

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 10 May 2022 7.30pm

James Ehnes violin, viola

Andrew Armstrong piano



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A minor Op. 105 (1851)

I. Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck • II. Allegretto • III. Lebhaft

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Viola Sonata in F minor Op. 120 No. 1 (1894)

*I. Allegro appassionato • II. Andante un poco adagio •
III. Allegretto grazioso • IV. Vivace*

Interval

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Op. 78 (1878-9)

I. Vivace ma non troppo • II. Adagio • III. Allegro molto moderato

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Although the auspicious first meeting between Brahms and the Schumanns is usually recorded as being in 1853, the three had already encountered each other in 1850 in Hamburg. Brahms apparently offered a package of compositions to Robert which he did not look through. We shouldn't judge either party too harshly, since the Schumanns were of celebrity status at the time, and Brahms a shy teenager. Yet Schumann's seniority was not necessarily indicative of his having already experimented with all the musical genres available to him, and it was only in 1851 that he completed his Violin Sonata No. 1 in A minor Op. 105. This was most likely begun at the prompting of Ferdinand David, Mendelssohn's concert master in Leipzig, who wrote to Schumann in January 1850, 'I love your *Fantasiestücke* for piano and clarinet very much; why haven't you made anything for violin and piano? There is such a lack of new, clever things and I don't know anyone who could do it better than you.'

Schumann set about writing something for David in September 1851, composing a three-movement Sonata in just five days, and tweaking it ahead of its public première in March 1852 – given, of course, by David and Clara Schumann. The opening movement is highly reminiscent of the 'fantasie' pieces that David had admired, dark and brooding, with the violinist instructed to play at one point on the G string to emphasize the dark colours of the instrument's lower range. The playfully tentative second movement seems to recall Schumann's early piano works, with its rapid juxtapositions of light-heartedness, naughty play and profound sorrow. After this little respite, the closing movement surges forward over a tonic pedal, the rattling semiquavers of the first pages reminiscent of Baroque models – indeed, in the years immediately after the composition of this sonata, Schumann composed piano accompaniments for several of Bach's cello and violin works.

Schumann was 42 when his First Violin Sonata was given its public première; Brahms was in his 60s when he wrote his Viola Sonata in F minor Op. 120 No. 1. Although he had taken the decision to retire in the early 1890s, he was prompted to continue by his encounter with the virtuoso clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld. Mühlfeld inspired two sonatas, a trio and a quintet over the next few years.

The sonatas were written in the summer of 1894, and several private performances followed, allowing Brahms to share the pieces with his close friends and make various adjustments – presumably steered in part by Mühlfeld, since Brahms had no personal experience of playing the clarinet – before they were given in public in 1895. Such was their reception that both had to be encored at the first performance, and within a few months, Brahms had finished preparing the scores for publication. Ever the pragmatist – and a clear admirer of the rich tones of the viola – Brahms issued the pieces as *2 Sonaten für Clarinette (oder Bratsche) und Pianoforte*.

There is a sense of grandeur in the opening gestures of this F minor sonata, and Brahms's *Allegro* is earnest and impassioned in equal measure, building to dramatic climaxes and making use, towards the movement's close, of a subtle dislocation between players that makes it feel, for one heart-stopping instant, as if the two are out of sync with each other. After such frenetic activity, the following *Andante* is exactly the opposite: the viola floats over long piano chords, bass notes dropping gently from the pianist's left hand. A graceful *Allegretto* follows, opening with the swing and sway of a waltz, but soon announcing the livelier stamp of a folk dance. The closing *Vivace* bursts on the scene full of bounce and smiles – but with plenty of opportunities for soaring, singing lines for both players, and a final flourish to end the work.

The closing work in tonight's programme, Brahms's Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Op. 78, lies roughly 20 years after Schumann's sonata and before Brahms's clarinet music. But despite the numbering of this piece, it's clear from the reminiscences of his composition student Gustav Jenner that this was far from Brahms's first attempt at such a duo sonata – in fact, Jenner tells us that it was the *fourth* violin sonata that Brahms had composed. 'Three previous ones were suppressed because they did not pass his criticism.'

The inspiration behind these pieces was one of Brahms's oldest and dearest friends, the distinguished violinist Joseph Joachim. In addition, the final movement is based upon the song 'Regenlied' Op. 59 No. 3, a particular favourite of Clara Schumann – and in effect this is a work built backwards, since the opening dotted rhythm of the 'Regenlied' finale is already present in the very first bars of the opening *Vivace*, a richly expansive movement in which the low-register chords of the piano gradually open and blossom across the keyboard. The central *Adagio* is later recalled in the finale, so that each movement is bound and united by song.

The sonata was begun in the summer of 1878, when Brahms was visiting Clara Schumann's son Felix – himself a violinist – in Palermo. Felix had been sent there in the hope that it would improve his health after a serious illness, but the 24-year-old died the following year. When Brahms sent the sonata to Clara a few months later, he revealed that the slow movement was written with Felix in mind. 'I received [your sonata] today,' she wrote in her reply, 'and naturally I played through it right away and afterwards, out of joy, cried a great deal over it... Many others could perhaps understand it and speak about it better, but no one could feel it more than I do.'

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