

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 11 November 2021 7.30pm

**James Ehnes** violin

**Andrew Armstrong** piano



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

**Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

Scherzo in C minor from *F.A.E. Sonata* (1853)

**Robert Schumann** (1810-1856)

Violin Sonata No. 3 in A minor WoO. 27/WoO. 2 (1853)

*I. Ziemlich langsam • II. Intermezzo • III. Scherzo • IV. Finale*

Interval

**Robert Schumann**

Märchenbilder Op. 113 (1851)

*Nicht schnell • Lebhaft • Rasch •*

*Langsam, mit melancholischem Ausdruck*

**Johannes Brahms**

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*

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On 30 September 1853, the 20-year-old Johannes Brahms knocked on the door of the Schumann residence in Düsseldorf. He had enjoyed a busy summer: chosen by the Austro-Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi to act as his accompanist on a tour of northern Germany, Brahms had not only gained professional experience in this role, but also met several notable musical personalities on his travels. The most significant encounter was with another violinist, Joseph Joachim, with whom Brahms immediately struck up a warm friendship. It was thanks to Joachim's encouragement and letter of recommendation that he found himself on the Schumanns' doorstep that September. And unfortunately, neither Robert nor Clara were at home!

The next day yielded the meeting that Brahms had sought, and was revelatory for all. He agreed to take up lodgings nearby so that he could visit daily, and the following weeks were a happy time of music making and wide-ranging conversation. Around the middle of October, the idea was hatched of composing a special work as a surprise for Joachim, who was coming to visit a few weeks later. Robert recruited his pupil Albert Dietrich and Brahms to contribute movements to a sonata, and the piece was to be based on Joachim's motto 'Frei aber einsam' ('Free but lonely') – F.A.E. The completed work was presented to Joachim on his arrival and he played it with Clara Schumann, correctly guessing who was responsible for each movement: Dietrich the first, Robert the second and finale, and Brahms the Scherzo in C minor. It is with the Scherzo that we begin tonight, a bundle of explosive energy replete with the hammering 'Fate' rhythm of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. But it is curiously lacking in any appearances of Joachim's motto.

In the days after Joachim's visit, Robert Schumann decided to recycle the two movements he had composed for this occasion piece, and supplement it with two more. The result was his Violin Sonata No. 3 in A minor, and Joachim seems to have been similarly delighted with this new piece – but he never performed it in public, and in the ensuing tumult of Robert's attempted suicide and removal to the sanatorium at Endenich in early 1854, the Sonata was caught up among a number of recent compositions which Clara feared might bear the 'taint' of her husband's mental illness. Although she considered a partial publication of the Sonata in 1859, several years after Robert's death, she seems to have been dissuaded by Joachim and others. The first public performance of this piece, then, took place here at Wigmore Hall – on 20 March 1956, the centenary of Robert's death, and the same year that the score was first published. Gerhard Seitz and Margaret Kitchin performed the piece to mixed reviews, as critics were still highly sceptical about late Schumann even one hundred years later.

Certainly the grandly rhetorical opening of this piece might seem austere to those expecting the lush melodies of Schumann's earlier

music; but as the movement unfolds, those familiar textures and gestures are still in evidence even as he experiments with a leaner means of musical development. The dreamy *Intermezzo* calls out Joachim's motto, 'F-A-E', in the piano's left hand and the violin's opening phrase; whilst the brisk *Scherzo* scampers up the keyboard and across the violin strings, the players now and then permitted brief lyrical outbursts. The F.A.E. finale recalls the dramatic chords of the work's opening, now moving in the opposite direction, to propel the players into a passionate and lively *allegro* and a major-key resolution to the whole.

Schumann's *Märchenbilder* Op. 113 date from 1851, several years before his first meeting with Brahms. They were written for Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, who led the city orchestra in Düsseldorf for which Schumann acted as music director – but the pieces were composed for *viola* and piano, with the violin as a workable alternative, so Wasielewski was evidently comfortable on both instruments. The cycle of poetic miniatures was a favourite model for Schumann – there are other roughly contemporary sets for clarinet, cello and oboe, too – but the mention here of 'fairytales' in the title gives us a sense of a particular kind of narrative, even if Schumann did not specify the exact details. The first piece seems anxious and anticipatory, perhaps a character trapped or in danger; whilst in the second our hero sets out on his horse to face adventure (with various contrasting episodes along the way). The furious energy of the third seems to hint at high peril, and one might have reasonably expected the set to close with a sense of triumph. But the fourth piece is marked 'Slowly, with a melancholy expression', and despite its major key and gentle lyricism, there is a feeling too that something has been lost.

Robert Schumann died in 1856. The final piece in tonight's programme was begun exactly 30 years later, in the summer of 1886, when his young protégé – now the leading composer of symphonic and chamber works in Austro-Germany – was on holiday in Switzerland. During this highly productive summer in Thun, Brahms worked on his Violin Sonata in D minor Op. 108 alongside several other chamber pieces, and he later completed it in the autumn of 1888. This is the only one of Brahms's violin sonatas to have four movements, each taut and economical, yet featuring moments of great beauty and lyricism. The restless *Allegro* is particularly striking for the extent to which Brahms uses the extremes of the piano's register to rebalance the interplay of the pianist's hands with the violinist's line. The achingly beautiful *Adagio* which follows is simplicity itself, whilst the brief, light-footed third movement is followed by a *Sturm und Drang* finale.

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