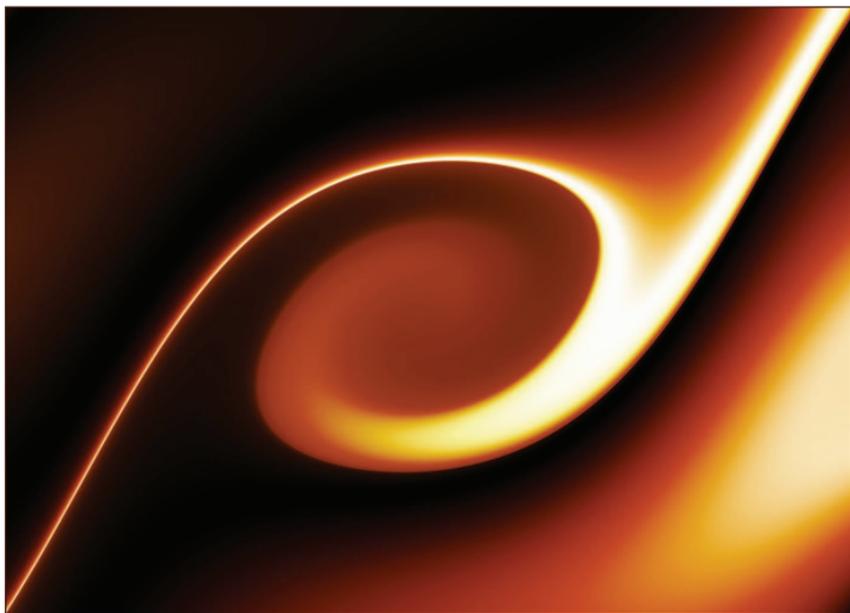




BERG
String Quartet • Lyric Suite
WOLF
Italian Serenade
New Zealand String Quartet



Alban Berg (1885–1935)

String Quartet, Op. 3

Lyric Suite

Hugo Wolf (1860–1903)

Italian Serenade

Alban Berg died at much the same age as did his idol Mahler, and his output is a similarly limited one. Limited in number but not in scope, because, like Mahler's, Berg's catalogue contains few minor works and, unlike that of Mahler, features major contributions to all the principal genres. His chamber music centres on the two works for string quartet that come from complementary periods in his career, but these alone are enough to place him with the foremost exponents of the quartet medium during the first half of the twentieth century.

Arnold Schoenberg was fond of recalling that when the teenage Berg had come to him for lessons in 1904, he was unable to extend his musical thinking beyond songs. It was only with his single-movement *Piano Sonata* of 1908 [Naxos 8.553870] that Berg produced a work fulfilling his teacher's requirements, and which was later published as his Op. 1. If, in this piece, Berg took the chromatic harmony of Wagner and Richard Strauss almost to its limits, he crossed the line in the last of the *Four Songs* (1909) that were to become his Op. 2. Thus it is that his *String Quartet, Op. 3*, completed in 1910 and given its private première the following year, is both a graduation exercise and also the composer's first extended foray into the non-tonal regions that were then being explored by Schoenberg and his older pupil Anton Webern.

A graduation piece it may be, but the musical language of the *String Quartet* is not far removed from that of Berg's maturity. Especially notable in its two-movement form, the salient ideas of the first are developed and intensified in the second, to an extent that the former can be seen as an exposition with the latter functioning as combined development and reprise. While there are precedents for this in some of Beethoven's late quartets, and in two of

Schoenberg's major early achievements (the *First String Quartet* and *First Chamber Symphony*), the process that binds the two movements into a single, overarching entity is here carried through with a rigour and conviction that were to have major implications for the quartet genre over a decade hence.

The first movement opens with a flourish that, along with the halting chords that follow, informs the whole work. A forceful climax, focusing on the flourish, is reached, after which the music quickly dies down. Detached chords usher in a new section that is brusquely curtailed, leaving the instruments to ruminate on a more lyrical motif before a general pause. The activity once more irrupts towards the movement's centre, in what is a freely unfolding reprise (replacing the development section) of the material heard thus far. This builds to the main climax, in which all the main motifs are daringly combined, before a lengthy coda recalls the lyrical motif and the movement fades away regretfully. The second movement opens with explosive activity across the whole quartet, calming so that aspects from the preceding movement can gradually filter through. A yearning motif on violins presently assumes the foreground, then the initial momentum is regained and a powerful climax (the emotional apex, indeed, of the whole piece) is reached. It is here that the flourish from the work's opening is recalled, presaging a return of the yearning motif then an extended coda in which the main motifs are heard in modified guises. The music gains in intensity, with a last surge of energy turning the flourish into a decisive final gesture.

Berg did not return to the string quartet until the summer of 1925, when he began his *Lyric Suite*, completed

in October 1926 and first performed by the Kolisch Quartet in the following January. Again the form is unconventional: six movements, the odd-numbered of which become progressively faster and more disruptive, while the even-numbered ones become progressively slower and more intense. The expressive trajectory of the work towards greater emotional extremes is thus evident at a first hearing. What is not apparent, and remained unclear until long after Berg's death, is that the piece embodies his feelings over the relationship with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, the wife of a family friend and to whom the *Lyric Suite* was secretly dedicated. The final movement is actually a wordless setting of the poem *De profundis clamavi* by Charles Baudelaire and has latterly even been performed as a vocal piece. Such considerations should not detract, though, from the work's abstract mastery: the first in what was undoubtedly a 'golden era' for the string quartet that extended well into the next decade.

