

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) String Quartet No 2 Op 56 (1927)

Moderato

Vivace scherzando

Lento

Karol Szymanowski was born in 1882 to an affluent family who had settled after the partitioning of Poland in Tymoszwówka, between Kiev and Odessa. His early musical training was at home and in nearby Yelisavetgrad, but at 19 he moved to Warsaw to study. With three other composers he founded *Young Poland in Music*. Its outlook shared the transcendentalism of the *Young Poland* movement in literature: '*Art has no aim... art stands above life, penetrates the essence of the universe.*' He travelled to Berlin and Vienna, and was much influenced by the late German romantics, particularly Richard Strauss. He travelled widely to Paris, Sicily and North Africa, and his style moved away from Strauss towards Debussy and Ravel and was heavily influenced by the exotic imagery of Arab mythology. It was in this style that he composed prolifically during the first world war, isolated on the family estate at Tymoszwówka. Major works from this period include his first violin concerto, his first string quartet and his third symphony.

The October Revolution of 1917 destroyed the family home and, temporarily, his musical creativity. He occupied himself writing a novel on erotic love, *The Ephebe*, whose ideas and characters fed into his opera *King Roger*. The independence of Poland in 1918 allowed him to return to Warsaw. The change of location and heightened Polish nationalism rekindled his musical creativity. His new style was inspired by Stravinsky and, against his previous convictions, incorporated elements of folk music, particularly that of the Tatra mountains. *King Roger*, his second violin concerto, and the second string quartet all show this new style.

The second quartet introduces strong folk elements into basic classical structures – sonata form, theme and variations, rondo. The *Moderato* first movement is based on the traditional sonata form with an opening theme on muted violin and cello, two octaves apart. Its rhapsodic flow is brutally interrupted by discordant *sul ponticello* (bowed near the bridge) outbursts reminiscent of Janáček. The second movement is a Rondo with variations; the melody, the strong rhythms and wild outbursts are all inspired by Tatra folk music. The third movement is a four-part double fugue, again with themes that are of folk origin.