WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 10 January 2026
1.00pm

Fenella Humphreys violin
Nicholas Daniel oboe
Martin Roscoe piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)	Violin Sonata in B flat K454 (1784) *I. Largo – Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegretto*
Alasdair Nicolson (b.1961)	Magnus III: Distant Echoes (2016)
Dorothy Howell (1898-1982)	Air, Variations & Finale (1949) *I. Air • II. Variations • III. Finale*
Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)	Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Op. 13 (1875-6) *I. Allegro molto • II. Andante •* *III. Allegro vivo • IV. Allegro quasi presto*

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Mozart's earliest violin sonatas, products of his childhood travels around Europe, belonged to an evolving species of composition. Jean-Jacques Rousseau described the sonata in 1768 as 'consisting of three or four movements in contrasting characters … [being] to instruments roughly what the cantata is to voices.' By the time Mozart created his Violin Sonata in B flat K454 in 1784, the genre had become a means for two players to display their virtuosity and expressive artistry. He seized the chance to write a new work for the 23-year-old Mantuan musician Regina Strinasacchi, one of the finest violinists of the age, and accompanied her for its first performance at Vienna's Kärtnerthor Theatre. Mozart, pressed for time to notate the keyboard score before the première, played his part from memory but placed a blank sheet of paper on the instrument to fool the audience.

The Violin Sonata in B flat opens with a slow introduction, an aria-without-words ripe with cantabile melodies. The singing style flows into the subsequent *Allegro*, which grows from a simple first theme into a sonata movement of considerable charm and substance. Although Mozart crossed out *Adagio* and replaced it with *Andante* at the head of the second movement, its music conveys the seriousness of the slowest of slow movements; violin and piano serve here as equal partners in developing an intense, utterly cogent musical argument. The *Rondo* finale strikes up with a catchy violin theme, which is adopted by the piano and extended by both instruments before the first in a series of brief episodes, each of which shares the rondo theme's exuberance.

Magnus III: Distant Echoes was first performed in 2016 during 'Remembering Max', a concert given in memory of Peter Maxwell Davies at St Magnus Cathedral, Orkney. Alasdair Nicolson's elegiac work, written for Fenella Humphreys and Nicholas Daniel, evokes the spirit of *Nobilis humilis*, the 13th-century polyphonic hymn to St Magnus, the Christian leader martyred by his warrior cousin, Hakon of Norway. The hymn's two-part counterpoint, an early example of *cantus gemellus* or 'twin song', leaves its imprint on Nicolson's writing for violin and oboe, notably so in the oboe's first entry and the way the two instruments share and develop common ideas. The composer's chosen subtitle for the work, 'The mystery of being and time', comes from a poem written for Maxwell Davies's 60th birthday by his frequent collaborator, the Orcadian author George Mackay Brown.

Countless students at the Royal Academy of Music received a thorough training in harmony and counterpoint from Dorothy Howell. Her more remarkable achievements as composer, once celebrated, then neglected, have surfaced again in recent years, thanks not least to Leah Broad's book *Quartet*, a study of four pioneering women composers, and the persuasive advocacy of performers such as Rebecca Miller, Danny Driver and Fenella Humphreys. *Air, Variations & Finale*, composed in 1949, postdates the period when her public profile was at its height. The work's rich romanticism proved at odds with the music of the postwar avantgarde and its influential promoters. Howell's score, like those of virtually all her works, was saved from destruction by a niece; the piece remained unpublished until 2009, when it was resurrected from a 'rough' manuscript preserved in the archives of the Dorothy Howell Trust.

Howell's gift for melodic invention is clear from the opening of *Air, Variations & Finale*. Her plaintive oboe tune, soon echoed by violin, and hints of modal harmony in the piano form a distinctive platform for the following set of five variations. The first variation's energetic call-and-response between violin and oboe leads to the scherzando swagger of its successor which in turn gives way to the melancholy slow central variation. Howells dismisses its unease with the fourth variation's spiky staccato figures, albeit within the work's prevailing key of D minor. The final variation, marked *Andante grazioso*, begins with a heart-on-sleeve fiddle melody around which the oboe weaves delicate answering phrases. Howell's experience as a concert pianist informs the *Finale*'s dramatic opening, the imposing power of which lingers through subsequent solo cadenzas for violin and oboe and becomes embedded in the clear-cut rhythmic motifs that lead to a bold return of the *Air*.

The conservative music publishers of Paris unanimously rejected Gabriel Fauré's Violin Sonata in A, seemingly unsettled by its then-radical combination of classical and romantic elements and bold shifts between chromatic and modal harmonies. Camille Clerc, a wealthy industrialist, lobbied the Leipzig firm of Breitkopf und Härtel to accept his young friend's novel work. On 5 November 1876, he wrote to Fauré with good news: 'To sum up, these people offer to publish the work at their expense on condition that they retain the copyright. I believe that from your point of view this result is a flattering one by their proposition, and it is obvious that your work has been appreciated by them.' The company's good opinion of the sonata was shared by the enthusiastic audience at its première, given in January 1877 at the Salle Pleyel in Paris under the banner of the recently established Société Nationale de Musique.

Camille Saint-Saëns, Fauré's close friend and former teacher, praised the sonata for its 'formal novelty, quest, refinement and modulation, curious sonorities, use of the most unexpected rhythms and … touches of boldness.' Those qualities register in its first movement and are powerfully reinforced in the *Allegro vivo*, with its rhythmic energy and strikingly free phrase lengths and placement of metrical stresses. The expansive D minor slow movement, underpinned by a finely crafted and subtle accompaniment, alternates in mood between impassioned lyricism and serene stillness. Fauré's deliberate departure throughout the work from the conventions of sonata-form harmony complement the enigmatic nature of his pithy themes and their development.