

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 12 July 2026
7.30pm

Adrian Brendel cello
Dénes Várjon piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 5 No. 2 (1796)

*I. Adagio sostenuto ed espressivo • II. Allegro molto più
tosto presto • III. Rondo. Allegro*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor Op. 38 (1862-5)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Allegretto quasi menuetto •
III. Allegro*

Interval

György Kurtág (b.1926)

Les Adieux (in Janáček's Manier) from *Játékok VI* (pub. 1997)

Az hit... from *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza Op. 7* (1998)

Preludium és korál (Prelude and Chorale) from *Játékok V*
(pub. 1997)

Pilinszky János: Gérard de Nerval from *Signs, Games and
Messages* (1989-97)

No. 1 A la mémoire de György Szoltsányi from *Trois in
memoriam* (1988-90)

Népdalféle (Im Volkston) from *Signs, Games and Messages*

No. 2 Hommage tardif à Karskaya from *Trois in memoriam*

Arnyak from *Signs, Games and Messages*

No. 3 In memoriam Maurice Fleuret from *Trois in memoriam*

Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960)

Cello Sonata in B flat minor Op. 8 (1899)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Scherzo. Vivace assai •
III. Adagio non troppo • IV. Tema con variazioni. Allegro
moderato*



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The story of the cello-piano duo begins in Potsdam in 1796, when **Beethoven** was visiting the court of the cellophile Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm II. Right away Beethoven recognised how the cello would have to sing without getting mired in the piano's left-hand harmony and how the differences between low-register string instrument and keyboard could be opportunities.

He brought the king two sonatas, of which the second starts with a solid G minor chord that sets the stakes high. The subjects are then assembled: a falling scale in dotted rhythm, introduced by the piano, and a twist of cello melody. The sonata is a little ambiguous as to whether its slow opening is an introduction to the main *Allegro* or a self-standing slow movement; probably the latter.

The next movement, whose marking means 'Allegro molto, or rather Presto', moves into triple time, with a songlike main theme. This arrives at a cadence – poignant? wistful? – that recurs and seems to impel agitation. The second subject is also songlike while offering appropriate contrast and opening a broad field within which this long movement can extend itself, through a development sporting a new melody, the expected recapitulation and a coda that finally swivels into G major. This is the key also of the *Rondo* finale, whose principal theme belongs to the piano. The cello's many efforts to get on board are part of the fun.

Coming almost 70 years later, the **Brahms** work, too, stands at a beginning, as the first duo sonata he published. It starts with an *Allegro* that is very much *non troppo*, almost a slow movement, and thus obviating the need for a separate movement of that type – though Brahms originally drafted one. The second subject, with oscillating fifths, is introduced briefly, even curtly. Any sense of imbalance is, however, immediately effaced by the development, which treats this subject at length before going on to the first theme and leading straightforwardly into the recapitulation, which closes in the major.

If the exposition repeat is taken, this movement will occupy around half the work's total duration. It is followed by a delicious example of Brahmsian neoclassicism, a minuet in A minor that wakes up to itself as being in the age of Darwin and moves into a wistful trio in F sharp minor that is almost a variation of the minuet, which duly returns.

Also in an antiquarian spirit, Brahms begins the finale fugally, modelling his subject on *Contrapunctus XVII* from Bach's *Art of Fugue*. This imitation game between the instruments continues pretty much all the way, except for a lyrical episode. There is something relentless about all this quasi-fugality, with its E minor tonality and driving 12/8 rhythm, but also something humorous.

A century and more has passed in the interval, bringing us to some of the *Játékok* (Playthings) for piano **Kurtág** has been writing since 1973, interspersed with pieces from the cello volume of his parallel *Signs, Games and Messages*. None extend beyond three minutes.

'Les Adieux (In Janáček's Manier)': A typical Kurtág gesture of farewell is made with reference much less to the

Beethoven sonata than to Janáček's folksong-bathed style.

'Az hit...': The cello sings a soprano line from the composer's *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* whose words speak of the faith ('Az hit') as alive inside the believer.

'Prelude and Chorale': A mostly abrupt prelude, dating back to 1962, has a searching five-part chorale added in 1981 dedicated to an ordained music scholar, Benjámín Rajeczky, who had a particular interest in Gregorian chant.

'Pilinszky János: Gérard de Nerval': Pilinszky's poem is on de Nerval's suicide. Like a song, the tiny piece has a refrain, which might suggest the *Sarabande* of Bach's Fifth Suite.

'A la mémoire de György Szoltsányi': A pianist who left Hungary and became known as Georges Solchany is remembered in vestiges of melody within implacable tolling.

'Népdalféle' (Folksonglike): Folksong, for Kurtág, is an ideal.

'Hommage tardif à Karskaya': Ida Karskaya was a Russian-born painter who spent almost her whole life in Paris. Jean-Claude Macadé's summary resonates with Kurtág's homage piece: 'Her pictorial prism consists in the colour grey...; an ash grey in which black and white are the main protagonists; a luminous grey that opens up onto metaphysical landscapes.'

'Arnyak' (Shadows): A tuneful mumbling. Ominous? Comic?

'In memoriam Maurice Fleuret': Completing a little group of 'Three In Memoriam' with those for Szoltsányi and Karskaya, a chorale for the left-hand regrets the passing of one who was a live wire in French new-music circles.

Going back now a century, we arrive at the sonata by a senior Hungarian, **Dohnányi**, for whom Brahms, not Webern, was the Viennese master to watch. Dohnányi had been praised by Brahms for his Piano Quintet, which he wrote when he was 17. This Cello Sonata comes from four years later, when his life as a travelling virtuoso had taken off. Much of it he composed in trains and hotel rooms on a two-month tour of Britain that ended with the work's first performance, in London, with Ludwig Lebell, an Austrian cellist who taught for decades at TCM.

The work starts with what sounds like an old memory before it introduces its main themes, stormy and sunny. This 'old memory' recurs, notably before the second part of the movement, which recapitulates and develops at the same time. Next comes the *Scherzo*, Mendelssohnian, in the major, with a quiet song for trio. The slow movement provides space for more singing, from both instruments, before a theme in B flat major arrives to set the finale going through nine variations, of which the seventh recalls the *Scherzo* and the eighth is an adagio in E flat minor.

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