The *Allegretto* unfolds with an engaging verve that might well be described as 'jovial'. The texture is one in which all four instruments are closely intertwined; with a repeated-note motif, repeated at key points, the means of ensuring unity over this brief but highly active movement. The *Andante* begins with a sensuous, insinuating idea that is appropriately amorous. Also important is a slyly descending motif that appears at its tail. These are intently evolved either side of a static central passage, the music latterly evincing greater resolve before sinking back into sensuous calm. The *Allegro* is a scherzo whose scurrying outer sections are aptly marked 'mysterious'. Several brief motifs are thrown up during its course, but the movement only takes on greater substance in the central *trio estatico*,

whose impulsive manner is itself swallowed up by a return to the opening music.

The *Adagio* is the work's heart, revealing an emotional depth that is well described as 'passionate'. Heaving chords launch into a maelstrom of emotion that only abates at the movement's still centre, the music then lurching towards a frantic climax before concluding in anxious resignation. The *Presto* is another scherzo, though here the three 'delirious' main sections generate a headlong rhythmic drive. In between are two quietly pulsating trios whose *tenebroso* marking underlines their darkly ominous feel. The second return of the scherzo builds incessantly to the slashing final bars. The *Largo* opens with stealthy pizzicato chords, duly opening out into music whose 'desolate' manner remains. There are several brief interruptions, the last of which draws all four instruments into a whirling ostinato that, having died down, bids the players fall silent one by one as the work fades beyond earshot.

Best known for his songs, Hugo Wolf wrote a fine *String Quartet* that was unheard in his lifetime. He returned to the medium in 1887 with his *Italian Serenade*, a light-hearted piece later orchestrated as the first movement of a larger suite that remained unrealised. Over a lively rhythmic backdrop, the high-spirited main theme is announced. This theme marks off alternating episodes, each of a subtly different nature, with the genial mood always respected. A central passage features humorously rhetorical exchanges between the instruments, then a lilting secondary theme steers the piece to its brief climax, before the return of the main theme and a piquantly understated close.

Richard Whitehouse

New Zealand String Quartet

Acclaimed for its powerful communication, dramatic energy, and beauty of sound, the New Zealand String Quartet has distinguished itself internationally for its imaginative and unique programming, including cycles of composers' music from Mozart to Berg, and the championing of works from New Zealand and the Pacific Rim. They have won praise for their versatility in performing with jazz artists and indigenous musicians as well as for their fresh approach to the great classics of the quartet repertoire. The quartet has made acclaimed débuts in London at the Wigmore Hall, and in New York at the prestigious Frick Collection, and has undertaken concert tours of Korea, North America, and Mexico, including two concerts at the Cervantino International Festival, with some forty concerts in New Zealand alone. The New Zealand String Quartet has been featured on North America's popular public radio programme *St Paul Sunday*, and has recorded for Deutsche Welle, CBC in Canada, and Australia's ABC, as well as regularly appearing on Radio New Zealand's fine music network Concert FM. Their extensive discography includes works from the standard quartet repertoire by composers such as Bartók, Ravel, Debussy, Beethoven, Dvořák, Berg and Wolf, as well as the première recording of the remarkable Zoltan Székely quartet, and numerous works by acclaimed New Zealand composers. They recently began a three-year project for the Naxos label, which will release their complete Mendelssohn quartets. The ensemble's innovative collaborations have included performances of concertos with the BBC Scottish Symphony, the Auckland Chamber Orchestra and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestras. They have performed with a number of internationally renowned artists. Dedicated teachers as well as performers, the group has been Quartet-in-Residence at Victoria University of Wellington, now the New Zealand School of Music, since 1991. In North America they have been artist/teachers-in-residence at the Banff Center, Quartet Fest West, and the Quartet Programme at Bucknell in Pennsylvania.

From left to right:

Rolf Grelsten (cello)

Gillian Ansell (viola)

Helene Pohl (1st violin)

Douglas Beilman (2nd violin)





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Playing Time
57:28
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Alban Berg's two works for string quartet alone are enough to place him with the foremost exponents of the quartet medium during the first half of the twentieth century. The *String Quartet*, Op. 3, completed in 1910, is both a graduation exercise and also the composer's first extended foray into the non-tonal regions that were then being explored by Schoenberg and Webern. Berg's highly expressive *Lyric Suite*, inspired by his love-affair with the wife of a family friend, is notable for its unconventional six-movement form, the odd-numbered of which become progressively faster and more disruptive, while the even-numbered ones become progressively slower and more intense. Hugo Wolf's *Italian Serenade* is a lighthearted piece later orchestrated as the first movement of a larger suite.

Alban BERG (1885–1935)	Hugo WOLF (1860–1903)
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BERG: String Quartet, Op. 3 **21:45**

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|---|-----------------|-------|
| 1 | Langsam | 10:13 |
| 2 | Mässige Viertel | 11:31 |

BERG: Lyric Suite **28:31**

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|---|-------------------------|------|
| 3 | I. Allegretto gioviale | 3:02 |
| 4 | II. Andante amoroso | 5:46 |
| 5 | III. Allegro misterioso | 3:23 |
| 6 | IV. Adagio appassionato | 5:41 |
| 7 | V. Presto delirando | 4:39 |
| 8 | VI. Largo desolato | 5:58 |

9 **WOLF: Italian Serenade** **6:56**

New Zealand String Quartet

Helene Pohl, Douglas Beilman, violins • Gillian Ansell, viola • Rolf Grelsten, cello

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