

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 10 January 2023
7.30pm

Frank Peter Zimmermann violin
Martin Helmchen piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 100 (1886)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Andante tranquillo - Vivace •
III. Allegretto grazioso, quasi Andante*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Violin Sonata No. 2 BB85 (1922)

I. Molto moderato • II. Allegretto

Interval

Johannes Brahms

Clarinet Sonata in E flat Op. 120 No. 2 (transcribed for violin)
(1894)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Allegro appassionato •
III. Andante con moto - Allegro*

Violin Sonata No. 3 in D minor Op. 108 (1886-8)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio •
III. Un poco presto e con sentimento •
IV. Presto agitato*

ENCORE:

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)

Romance for violin and piano (1930) *world première*

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During his schooldays in Pozsony, today's Bratislava, Béla Bartók regularly attended chamber music performances hosted by the city's prominent families. 'Many of the pieces he became acquainted with there contributed to his musical education,' noted his mother in her diary. 'He liked going there because he encountered unfamiliar compositions.' When the teenager was asked to name his favourite composers, he immediately replied: 'Beethoven, Bach, Brahms'. Brahms's use of stylised Hungarian or pseudo-Hungarian folk melodies, often sentimental popular tunes, ultimately proved at odds with Bartók's growing desire to forge a distinctive identity for new Hungarian music. Yet both men pursued ideals of thematic coherence and formal unity in their compositions, as the works in this evening's programme show.

Brahms spent the summer of 1886 in the Swiss village of Hofstetten, now part of the municipality of Thun, in modest rooms rented from a local grocer. Here he completed his Second Violin Sonata Op. 100 and also sketched his Second Cello Sonata Op. 99 and Third Violin Sonata Op. 108. Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, Brahms's friend and former piano pupil, caught the new violin sonata's nature in her concise description: it was, she wrote, 'constructed in the plainest possible way from ideas at once striking and simple, fresh and young in their emotional qualities, ripe and wise in their incredible compactness'. The work owes its formal clarity to the song-like character of the themes of its three movements and the lucidity of their development across the piece.

Early commentators spotted the similarity of the first movement's opening theme to Walther's 'Prize Song' from Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. It is not known whether the allusion was intentionally made; it is certain, however, that the theme, first stated by the piano, offers rich material for the movement's central development section, which flows seamlessly out of its exposition. Brahms, the master of thematic transformation, here modifies his first theme with ingenious changes to its rhythmic structure before recalling the lyricism (if not the melodic line) of the movement's second theme. Two characteristic moods alternate in the *Andante tranquillo*, in which a wistful theme is confronted by the music of a sprightly triple-time scherzo. Following the *Andante's* final return, the movement closes with a sudden and uplifting echo of its scherzo theme. The rondo finale's principal theme, described by the lifelong Brahmsian Donald Tovey as 'one of the great cantabiles for the fourth [G] string', establishes the lyricism of a movement marked by formal ingenuity and great expressive intensity.

Bartók wrote his two violin sonatas respectively in 1921 and 1922 for the Hungarian-born violinist Jelly d'Arányi. Whereas Brahms makes a virtue of thematic integration in his Op. 100 sonata, Bartók's Second Violin Sonata appears to do the opposite by presenting parts for violin and piano that coexist as independent entities built from contrasting material. The two instruments behave like close companions engrossed in strikingly different thoughts; the work's tonality,

meanwhile, reinforces the dichotomy in its shifts around the tritone C to F sharp. Recent scholarship suggests that Bartók derived the sonata's two-movement, slow-fast structure from a pair of Romanian peasant songs, 'When the shepherd lost his sheep' and 'When the shepherd found his sheep'. The improvisatory opening violin theme certainly evokes the Romanian *hora lungă* or 'long song', an ornamented incantation marked by fluid rhythms and melodic freedom. That freedom gives way to greater thematic organisation as the movement unfolds and the initial theme is recalled, albeit with rhapsodic variations. The second movement's momentum is sustained across a sequence of repeated metrical units, akin to the stanzas of a poem, and energised by the violin's scintillating shifts of register and tone colours.

At the beginning of 1894, Brahms was overcome by grief at the loss of close friends and thoughts of his own mortality. He drew solace from the springtime festival of chamber music organised in Vienna to mark his 61st birthday, where he was once again inspired by the playing of Richard Mühlfeld, principal clarinettist in the Meiningen orchestra. The composer devoted part of his summer break at Bad Ischl to writing two sonatas for clarinet and piano. The second of the pair, played tonight in its transcription for violin, casts cares aside with its genial opening movement, a light-hearted essay in sonata form. Brahms's fascination with Hungarian music surfaces in the trio section of the *Allegro appassionato*, reminiscent in style of his song 'Magyarisch' Op. 46 No. 2. The theme of the finale's carefully crafted set of variations may have been modelled on that of Robert Schumann's *Andante and Variations* for two pianos Op. 46 in tribute to Brahms's great champion and friend.

With four movements and a striking range of musical ideas, Brahms's Third Violin Sonata is considerably grander in scale and scope than its predecessor. Yet the economy of its thematic development reflects its composer's ability to build large musical structures without sacrificing formal clarity and expressive consistency. The work, sketched by the shores of Lake Thun in 1886, appears not to have been completed until later. Dark emotions and stormy outbursts belong to the world of the D minor sonata's outer movements, while its middle movements stand as ideal models of concision and concentration. The *Adagio* opens with an expansive D major melody that receives subtle variation over the movement's course. Brahms upholds the virtue of simplicity in the third movement, which remains light in nature despite a brief shift into more turbulent emotional waters at its centre. Thematic variation, a hallmark of the first movement's development sections, is woven into the finale's fabric, a sonata rondo in which Brahms explores the contrasts of two main themes – one impulsive, the other hymn-like in nature – and transforms their characters as the movement unfolds.

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