

Pavel Haas Quartet





Pavel Haas Quartet
Veronika Jarůšková, violin; Marek Zwiebel, violin;
Simon Truszka, viola; Peter Jarůšek, cello
2023-2024 Biography

The Pavel Haas Quartet is revered across the globe for its richness of timbre, infectious passion and intuitive rapport. Performing at the world's most prestigious concert halls and having won five *Gramophone Awards* and numerous others for their recordings, the Quartet is firmly established as one of the world's foremost chamber ensembles.

The Quartet appears at major venues including Wigmore Hall, London; Philharmonie and Konzerthaus, Berlin; Musikverein, Vienna; Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg; Concertgebouw and Muziekgebouw, Amsterdam; Tonhalle, Zürich; Théâtre de la Ville, Paris; Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome; BOZAR, Brussels; NCPA, Beijing; LG Arts Centre, Seoul and Carnegie Hall, New York. In celebration of its 20th anniversary, the Quartet was invited to be on the cover of *The Strad's* June 2022 issue and was the featured interview in *BBC Music Magazine* in the same month. They were included in the latter magazine's *10 greatest string quartet ensembles* of all time and were described as “stylistically powerful and richly sonorous, [and] known for its passionate and fearless performances”.

In the 23/24 season, the Quartet returns to the Wigmore Hall for four concerts; Rudolfinum Prague; Teatro La Fenice; Liverpool Philharmonic Hall; Göteborgs Konserthus; National Concert Hall, Dublin; Muziekgebouw, Amsterdam; Philharmonie Luxembourg. Further afield, the Quartet tours the United States in March 2024 and Asia in May 2024.

Since September 2022, the Pavel Haas Quartet has been Artist-in-Residence at the Dvořák Prague Festival and curate the chamber music concerts including programming all the Dvořák String Quartets and chamber music works over the three seasons.

The Pavel Haas Quartet records exclusively for Supraphon. Their most recent recording of the Brahms Viola and Piano Quintets with Boris Giltburg and their former member, Pavel Nikl, was released to critical acclaim in May 2022. The recording was described as “radiant and vivacious” by *The Strad*, and was *Presto Classical's* Recording of the Week. For their previous album of Shostakovich String Quartets (2019), they received the Recording of the Year by Classic Prague Awards and were named one of the 100 best records of the year by *The Times*.

The Quartet received their five *Gramophone Awards* for their recordings of Dvořák, Smetana, Schubert, Janáček and Haas, as well as Dvořák's String Quartets No.12 ‘American’ and

No.13, for which they were awarded the most coveted prize, Gramophone Recording of the Year in 2011. *The Sunday Times* commented: “their account of the ‘American’ Quartet belongs alongside the greatest performances on disc.” Further accolades include *BBC Music Magazine Awards* and the *Diapason d’Or de l’Année* in 2010 for their recording of Prokofiev String Quartets Nos. 1 & 2.

Since winning the Paolo Borciani competition in Italy in 2005, further highlights early on in their career have included the nomination as ECHO Rising Stars in 2007, the participation in the BBC New Generation Artists scheme between 2007-2009 and the Special Ensemble Scholarship the Borletti-Buitoni Trust awarded to them in 2010. The Quartet is based in Prague and studied with the late Milan Skampa, the legendary violist of the Smetana Quartet. They take their name from the Czech-Jewish composer Pavel Haas (1899-1944) who was imprisoned at Theresienstadt in 1941 and tragically died at Auschwitz three years later. His legacy includes three wonderful string quartets.

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Pavel Haas Quartet

Critical Acclaim

"They represent the best qualities of the Czech tradition – warmth, sonorousness, individuality, intensity; but what's striking here is their fearless risk-taking, their fervency and the absolute confidence with which they propel you through these two masterpieces."

Gramophone

"It's their lightness of touch that commands; the subtle nuances of colour, line and texture performed with almost spectral intensity."

BBC Music Magazine

"The Pavel Haas Quartet is one of the truly outstanding ensembles of our time. They combine a sensual sound quality with an innate sense for the chamber musical structure in the finest and most vital way."

Süddeutsche Zeitung

"The Pavel Haas Quartet at the Kammermusiksaal played its way into the highest echelon of string quartets... The four musicians play with an infectious and fearless passion and a technical brilliance that was breath-taking."

General-Anzeiger, Bonn

"What really grips me about these performances is the ensemble's ability to get under the skin of the music and their compellingly imaginative concept of texture, instrumental balance and nuance."

