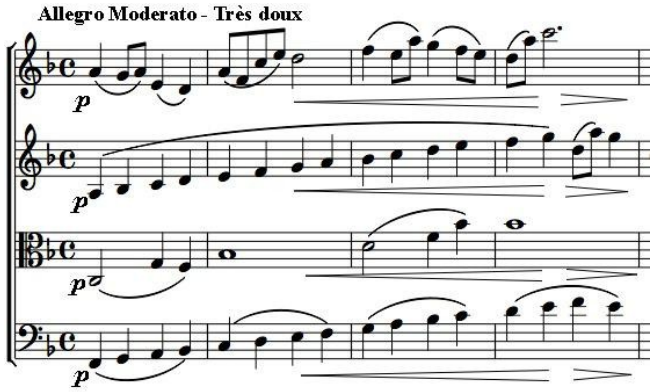
13 Nov 2026 Martinů Quartet

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) String Quartet in F (1903)
Moderato très doux
Assez vif-Très rythmé
Très lent
Vif et agité

Ravel's only string quartet dates from 1902-3 while he was still (aged 28) a student at the Paris Conservatoire. It was dedicated to his teacher Fauré and the first movement was submitted to the annual composition contest at the Conservatoire. The contest's judges rejected Ravel's work, and he was expelled for the third and last time. Fauré was more appreciative, though he did not like the last movement: "*stunted, badly balanced, in fact a failure*." Debussy was more prescient: "*In the name of the gods of Music and for my sake personally, do not touch a note of what you have written.*" First performed in 1904, the quartet was not published until 1910 after Ravel had in fact made some changes. Quite what these changes were, we don't know, since the original score is lost.



The opening (*illustrated*) is one of the most memorable in the quartet literature, transporting at least this listener to the balmy warmth of a French summer. The cello and second violin play a simple rising scale an octave and a third apart, while the viola with another rising figure fills out the harmonies to the first violin's simple tune. In the next four bars the three lower parts just go down a scale. But the overall effect? Magic!



The quartet has great thematic unity, with the two main themes of the first movement returning in various guises in the other three. But the treatment of the material is wonderfully varied – rhythmically, harmonically and in tone-colour. Notice particularly the second theme in the first movement with the first violin and viola two octaves apart (*illustrated*); the exciting pizzicato cross-rhythms of the second movement and the complex 5-beat rhythms of the last.

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) String Quartet No. 2 H.150 (Nov 12, 1925)
Moderato - Allegro vivace
Andante
Allegro - Allegro ma non troppo

It is exactly a year and a day since the centenary of Martinů completing his second string quartet in Berlin. He spent the first decade of his life living in a church bell tower in a small Bohemian town where his father worked as a cobbler, fire-watcher and bell-ringer. At 15, he showed sufficient promise as a violinist for the local community to raise funds to send him to the Prague Conservatory. But he was not a good student: his studies in Prague were a desultory record of poor attendance and suspension resulting in expulsion for 'incorrigible negligence'.

He returned home during WW1 and evaded the draught through a combination of simulated and actual ill-health. However, his composing flourished and his *Czech Rhapsodie* was performed very successfully in 1919 by the Czech Philharmonic in the presence of President Masaryk. Martinů often deputised as a second violin with the orchestra and its European tour which included Geneva, London, and Paris in the same year changed his life.

He really took to Paris and thanks to a small scholarship from the Ministry of Education, returned there in October 1923 to study with Roussel. He never again lived in Czechoslovakia. Paris exposed him to a wide range of musical experiences including jazz and the music of Stravinsky, Satie and members of *Les Six* such as Honegger, Milhaud and Poulenc – influences that you might hear in tonight's second quartet.

The quartet combines some of these new Paris styles – particularly Stravinsky's hard-edged rhythms – with the melodies and rhythms of his native Czech folk music. The short *Moderato* introduction has a simple, sinuous tune on the two violins (*illustrated*) which provides some of the melodic material for the rest of the work. Its harmonies harden and then gently resolve into the *Allegro vivace's* driving energy. Stravinsky-like off-beat jabs contrast with both running triplets and another figure with a sharply dotted rhythm, which are both derived from the opening material. By contrast, the *Andante* middle movement has the despairing intensity that we now associate with Shostakovich. Irregular bar lengths (3,5,3,4,3) and harsh harmonies destroy comfortable familiarity. However, the last movement, a brilliant rondo, restores hope through the syncopated vitality of Czech folk dance rhythms. Towards the end, the first violin puts a stop to the fun in a cadenza which reminds us of the darker world of the slow movement, before agreeing to renewed jollities.



Interval

Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884) String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my Life' (1876)
Allegro vivo appassionato
Allegro moderato à la Polka
Largo sostenuto
Vivace

Smetana, the son of an affluent brewer, heard string quartets played at home, and learned the violin from an early age. As a piano and composition student in Prague he also played in a string quartet for which he wrote arrangements of pieces he had heard played by military bands at promenade concerts. Although he wrote both a string quartet (now lost) at the age of 15, and a passionate piano trio in his early 30s after the death of his favourite daughter, it was not until his last decade that he returned to quartet writing.

In 1874, after conducting Prague's National Provisional Theatre's orchestra for 8 years, Smetana was forced to resign his post because of increasingly troublesome tinnitus. Despite rest and quiet, the noises in his ears became worse and soon he lost all hearing in both ears. In 1876, he moved from Prague to Jabkenice to live with his eldest daughter. His continuing profound deafness did not impair his ability to compose, and soon after arriving in Jabkenice he wrote his first string quartet – what he described as an intimate

confession depicting the course of his life "... using four instruments speaking among themselves in something like a friendly circle".



The work opens (*illustrated*) with a long declamatory solo by the viola. At the first private performance of the work, the viola was played by Dvorák, who had been a violist in Smetana's Prague orchestra. In a letter to a friend Smetana described the autobiographical nature of the work as follows:

> *"My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune . . . The long insistent note in the finale owes its origin to this. It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which in 1874 announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke, because it was so disastrous to me. The second movement, a quasi- polka, brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing. The third movement . . .reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife. The fourth movement describes the discovery that I could treat national elements in music and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret."*

Programme notes by Chris Darwin