

Programme Notes by Chris Darwin – use freely for non-profit activities

Erwin Schulhoff (1894 – 1942) String Quartet No 1 (1924)

Presto con fuoco

Allegretto con moto e con malinconia grottesca

Allegro giocoso alla Slovacca

Andante molto sostenuto

Born in Prague to a musical German family, the young Schulhoff was a prodigiously gifted pianist. Dvořák heard the 7-year old play and was so impressed that he gave him two pieces of chocolate and encouraged him to become a musician. Aged 10 he studied at the Prague Conservatory before going on to Vienna, Leipzig and Cologne, where he briefly studied with Debussy. His early compositions were influenced by Debussy, Reger, Richard Strauss and Scriabin. However, his experiences as a conscript in the first world war had a profound effect: angry and disillusioned, he became a convinced socialist and was unable to continue to compose in a post-romantic idiom.

In 1919 he found two incompatible new directions. In Dresden he championed the Second Viennese School, organising concerts of Berg and Schoenberg, whilst in Berlin through his friendship with George Grosz, he discovered both Dadaism and, thanks to Grosz's wonderful record collection, jazz. Schulhoff's Dada-influenced works from 1919 include *Fünf Pittoresken* for piano; its third movement *In Futurum* consists of 29 bars of minutely and ridiculously scored rests. Although Alphonse Allais had composed a totally silent piece in 1897 (*Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Great Deaf Man*), Schulhoff was still 33 years ahead John Cage's more famous 4'33". Another Dada-esque work written in 1919, but in a rather different vein, is Schulhoff's *Sonata Erotica* for solo female voice; again carefully scored, it is 70 years ahead of Sally's infamous delicatessen monologue to Harry.

On his return to Prague in 1923 Schulhoff settled into a productive period, writing mostly chamber music, whose generally tonal base is invigorated by the influence of a wide diversity of dance, jazz and folk music and by the music of Janáček and Bartók. He is also not above an occasional outrageous Dada-esque gesture. His first string quartet comes from the beginning of this period. After a visit to Moscow in 1933 Schulhoff espoused Socialist Realism, writing symphonies and also a cantata setting parts of the Communist Manifesto in a serious, heroic style. The German occupation of Czechoslovakia threatened Schulhoff's life - he was both a Jew and a communist. In 1941 he obtained a visa to emigrate to the Soviet Union; a week later Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Unable to leave Prague, Schulhoff was arrested for being a Soviet citizen and deported to a concentration camp in Bavaria, where in August 1942 he died of tuberculosis.