BBC Music Magazine

the Strad

May 18, 2022

Pavel Haas Quartet at 20: Coming home

The energetic and eloquent musicians of the Pavel Haas Quartet are celebrating 20 years of music making with a new recording of Brahms quintets joined by some old friends, as they tell Tom Stewart



You get to meet a lot of string quartets in this job, and it goes without saying that each has its own unique dynamic; but generally, they fall into one of two categories: earnest and businesslike or chatty and excitable. I'm not sure I've ever encountered a group more conclusively in the latter camp than the Pavel Haas Quartet. Listening again to the recording of our interview, some words are difficult to make out as the players finish each other's sentences, interject with new ideas and, sometimes, begin entirely new conversations among themselves. After more than an hour of this, I put it to the

group that they are almost startlingly friendly, and with none of the awkwardness that often accompanies this kind of interaction (I'm at home in the UK, they're backstage in Brussels, all gathered round a single iPad). 'I think what you're trying to say is that we don't take ourselves too seriously,' replies violist Luosha Fang, who became the group's newest member when she joined them in April 2021. 'But we can still be serious, of course,' counters founding first violinist Veronika Jarůšková. 'When we're on stage we would die for our music.'

Strikingly for a group so brimming with energy, this is the Pavel Haas Quartet's 20th-anniversary year. Perhaps some of their freshness stems from the sense of renewal that accompanies the arrival of a new member – and six line-up changes across two decades should be enough to keep anyone on their toes. Peter Jarůšek (Jarůšková's husband) replaced the group's first cellist soon after the quartet started life; Marek Zwiebel became its third second violinist in 2012 and Fang is the third violist to play with the group since its co-founder Pavel Nikl left in 2016. Nikl makes a return, however, on the group's new recording of Brahms's op.111 String Quintet – 'Like a big brother coming home!' Jarůšková says. For the coupling, the composer's op.34 Piano Quintet, they're joined by Israeli pianist Boris Giltburg, with whom they first played in 2014 – and who is with them on the call from Brussels. 'We just clicked,' he says, grinning. 'The way they lean into every note is the same approach I take in my solo



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Violist Pavel Nikl returned to record Brahms with his former colleagues

playing. Very often you just have to find a way into how a quartet works and quickly put something together. With them it's different; I feel very much part of the group. They're just such warm and lovely people.' Giltburg's effusive praise is met with bashful laughter, but it's clear from their faces that the quartet players consider him one of their own.

'It was all very hippy-ish at the beginning,' Jarůšková says, gazing upwards as if recalling a simpler time. 'I just wanted to have a band, Beatles-style. Today, sometimes all the organising and logistics can make it feel like a real mission.' Jarůšek, too, is frank about the challenges of quartet life. 'For us, feelings are the most important things when it comes to the music, but this life isn't easy and it isn't for everyone,' he explains. 'Very honestly, sometimes I hate it. There have been many moments when I've said to myself, "No – this is over." Concert and travel schedules mean we have to plan our lives two years ahead, but you don't know what you'll want to eat in two years' time, let alone what music you'll want to play. That's just how it is, though – this isn't a job, it's a life.'



The Quartet performs at the 2021 Smetana's Litomyšl festival.

As Jarůšek recalls, the group's first big success – winning the Vittorio E. Rimbotti competition in Florence in 2004 – meant they had to adjust quickly to a faster pace. 'We wanted to go because we thought the weather would be nice in Italy at that time of year, and because it would be useful to hear what other groups our age were doing. Part of the top prize was a long and very busy concert tour; I remember Veronika saying how sorry she felt for whoever ended up winning.' They were the ones who won, of course, and they were soon playing more than 40 concerts over just five weeks, at venues across Europe and North America. 'We didn't have the repertoire ready for that kind of thing, though, so we were learning music on the road at the same time as figuring out how to survive as a quartet.'

Another big win followed, at the 2005 Prague Spring competition, after which they came to the attention of Supraphon, the Czech label they still record for today. Their first disc, fittingly, was a recording of music by Haas, the Czech composer who gives the group its name, and by his teacher Janáček. Haas was born in 1899 to a Jewish family in Brno, where Janáček established the city conservatoire in 1919 and became the younger composer's most significant mentor. Before his death at Auschwitz in 1944, Haas wrote music with the same arresting originality and emotional clarity as Janáček's, though he was never a prolific composer, and his work, according to Jarůšková, remains somewhat obscure even inside the Czech Republic. The quartet, which must rank among Haas's greatest champions, settled on the name after hearing a recording of his moving and ebullient Second String Quartet, 'From the Monkey Mountains', a work that, in typically idiosyncratic Moravian style, includes a part for percussion. Haas's music is bright, clear and energetic – a perfect match for the sound and personality of the quartet that now carries his name. Haas and Janáček (along with their ancestor Dvořák) remain important foundations of the quartet's repertoire on disc and in concert, but the players don't consider themselves Czech specialists. 'It made sense for us to start with these composers, but we also love Beethoven, Shostakovich, Haydn,



