

# INTERSTELLAIRE

10:00AM

SUNDAY 13 OCTOBER 2024

ST JOHN'S CHURCH



**Erwin SCHULHOFF (1894 – 1942)**

**String Quartet No. 1, Op. 8**

1. *Presto con fuoco*
2. *Allegretto con moto e con malinconia grottesca*
3. *Allegro giocoso alla slovacca*
4. *Andante molto sostenuto*

Orava Quartet

Daniel Kowalik *Violin*  
David Dalseno *Violin*  
Thomas Chawner *Viola*  
Karol Kowalik *Cello*

**Claude DEBUSSY (1862 – 1918)**

**String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10**

1. *Animé et très décidé*
2. *Assez vif et bien rythmé*
3. *Andantino, doucement expressif*
4. *Très modéré – Très mouvementé et avec passion*

*This performance is generously supported by Di Jameson OAM and Frank Mercurio.*

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Though his life was tragically cut short in a Nazi prison camp and his music suffered something of a lull in the decades after his death, the wide-ranging output of Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff has come into greater prominence over the last quarter century. His music reflects a unique synthesis of the diverse artistic movements sweeping across Europe during the early 20th century, from German late Romanticism and French Impressionism, to jazz and the avant-garde experiments of the Dadaists.

Though a relatively early work written in 1924, the First String Quartet is one of Schulhoff's finest pieces and already displays his strong grasp of the medium. It opens with a fiery, restless presto whose rhythmic energy evokes the folk music of the composer's native Bohemia. The second movement is a scherzo tinged with "grotesque melancholy", its capricious, whimsical sentimentality coloured with spectral *ponticello* effects.

In a similar vein to the opening presto, the third movement is a wildly playful folk dance "in the Slovak style". The sonic palette of the quartet is further expanded here with left-hand pizzicato, eerie artificial harmonics, and percussive *col legno*. Unconventionally, and in opposition to the verve of the preceding movements, Schulhoff ends the quartet with an extended slow movement. According to writer Josef Bek, it is a meditation on the ephemeral joy of life: "In the mirror of this movement, all the previous dances are transformed into a memory, into the past, into a dream."

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In 1893, Debussy composed his first important work, the String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10. It was the only work to which he attached an opus number or a key designation, and it was the only work Debussy wrote in a conventional form. Outwardly, the quartet does assume the mould of a traditional string quartet comprising four movements: a first movement in sonata form, a rhythmic scherzo, a slow, lyrical movement and an energetic finale. But within this framework, the music sounds completely new, and in many ways anticipates the groundbreaking *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, written the same year.

Debussy expands the possibilities of the string quartet with an array of innovative devices – exotic scales, unconventional chords, progressions and key changes, and novel textures and tonal effects. Especially striking is the work's rhythmic vitality, its swiftly changing tempos, dazzling figurations and cross-rhythms, and the special shimmering or hovering pulsations typical of his music.

The quartet begins with a theme that underpins the entire piece. Both rhythmically and melodically, it generates subsequent musical ideas and runs as a sometimes subtle, sometimes overt current that changes to suit the moment. The swirling energy and colours of the first movement give way to pointillistic rhythms and textures in the second movement, inspired by the sounds of Javanese gamelan that Debussy experienced at the 1889 World's Fair. Here the opening motive is transformed into a repeating rhythmic figure first heard in the viola against the pizzicato accompaniment of the other instruments.

The third movement further displays the versatility of the opening motive, this time with a glow shrouded as if by early morning mist. Muted instruments in the opening bars, along with lush harmony and a remote key, give the music an otherworldly colour. Finally the viola leads the quartet to a sublime climax, before the movement returns once again to the evening shadows. The finale emerges from the memories of the third movement, at first thoughtful and brooding, but soon building to the ultimate and energetic return of the opening motive.