WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 12 October 2023
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Pauline and Ian Howat

Boris Giltburg piano
Alina Ibragimova violin

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)	Violin Sonata No. 1 in A minor (1897)
Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)	Violin Sonata No. 2 in D Op. 94bis (1944) *I. Moderato • II. Scherzo. Presto •* *III. Andante • IV. Allegro con brio*
	Interval
Sergey Prokofiev	Violin Sonata No. 1 in F minor Op. 80 (1938-46) *I. Andante assai • II. Allegro brusco •* *III. Andante • IV. Allegrissimo*
Maurice Ravel	Violin Sonata No. 2 in G (1923-7) *I. Allegretto • II. Blues. Moderato •* *III. Perpetuum mobile. Allegro*

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Ravel did not acknowledge the Violin Sonata in A in his catalogue of works, for which reason the G major Sonata is often thought of as his only contribution to the genre. In fact the 'Sonata No. 1' was not published until almost 40 years after his death, confusingly as Op. posth., suggesting it was a very late work. Quite the opposite: it was a product of Ravel's student years, completed in 1897 when he was a member of Gabriel Fauré's class at the Paris Conservatoire. It was Ravel's second stint at the Conservatoire, since two years earlier he had failed his initial exams and been chucked out.

The piece is in one movement, lasting 15 minutes, and permeated by the phrase heard right at the beginning. Those twinkling opening bars are the clearest foretaste of Ravel's later 'impressionist' style, as the influence of Fauré soon becomes very evident. Having fallen foul of his professors once, the student could be forgiven for a touch of conspicuously admiring emulation. But perhaps it is fairer to view this work as an acknowledgement of how much Fauré had paved the way for the next generation of French composers, freeing musical language from bassline-dominated harmony and creating a world of constant fluid transition.

With **Prokofiev**'s Op. 94bis, we have a violin sonata based on a flute sonata that was written instead of music for violin and piano! To start somewhere near the beginning, in July 1942 Prokofiev wrote to Semyon Schlifstein (Music Consultant in the Committee of Arts Affairs) asking if a commission for some violin pieces could be fulfilled instead with a flute sonata. It seems he had already devised much of the thematic material. The request was granted, and the work was completed the following year in Perm, in the Ural mountains, a designated sanctuary for Soviet artists from the dangers of the Second World War.

Within a year, the work had been recast in an alternative version for violin and piano. The instigator for this transformation was the violinist David Oistrakh, who collaborated on the revision of the flute part (the piano part remained unaltered). According to Oistrakh, he identified the passages that needed rewriting and provided Prokofiev with multiple alternatives for each one, from which the composer chose and edited the ones he favoured.

Perhaps because the themes were composed before the war, and maybe because Prokofiev had been working on the fairy-tale ballet *Cinderella*, the Sonata is generally of a more neoclassical character than some of his grim wartime compositions, though it does have some brittle outbursts. There are also tinges of the jazz music that was circulating on records within Russia, despite Stalin's disapproval.

One of the reasons why David Oistrakh urged Prokofiev to adapt his Flute Sonata for violin might have been a tinge of impatience. The composer had been working on a violin sonata since 1938, beginning it in Moscow in the midst of Stalin's Terror, when several of Prokofiev's friends were murdered. Unsurprisingly, composition had not come easily. The First Sonata was not finished until 1946 (i.e., after the Second had been performed), and only through the continued encouragement of Oistrakh.

During rehearsals for the première, Prokofiev told Oistrakh and his pianist, Lev Oborin, that an eerily slithering scale figure he had added when revising the first movement should sound like 'the wind blowing through a graveyard'. Much of the piano writing in this opening *Andante* suggests tolling bells. Perhaps this is funeral music for the disappeared. However, the second movement, *Allegro brusco* ('fast and harsh'), is clearly informed by anger rather than remembrance. In the third movement, phrases are repeated like pleading questions – most probably, *why?* The close brings shivers as the wind threatens to rise, and the church bells can be heard again in the distance.

We are not long into the finale before violent bass chords in the piano dispel all thought that the Sonata can be brought to an affirmative conclusion. With nothing to look forward to, Prokofiev looks back on the Sonata's themes, and darkness descends.

The 17-or-so minutes of Ravel's last completed chamber work took him four years to compose, from 1923 to 1927. One unfortunate result of the long gestation was that a joke backfired. Ravel had promised the violinist for whom it was written, Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, that it would be a simple work that 'will not sprain your wrist'. By the time the sonata was finished, she was unable to play, after the onset of bursitis. What's more, the finale had turned out to be a tour-de-force likely to put any fiddler's joints at risk. The première was therefore given by the eminent Romanian George Enescu, with Ravel at the piano. The middle movement in particular created an immediate stir in musical circles.

The composer maintained with typical dry humour that the two instruments were essentially incompatible, and the first movement plays on that idea: piano and violin even seem to inhabit different key centres. The second movement, *Blues*, incorporates elements of the kind of jazz Ravel heard in the Paris nightclubs, imported from America but infused with Gallic insouciance. Note the guitar (or banjo) imitations, which survive into the finale. Other reminiscences of the previous two movements are heard in the concluding *Perpetuum mobile*, as the violin executes its ceaseless acrobatics.