Schubert – the list goes on,’ Jarůšek says. The Brahms on their latest disc comprises two milestones of the composer’s chamber music: the fiery 1864 Piano Quintet in F minor from his early years in Vienna, and the String Quintet in G major, a touching and autumnal work composed 26 years later, in 1890. Both are big, complex scores that require stamina and – though presumably this presented no difficulties for these players – perfect balance of all five parts. ‘There’s something of a misconception among pianists that piano quintets of this era – Brahms, Schumann, Dvořák, Franck – are mini concertos,’ says Giltburg. ‘They’re actually very well-integrated and balanced pieces, but they’re often played as if this isn’t the case.’ Brahms’s first version of the piece that became the Piano Quintet didn’t even include a piano part at all. He showed the music to his friends Clara Schumann and violinist Joseph Joachim while it was in its original form: a string quintet with two cellos. ‘That was in 1862, when they told him the material needed something stronger to support it, so he rewrote it as a sonata for two pianos,’ Giltburg explains. ‘Then he brought back some of the colour and warmth of the strings – at the beginning of the second movement, for example, the piano has the lullaby melody and the interjections from the strings come like little caresses. You can’t really do that with a second piano. The piano quintet version sounds so natural and obvious to us now – it’s hard to imagine the music any other way.’

Zwiebel also detects hints of other, larger forms at work. ‘I think the piece shows him preparing for the First Symphony, which doesn’t come along for another 14 years,’ he says, noting that Brahms’s First String

Quartet also did not see publication until eight years after the Piano Quintet. ‘Symphonies, string quartets – these were a big responsibility for a composer, particularly coming so soon after Beethoven.’ Although Brahms was born six years after Beethoven’s death, he described the older composer as ‘that giant whose steps I always hear behind me’.

It seems reasonable that he might well have been intimidated by the huge successes of Beethoven’s orchestral music, finding smaller-scale outlets for landscapes conceived in orchestral terms. ‘I don’t just hear strings and piano when we play this piece,’ Zwiebel continues. ‘There’s a richness that makes me imagine winds and brass in there, too. It makes sense – composers have always used chamber music as a way to explore possibilities and test ideas on a smaller scale.’



At the Brahms recording sessions, from left: Boris Giltburg, Supraphon producer Matouš Vlčinský, Marek Zwiebel, Veronika Jarůšková, recording engineer Karel Soukeník and Peter Jarůšek.

In December 1890, Brahms sent a sketch for a string quintet to his publisher with a note that read, ‘With this scrap bid farewell to notes of mine – because it really is time to stop.’ The composer was just 57 at the time, and he didn’t complete his final work, a set of chorale preludes for organ, until 1896, but the four movements for string quartet with an added viola that make up op.111 do represent his final work for strings alone. Brahms is often thought of as a composer who worked within existing parameters, becoming a master of Classical forms and techniques instead of forging out into the unknown. The extent to which this is true is subject to debate, but for Giltburg, there is an assuredness to this string quintet that

suggests a composer at the height of his powers. 'The form becomes so plastic in his hands – he's in total control, just like Shakespeare is with language,' he says.

'You can feel the years of life experience he's accumulated in the years since the Piano Quintet,' Fang adds. 'I think it's important to be aware of this – I try not to focus just on the intellectual side of the music, because, at the end of the day, it's emotions that we're trying to express.' From a technical perspective, she suggests, the later work is more challenging on account of its more complex texture. 'The Piano Quintet is comparatively transparent; you know what each of the voices is doing and which you're supposed to be paying attention to at any one time. In the String Quintet, every single line is unique and important, but in constantly shifting ways.' The challenge, she says, is in making each voice shine without overpowering the others – not that this is something new to her: 'Of course, we violists are diplomats. From the very beginning we're trained in how to support others.'

