 3 • IV. Litanies 2 • Parenthèse 4 • V. Constellations • VI. Nocturne 2 • VII. Temps suspendu

Interval

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884) String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my life' (1876)
I. Allegro vivo appassionato • II. Allegro moderato alla polka • III. Largo sostenuto • IV. Vivace

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There is a myth of **Mozart** as a childlike genius, through whom sublime music passed, seemingly spontaneously. Whilst Mozart could certainly compose with extraordinary fluency, his compositions were often more premeditated and self-conscious than is sometimes realised. The String Quartet in D minor K421 illustrates this side of his character to the full. It probably dates from 1783, not long after he had left the service of Archbishop Colloredo in Salzburg. Newly settled in Vienna, he began to establish himself on his own terms, writing works that would appeal to the Austrian capital's musical public and appearing as the piano soloist in a series of newly composed concertos. In August 1782, he married Constanze Weber, and the following summer, their first child – Raimund – was born. It was a difficult birth – Constanze later claimed that her husband had transcribed her cries in the third movement – and their son survived for just two months.

It is tempting to attribute to the sombre, sometimes dramatic mood of the D minor quartet to such events, yet its primary influences are musical rather than autobiographical. In 1782 and 1783, Mozart made a study of the scores of Bach and Handel, and there is a dose of Baroque rigour in the quartet's approach rhetoric. The greatest influence was, however, Haydn, whose six quartets Op. 33 appeared in 1781. Mozart knew these innovative works well and paid homage to them in the six quartets he composed between 1783 and 1785, of which the D minor quartet is the second. An early review observed that Mozart had 'a decided inclination towards the difficult and the unusual'. If that judgment sounds cautious, Haydn was more positive, confessing to Mozart's father that 'before God and as an honest man I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name; he has taste, and, furthermore, the most profound knowledge of composition.' When the quartets were finally published in 1785, their dedication was not to an aristocratic patron, but to Haydn himself, whom Mozart called 'a great man and dearest friend'.

Dutilleux's *Ainsi la nuit* ('Thus the night') also emerges from a deeply felt creative dialogue with the legacy of other composers. The idea of writing a quartet was, though, not Dutilleux's own; rather, it was suggested by sculptor Rita Sussman, who persuaded Olga Koussevitzky to commission a piece in memory of her late husband, Ernest Sussman. As one might expect, there are certain affinities with the soundworld of Debussy and Ravel, yet those are works by young composers, whereas Dutilleux was 60 when he completed his quartet in 1976. With such maturity came a heightened receptivity to other schools and traditions, and when preparing to write *Ainsi la nuit*, Dutilleux consulted the scores of Beethoven, Berg and Bartók,

as well as making a detailed study of the 6 Bagatelles Op. 9 by Webern – austere, pointillistic miniatures, which broke with the lush and expansive textures of late Romanticism. According to Dutilleux, his quartet began life as a series of short studies, 'each dealing with various kinds of string sound: one study in pizzicatos, others in harmonics, dynamics, contrasts, opposition of register, and so on.' Played without a break, *Ainsi la nuit* consists of seven main movements, prefaced by a short introduction and connected by four terse '*Parenthèses*'. Further internal coherence is lent by the use of a recurring harmonic framework, and melodic motifs are fastidiously elaborated from movement to movement. That might make the quartet seem dry and cerebral, yet that would be to underestimate Dutilleux's captivating sonorities and engrossing storytelling. In an interview, he alluded to 'the influence of literature, of Proust and his notions about memory,' suggesting that the 18 minutes of *Ainsi la nuit* might be read as a compressed musical analogue to the seven volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Memory is central to **Smetana's** String Quartet No. 1, entitled 'From My Life'. In 1874, at the age of 50, Smetana began to suffer the effects of syphilis, one symptom of which was increasing deafness. Obligated to give up his role as conductor at Prague's Provisional Theatre, he moved to the countryside. There, in the autumn of 1876, he poured his reflections and feelings into a string quartet, designed to capture important moments in his personal life and development as an artist. The idea of using music to convey a programme or narrative was far from new, but tended to be confined to orchestral works, such as Smetana's own *Má vlast* ('My fatherland'), also composed in the second half of the 1870s. For a composer to use the string quartet for the same purpose was, however, a radical statement. As Smetana defiantly claimed, 'I shall gladly leave judgment on this to others and I will not be angry at all if they do not like it, for it is contrary to the conventional style of quartet music.' The first movement expresses 'my youthful inclination to art', as well as 'a sort of warning of my future disaster', and we may wish to hear the dramatic opening viola theme as a kind of fate motif. A polka follows, evoking 'the happy life of my youth when, as a composer of dance music, I frequented the fashionable world.' In the third movement, Smetana looks back nostalgically on 'the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife.' The finale begins heroically, yet ends with feelings of regret, and the ringing high E in the first violin is a vivid musical representation of his loss of hearing. Smetana was proud of his reputation as Bohemia's leading national composer, but the quartet is the confession of a private man.

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