

Programme notes by Chris Darwin

Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) Italian Serenade (1887)

Slovenian Hugo Wolf is best known for his many song settings; today's *Serenade* is one of his very few chamber works. Like Beethoven, who said he was good at nothing but composing, Wolf, at least as a child, was apparently good at nothing but music. His father, who had taught himself piano, violin, flute, harp and guitar, taught his son violin and piano from the age of 4, but Hugo was dismissed from secondary school in Graz for being "wholly inadequate". His failings may have been motivated by wanting to persuade his father, who thought music should be an avocation not a career, to send him to the Vienna Conservatoire. At 15 Hugo got his wish and started into the second year at the Conservatoire, where he made friends with the young Gustav Mahler and, after hearing *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* and meeting Wagner himself, joined the pro-Wagner avant-garde. He clashed with the Conservatoire's authorities and was dismissed for breach of discipline; perhaps the death threat to the director sent in his name by a fellow student contributed to his dismissal.

After 8 months back home, the 18 year-old Wolf returned to Vienna to earn his living as a music teacher. His fiery temperament, depression and mood swings made him a less than ideal music teacher, although his charm and undoubted abilities as a composer brought him commissions and pupils. One of his pupils was the daughter of Freud's collaborator Josef Breuer; one of her dreams, about her tiny teacher (Wolf was only 5-feet tall) ranting from a tower, made it into Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. That year Wolf both contracted syphilis and fell in love with Vally Franck, the beautiful relative of one of his benefactors. Vally inspired his maturing song-writing. However, three years later, the combination of Vally breaking up with him and the death of his idol, Wagner, destroyed his confidence. He turned to writing for the musical press, making many enemies, including Brahms, with his entertaining, insecurity-fuelled vitriol. Their hostility made it no easier to get his own work performed.

The short, single-movement *Italian Serenade* was composed at the time that he decided to give up being a critic and return to composing. His style matured and his songs were successful. The *Serenade* was inspired by Joseph Eichendorff's poem *The Soldier I* and his related novella *From the Life of a Ne'er-Do-Well*. The novella's story of a young violinist leaving home to seek his fortune echoes Wolf's own life. '*The essence of the delicious Italian Serenade is its antithesis of romantic sentiment and mocking wit*' (Robert Gutman).

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No 1 Op 7 (1908-9)

I. Lento

II. Allegretto

Introduzione: Allegro

III. Allegro Vivace

At the beginning of February 1908, the 27-year-old Bartók was not a happy chap. The violinist Stefi Geyer, with whom he was infatuated, wrote to break off their relationship. A week earlier he had finished composing a violin concerto for her. Its first movement depicts the 'idealized Stefi Geyer, celestial and inward' and is dominated by her motif: D–F#–A–C#, a rising series of 3rds; the second movement has a jagged descending reordering of the motif - 'cheerful, witty, amusing'. On the day he received her letter, Bartók wrote the 13th of his *Fourteen Bagatelles* for piano ('*she is dead*') and then the last

one, a grotesque waltz ('*my love dancing*'); both incorporate her motif. Geyer refused to play the concerto and other violinists showed little interest, so Bartók suppressed the work and recycled the first movement together with an orchestrated version of the last Bagatelle as '*Two Portraits: one ideal, one grotesque*'.

Stefi Geyer and her motif also figure prominently in Bartók's First Quartet which he started that same year. Bartók's friend Kodály commented on the quartet: "*The unity of the movements... is preserved... by the homogeneity of the thematic material, [and] with something more which I would call psychological unity – an intimate drama, a kind of 'Return to Life' of one who has reached the brink of the abyss. It is programme music...*". The programme is his recovery from Geyer's rejection. The style of writing of the quartet is transitional between the high romanticism of Bartók's youth (Brahms, Strauss and Reger were influential) and his mature, compact style that developed in response to Debussy and in particular to the native folk music of Hungary which he and Kodály were keenly exploring.

