

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 9 November 2023  
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

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

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 10 (1893)

*I. Animé et très décidé • II. Assez vif et bien rythmé •  
III. Andantino, doucement expressif • IV. Très modéré*

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Flight from war and terror shaped the lives of all three composers tonight. In 1870, the eight-year-old Debussy fled Paris during the Franco-Prussian War to find refuge in Cannes. He had his first music lessons there. 70 years later, Martinů too fled Paris, days before the German occupation of the city. An arduous trek south and west through France, Spain and Portugal led him and his wife ultimately to the USA. Anticipating the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, Schulhoff looked east from Prague and arranged asylum in the Soviet Union. A committed Communist, he had taken Soviet nationality to facilitate this, but heartbreakingly missed his window for escape and found himself detained and deported not for his Jewishness (like many others, including Pavel Haas after whom tonight's quartet is named) but his political beliefs. He died in 1942 in a camp in Bavaria.

Hearing Schulhoff and Martinů together tonight offers a moment to reflect on how turbulent life could be in the early 20th Century. Both were born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Schulhoff in Prague, Martinů well to the east in a town called Polička. Schulhoff's Czech-German Jewish family had good connections, so by his 20th year, when World War I began, he had already enjoyed a decade of study with prestigious teachers including figures as disparate as Debussy and Reger. Lacking such connections, Martinů's early progress was slower: he eventually studied in Prague at the age of 16 thanks to people from his hometown who raised the funds to send him there. After the war, with the Austro-Hungarian Empire no more, Czechoslovakia was created. Both men left to thrive in other European musical centres. Schulhoff, ever the cosmopolitan urbanite, relished life in the Weimar Republic and settled in Berlin until rampant inflation wiped out his family's wealth. He returned to Prague in 1923 just as Martinů left the city for Paris: he would never again live in his home country. Musically they both travelled far, embracing hot new influences, movements and trends including Dada (33 years before John Cage's *4'33*, Schulhoff wrote an elaborately notated but entirely silent piece for piano called *In futurum*) and dance music: Martinů's 1927 ballet *La revue de cuisine* offered tango, ragtime and Charleston in a joyful and surreal sequence.

Schulhoff's *5 Pieces* were written in the year of his return to Prague. Like Martinů in his ballet, and like Britten in his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, he presents a post-nationalistic smorgasbord of knowing and playful takes on well-known genres and styles: Viennese waltz, Italian serenade, Czech folk dance, Latin tango and tarantella. For all its globe-trotting jokiness, the work has a seriousness and kinship with Bartok's string quartets. It draws the intensity of its rhythm more from folk dance than jazz or pop, and the acerbity of its harmony, the physical excitement of its virtuosic string writing belongs to the concert hall not the dance hall. It is the work of a

brilliant young man out to show what he can do, and heralded the years of his greatest success.

15 years later, when **Martinů** wrote his Fifth quartet, the world was a darker, more desperate place. Maps were being torn up once again as Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938 (euphemistically called the 'Anschluss', or 'unification') seemed inevitably to pave the way for an invasion of the Sudetenland and then Czechoslovakia more widely. Distressed enough by this, Martinů faced storms in his private life when his affair with a young student, Vítězslava Kaprálová, precipitated crises in his marriage. This quartet was written in the months following the Anschluss and is dedicated to Kaprálová, but perhaps war not love is its true inspiration. An earlier Czech 'love' quartet, Janáček's 'Intimate Letters', blazes with passion for his ideal woman, Kamila Stösslová, while Martinů's love is eclipsed by the anxiety – perhaps even fear – of its time.

**Debussy** might look like an odd one out in tonight's company: French not Czech, 30 years older, a traveller but never an exile... yet both Schulhoff and Martinů had strong links to him. Schulhoff sought him out for lessons, only to be disappointed when Debussy's teaching turned out too orthodox for his liking. Arriving in Paris five years after Debussy's death, Martinů never met the man, but later in life he was asked about important influences on his composition and answered: 'There seems to be three. First, I would say the national music of my own country, Czechoslovakia. The second comes from the English madrigal and third from Debussy.'

In the wake of Martinů's Fifth, Debussy's only quartet sounds unshadowed by fear and tumult though it dates from 1893, 22 years after the horrors of the Franco-Prussian War. It exudes a depth of national identity – it could only be French, even if the string quartet was anything but a French genre. Few French composers wrote more than one if any. Debussy's quartet was commissioned by the Belgian violinist Eugene Ysaÿe, and we know that he struggled with the form. 'I had to start over three times ... by its very nature, music is something that cannot be cast into a traditional and fixed form', as he wrote to Chausson. The end result looks, at first glance, very much like a quartet in the 18th/19th-century tradition: four movements, around 30 minutes of music; but it is not at all 'traditional and fixed form'. Rather than four discrete movements, Debussy offers a prolonged exploration of a small number of ideas, playing with them over the course of a rather serious first movement, a playful scherzo and an introverted *Andantino*. His finale is like a kind of dream about all that has gone before.

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