On the question of Brahms's supposed conservatism, Giltburg has an interesting pianistic perspective. 'His three piano sonatas, which were written in 1852–3, are fiery and completely fearless. It's as if they were written by a different Brahms – one who wasn't thinking much at all about Classical structures and style.' So what became of this young revolutionary? 'He never really reappears. We know the sonatas were well received, but it's obvious that

Brahms loved looking back, too. Maybe he realised this was how he was going to find the greatest means of expression.' Rather than knocking down walls, in other words, Brahms got to the heart of their foundations and built new work around them. But, as Fang is quick to point out, none of this is to say that the composer's music is merely working over old ground. 'I think you can hear the revolutionary Brahms in the Scherzo of the Piano Quintet,' she says, referring to the movement's merciless forward march. 'I remember learning it when I was a teenager and just thinking it was so exciting, so full of energy and drive.'

As the minutes tick by and lunchtime beckons in Belgium, thoughts turn to what the future holds for the Pavel Haas players. They're learning music by Martinů and Korngold, but have no plans for a cycle of Beethoven or Shostakovich quartets: 'Other groups have already done that. We don't want to turn this great music into work, when really it should be for pleasure,' Jarůšek says. Jarůšková adds: 'We're like marathon runners: we need to stay in the best shape we can, mentally as well as physically – and all without losing curiosity or passion for new things.' Jarůšek is more sanguine: 'We're not at the centre of the universe,' he says. 'Nothing would change if we were to quit tomorrow, so we should just enjoy the moment while we can. Your life is getting shorter every day – that's a fact.' Jarůšková smiles and shakes her head. 'I think Peter is hungry!'

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Top 10 String Quartets

It's almost impossible to come up with a credible 'top 10' list for the best string quartets, so this is more of a newcomer's starter-pack. It incorporates great recordings of some of the most-performed masterpieces. Of course, one person's idea of something obvious will be another's off-the-beaten-track, but the 10 below, we can be fairly sure, will have a special place in the hearts of most classical music collectors.



Schubert String Quartet No 14, 'Death and the Maiden'

Pavel Haas Quartet

'The crazed tarantella that closes the quartet is a tour de force, raw, visceral and with an emotional immediacy that is almost unbearable. Such is the intensity of the playing that by the end of the disc you, too, are quite exhausted. But that's perhaps how it should be.'

Pavel Haas Quartet

the Strad

April 26, 2023

Pavel Haas Quartet, Boris Giltburg

By Tim Homfray

The Pavel Haas began its concert with Martinů's Seventh Quartet, the players producing a bustling energy in the first movement, with cellist Peter Jarůšek growling effectively underneath, along with moments of slinky legato, all imbued with dramatic impetus. After the flowing lyricism of the Andante, with its gently lapping arpeggios, there was a nice exuberance to the rhythmically sparkling Allegro vivo, complete with pointed syncopations.

The opening Allegro of Bartók's Fourth Quartet was fierce but never harsh toned, switching splendidly between dynamic and dramatic extremes. The players scurried through the Prestissimo, weightless and driving. Jarůšek's opening soliloquy in the Non troppo lento was strong and spacious, and at the end he and leader Veronika Jarůšková offered a tender duet. The Allegro pizzicato was fingerboard-slapping fun, and the quartet brought tremendous rhythmic élan to the motoric writing in the final Allegro molto, given with crystalline clarity of texture.

Pianist Boris Giltburg joined the Pavel Haas for Dvořák's Second Quintet, at the beginning of which Jarůšek was again in the spotlight, playing the opening melody with full-toned beauty, after which there were strong contrasts of major and minor passages and telling use of rubato. The musicians brought out the many facets of the Andante Dumka: floating easy charm, profundity and the quiet intensity of violist Dana Zemtsov's lament. The Scherzo was effervescent and the finale light, with great lyrical shaping.

Pavel Haas Quartet

the Strad

October 17, 2022

**Edinburgh International Festival 2022:
Pavel Haas Quartet**

By David Kettle

...By the time the **Pavel Haas Quartet** took to the Queen's Hall stage on 23 August, a packed house suggested that audience confidence had returned. And the foursome delivered a scorching performance, bristling with energy and enthusiasm, though gratifyingly measured in Schubert's monumental G major Quartet D887, whose restless wavering between major and minor felt less like the composer's private conflicts between joy and despair, more like mighty collisions between elemental forces. The PHQ players opened with a bold, confident Haydn op.76 no.1, but their account of Martinů's Seventh Quartet, Concerto da camera, was the concert's real revelation. It dashed past you with muscular verve and a slightly manic quality, its neo-classical clarity sharply etched, its imitative lines teased apart, and with cellist Peter Jarůšek providing a gloriously rich, passionate, keening solo in the slow movement.

