

Programme notes by Chris Darwin. Please use freely for non-profit activities

### **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).