The first movement, which Bartók described as his funeral dirge, starts with material from the second movement of the suppressed concerto. Its slow opening fugue is strongly reminiscent both in form and mood of the opening of Beethoven's Op 131 quartet, which we will hear after the interval. The movements become progressively less funereal, and the folk element is particularly strong in the boisterous last movement, where life has clearly returned. In the recitative introduction to the last movement, Bartók allows the cello to parody the popular song '*Csak egy szép lány van a világon*' (*Just one beautiful girl in the world*).

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet in C# minor Op. 131 (1826)

Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo

Allegro molto vivace

Allegro moderato – Adagio

Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile – Più mosso – Andante moderato e lusinghiero –

Adagio – Allegretto – Adagio, ma non troppo e semplice – Allegretto

Presto

Adagio quasi un poco andante

Allegro

Beethoven completed the three string quartets commissioned by Prince Galitzin (Op 127, 130 & 132) in 1826 after his Ninth Symphony. According to Karl Holz, the second violin in Ignaz Schuppanzigh's string quartet, who had effectively become Beethoven's secretary: '*While composing the three quartets... such a wealth of new quartet ideas flowed from Beethoven's inexhaustible imagination that he virtually had to write the Quartets in C-sharp minor and F major involuntarily. "My dear fellow, I've just had another idea," he would say jocularly and with glistening eyes when we were out walking, and would write down a few notes in his sketchbook.*'

The C-sharp minor quartet is extraordinary in many ways. It is unique among Beethoven's works in having seven continuous movements (continuing the increasing complexity from Op 132 to Op 130) and in starting with a fugue. Beethoven had recently finished writing the wildest of all fugues, the *Grosse Fugue* last movement of Op 130; by contrast, the

opening of Op 131 is serene; *'It is as though Beethoven were rendering a peace offering to the fugue gods'* (Michael Steinberg).

As in his two previous quartets, Beethoven builds Op 131 around two pairs of semitones: initially a G#-A [1] B#-C# [2] sandwich for the opening four notes of the fugue. The fugal line becomes more complex with syncopations and more rapid movement. Shortly before the end, the cello enters with the main theme at half the original speed against the first violin at normal speed. The movement ends on a simple C#-octave jump.

Adagio, ma non troppo e molto espressivo



Then comes the Beethoven trick of simply sliding up a semitone, to a D-octave jump, and, Hey *Allegro molto vivace*, we are in the *Scherzo* second movement with a new arrangement of two semitones: A#-B [1] and C#-D [2]. After an almost petulant *fortissimo* outburst, the music subsides to well-separated *pianissimo* chords that are not quite final, and we go straight into a short bridging recitative heralding the fourth movement - a set of extraordinary variations that form the heart of the whole work.



Again the theme starts with two pairs of semitones: A-G# [1] and D-C# [2]. The silent or deemphasised first beat is an important part of the theme. Listening to these variations it is easy to see why Beethoven the young pianist was so lionised for his ability to improvise, and why he himself wrote of this, his greatest quartet, that it showed *'less lack of imagination than before'*. There is another tentative ending and then, like a Shakespearean jester, the cello bursts in with the whirlwind *Presto*: a *Scherzo* packed with wit and contrast. After a couple of cycles of *Scherzo-Trio* the music seems to get lost and the players scurry around scratching a thin *sul ponticello* before Beethoven brings them to heel, abruptly stops the movement and immediately switches key, tempo and mood, leading us briefly into a world as serene as that of the opening fugue.

Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile



But we are brusquely kicked out of this world into the stormy, harsh intensity of the finale. Again semitones shape the opening theme: B#-C# [1] and G#-A [2]. We are now back in the 'home' key of C# minor for almost the first time since the first movement, and Beethoven establishes other links with the first movement to give a sense of closure. The climax comes with triumphantly majestic long descending octaves in the first violin, but the movement does not end easily: there are violent swings of mood and tempo before Beethoven swerves into C#-major for the final six bars of this huge work.



Coda: Five days before Schubert's death in November 1828, Op 131 was played at his bedside. Karl Holz who was present wrote: *"The King of Harmony has sent the King of Song a friendly bidding to the crossing."*