

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 10 February 2025
1.00pm

Sol Gabetta cello
Kristian Bezuidenhout piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Op. 99 (1886)
*I. Allegro vivace • II. Adagio affettuoso •
III. Allegro passionato • IV. Allegro molto*

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Cello Sonata No. 2 in D Op. 58 (1843)
*I. Allegro assai vivace • II. Allegretto
scherzando • III. Adagio • IV. Molto
allegro e vivace*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Robert Schumann once referred to **Brahms's** chamber works as 'veiled symphonies', and so it is with this; a wide-ranging sonata that takes us on a grand journey. Written 20 years after his first cello sonata, Brahms endowed this work, which he wrote in 1886, with a grand, four-movement design. He composed it during a productive summer spent far away from the heat and clamour of Vienna, in the ancient Swiss town of Thun, set in the foothills of the Alps. The cellist Brahms had in mind was the great Robert Hausmann, famed for his stamina and expansive tone. It was a happy time for Brahms. His career, by that point, was well established: he was world-famous, having completed his Fourth Symphony, and there is a confidence and assuredness to the writing that reflects this.

Yet surprisingly, the première in November 1886 received a lukewarm response, with some commentators apparently bewildered by the impassioned melodies and rich piano writing. Hugo Wolf, best known today for his characterful art songs, lamented, 'What is music, today, what is harmony, what is melody, what is rhythm, what is form, if this... is seriously accepted as music?'. Fortunately, history has disagreed with Wolf's view, and the Sonata has been adopted by cellists – and arranged for various other instruments – thanks to its drama and melodic charm.

The opening *Allegro vivace* surges into life with unstoppable momentum and bubbling energy, with a leaping cello theme, and tremulous triplets in the piano. The heroics give way to music of great poignancy and tenderness in the slow movement, in which Brahms renders the delicate interplay between the two instruments in delicate colours. The cello begins with soft *pizzicati* ('plucked notes'), picking out a gently plodding bass line which is then taken up in the piano. The tone becomes more lyrical, and at times troubled, but always sweetened with harmonies that ultimately speak of consolation and peace. The tumultuous *Allegro passionato* that follows picks up the triplet theme and forthright temperament of the opening movement, with emphatic contrasts of triple and duple rhythms. A central section engages the two instruments in a fleeting, curious dance of contrary motion, with a descending cello melody synchronising with an ascending bass line in the piano part, before the impassioned opening returns. In the songlike final movement, the piano and cello interweave musical ideas in a vibrant and dynamic exchange, bringing the sonata to a triumphant conclusion. It is telling that the work was written for 'Piano and Violoncello': this Sonata is a showcase for two musical equals, working in partnership together.

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg in 1809 to Jewish parents who later adopted Christianity as their religion, baptising Felix as a Lutheran in 1816. His musical prowess was clear from an early age. He was a precocious composer, composing multiple

symphonies for string orchestra, and no fewer than five operas while still a boy. Following a wide-ranging education in Berlin and Paris (at the age of 12, he played the piano for the great German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, with whom he struck up an unlikely friendship), he became active as a conductor, playing an integral role in the revival of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. He also developed an affection for Great Britain, visiting its shores no fewer than ten times during his short lifetime, and became a favourite composer of Queen Victoria.

By his early 30s, the era when he composed this cello sonata, he had already achieved remarkable success, with such enduring compositions as his astonishing String Octet (written when he was only 16), the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826), and his *Italian Symphony* (1833) already to his name. This Sonata dates from 1842, and was first performed in the first half of 1843; a time when Mendelssohn's personal and professional life was in flux. Having been lured to Berlin in the service of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, he found himself dissatisfied with his role, and returned to Leipzig with his wife, Cécile Charlotte Sophie Jeanrenaud, and their children. There he resumed his conducting duties at the city's Gewandhaus. His mother's death in December 1842 brought home the realisation, voiced in a letter to his brother, that 'we are children no longer'. Despite – or perhaps, because of – this, the Sonata we hear today is full of life and energy. It was dedicated to Count Mateusz Wielhorski (1794–1866), one of the founding fathers of Russian cello playing.

Torrents of triplets ripple and flow through the piano part, accompanying a jubilant, singing cello line that soars with irrepressible, upward-striving energy. A more turbulent, minor-key section follows, although the galloping major-key theme of the opening soon makes a jubilant return. The *Allegretto scherzando* is playful and light-footed, teetering between major and minor keys, restraint and abandon, and mystery and open-heartedness, in a joyful exchange between the two players. The *Adagio* opens with a hymn-like succession of chords, marked in the score as being played *sempre arpeggiando col pedale* ('arpeggiated and with pedal!'). This creates a rich and luscious sound-world, somewhere between a Bach chorale and a harp serenade, over which the cello adds an expressive, searching melodic line. Marked *appassionato ed animato*, Mendelssohn's string writing in this (and indeed, other movements), anticipates the direct, emotional music of the Romantic era. The final movement bursts with rapid-fire exchanges between the cello and piano, with only the briefest moments of calm before the finale, an exuberant expression of musical virtuosity.

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