Pavel Haas Quartet

prestomusic

May 13, 2022

Brahms Quintets from the Pavel Haas Quartet and friends

By James Longstaffe



They say that all good things come to those who wait. Testing this theory to its limits must surely be the members of the Pavel Haas Quartet, who tend to release an album only once every two years or so, and indeed who have not appeared on disc since their recording of three Shostakovich string quartets way back in 2019. Well, the wait is now over, and I'm extremely pleased to say that, with this latest account of two works by Brahms, the aphorism still holds true. As in their earlier offering of quintets by Dvořák, the regular members of the quartet are joined by special guests Boris Giltburg for the Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34, and violist (and former quartet member) Pavel Nikl for the String Quintet in G, Op. 111.

I try hard not to repeat myself too much in these reviews, and yet looking back at my previous musings on their albums of Smetana and Dvořák, I notice several common themes, all of which apply equally to these Brahms performances. Firstly, I always find it extraordinary that a small group can produce such a huge sound, full of raw power and magnificent enormity. Of course, I'm not suggesting they are the only string quartet in existence capable of

making a loud noise, but there's something about the Pavel Haas Quartet that makes them stand out in this regard, not just in terms of actual volume but also the presence and vitality of their tone. A notable example of this is in Op. 34, where, aided by Giltburg's lavishly sonorous contribution, they provide a sumptuous conclusion to the first movement that conjures the resonance of a much larger ensemble.

Another constant thread running through all their recordings is the range and variety of timbres that they deliver, and the ease with which they switch between them, such as in the last movement of Op. 111 with its multiple sudden shifts of dynamics from one extreme to the other, or the first movement of the same piece, where after a gloriously radiant opening (including a delightfully exuberant solo from cellist Peter Jarůšek in the first few bars), the players bring about a complete change of mood for the pianissimo start of the development section that is breathtakingly done, with the entire team altering their colour in the twinkling of an eye. As before, additional violist Pavel Nikl blends in seamlessly, reinforcing greatly the richness of texture that Brahms creates by his use of two violas.

The second movement of Op. 34 demonstrates this even further, with the somewhat hesitant, delicate string motif in the first few bars yielding to a glowing central E major section which allows second violin and viola to bloom with their unison theme. When the hesitant motif reappears first in the piano and then in the viola it's an enchanting moment, setting the stage perfectly for the subsequent steady



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crescendo: as the melody for first violin and cello gradually adds a third and eventually a fourth string voice, the interplay between the parts makes this a truly sublime performance, with each player being permitted to assert their own material

without ever standing in the way of the greater good.

So, as I mentioned at the outset, it has been a long wait to be able to listen to the Pavel Haas Quartet on disc once more, but with these splendid accounts of both quintets they have most certainly not disappointed.

Pavel Haas Quartet



April 23, 2019

Review: The Pavel Haas Quartet at Wigmore Hall, WI

A superbly considered and immaculately executed Radio 3 lunchtime recital of two of Shostakovich's string quartets

By Richard Morrison

It was only a matter of time before the passionate, purposeful Czechs of the Pavel Haas Quartet turned their attention to Shostakovich's 15 string quartets, which they are starting to record. For a group so adept at bringing out the neuroses and tensions even in seemingly restrained music, the anguished chamber music of Shostakovich - into which he poured his darkest and sometimes most unresolved feelings - is obvious repertoire. I'm just surprised they resisted it for so long.

In this superbly considered and immaculately executed Radio 3 lunchtime recital (available on the BBC iPlayer) they tackled the epic Second Quartet, written in 1944 with the war still raging, preceded by the Seventh Quartet from 1960, which, although miniature in scale, is enormous in intensity. Shostakovich dedicated it to the memory of his first wife, but the way the Pavel Haas play it - bleakness giving way to a finale hurled out with terrifying fervour at a blistering pace before collapsing into deep melancholy - it could just as easily be a reflection of a world that

seemed to be hurtling towards nuclear annihilation.

The Second has its frenetic moments too, particularly when the finale is whipped up into a nightmarish passage that sounds as if the quartet is trapped on an out-of-control fairground ride. The heart of this work, however, is the astonishing Recitative and Romance second movement, where the first violin soars - partly in rhapsody, more often in elegy - over held chords. I have never heard it played with as much subtle nuance or richness of timbre as Veronika Jaruskova did here. A packed audience scarcely dared breathe.

Quibbles? Only that the players fell a little short of making this quartet's strangely perfunctory ending sound convincing as a final destination for such charged music. Perhaps that is more Shostakovich's fault. It's almost as if, in this early piece, he has lifted the lid on something that will take another six or seven quartets for him to resolve.





