

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 13 December 2023
7.30pm

Janine Jansen violin
Denis Kozhukhin piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

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

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 100 (1886)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Andante tranquillo - Vivace •
III. Allegretto grazioso, quasi andante*

Interval

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

3 Romances Op. 22 (1853)

*Romance in D flat • Romance in G minor •
Romance in B flat*

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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Robert and Clara Schumann took the young Brahms under their wing in the early 1850s. Having studied Robert's music – though not, as yet, Clara's – Brahms presented himself at the Schumanns' home on 30 September 1853 and quickly secured a place within their circle. It was as if he had 'sprung like Minerva fully armed from the head of the son of Cronus', according to Robert's acclamatory article in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

Evidence of **Brahms's** early adoption is to be found in the *Scherzo* he wrote for the F-A-E Sonata: an October 1853 collaboration between Brahms, Robert and the latter's pupil Albert Dietrich. Brahms offered a particularly fervent tribute to the Sonata's dedicatee, Joseph Joachim, who had forged his introduction to the Schumanns and whose motto, 'Frei aber einsam' ('free but lonely'), provides the title for the work. And yet the music also pays homage to Robert, in that it traces the scherzo of his Second Violin Sonata Op. 121. But you would be forgiven for hearing another presence too: Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and its familiarly insistent rhythms. In response to these, the trio sounds more sedate, like the eye of the storm, before the initial tattoo returns to herald the close.

Brahms's Second Violin Sonata in A Op. 100 was composed on the Thunersee during a summer break in 1886. The Swiss resort was 'so full of melodies', the composer explained, 'that one must be careful not to step on any'. One of his visitors in Switzerland was the contralto Hermine Spies, an object of Brahms's infatuation. Consequently, the surrounding landscape and their friendship combined to inspire numerous compositions, including a clutch of songs, the Second Cello Sonata in F Op. 99 and this Violin Sonata, which Brahms first performed in Vienna with Joseph Hellmesberger Sr. the following December.

It is clearly a work 'for piano and violin', in that order, as indicated by the pianist taking a charming but purposeful lead. The radiant mood may well derive from the work's opening notes, which trace a motif from Walther von Stolzing's prize-winning 'Morgenlich leuchtend im rosigen Schein' at the end of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. In contrast, the second subject recalls one of Brahms's own songs, 'Wie Melodien zieht es mir', from the Op. 105 group that he dedicated to Spies:

'Yet when words come and capture them
And bring them before my eyes,
They turn pale like grey mist
And vanish like a breath.'

More ardent still is the movement's third (wordless) theme, which comes to dominate the development, before the two earlier melodies return in the recapitulation and extended coda.

The middle movement sits somewhere between an andante and a scherzo. Although unsettled, the Sonata's lyrical generosity nonetheless endures, as it does in the finale, featuring another allusion to the Op. 105 songs:

the soulful 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer'. The *quasi andante* qualification of the tempo suggests something more reflective, with Brahms perhaps acknowledging that, for all his hopes, Hermine would remain a friend. In this, there is a link to the composer's complex relationship with Clara, made even more tangible by the allusion to 'Meine Liebe ist grün' Op. 63 No. 5, with words by her son Felix (who had died in 1879). For all its lyrical contentment, then, this Sonata is symptomatic of unrequited feelings.

A less equivocal mood runs through the *3 Romances* that **Clara** wrote in 1853, the year Brahms appeared in her and husband's life. Again, Joachim is the dedicatee, though Robert makes his presence felt in the thematic material at the close of the first, which harks back to his First Violin Sonata Op. 105. The G minor tonality of the second of the *Romances*, on the other hand, is more pensive, never quite taking wing, until it finds release in the tonic major conclusion and, then, in the third and final *Romance*. This is a glorious song without words, complete with bubbling, arpeggiac accompaniment, written to show Joachim's lyrical gifts in the warmest possible light.

Like its A major predecessor, Brahms's Violin Sonata No. 3 in D minor Op. 108 was begun during the summer retreat of 1886. Cast in four movements, rather than the three of the composer's two previous violin sonatas, it may last only 20 minutes yet offers a rich crucible of ideas that are constantly subject to intense development. Dedicated to Hans von Bülow, the work was eventually completed in 1888, when it had its première in Budapest with Brahms at the keyboard and the Hungarian violinist Jenő Hubay.

The Sonata opens with a half-whispered violin melody, perched high above an urgent accompaniment. The two voices begin to merge as they journey towards the second subject. This elicits great tenderness from the violin, before a brief development section. In contrast, the recapitulation appears more polarised. Starting with a repeat of the first subject, now lower in the violin's range, it moves to a more petulant iteration of the second subject, as the virtuosity of both instrumentalists becomes more apparent, followed by a hushed coda.

That tranquil mood is taken up in the *Adagio*: another wordless song that shows both the composer's lyrical gifts and the melancholy nature of his personality. The piano takes centre stage in the ensuing scherzo, a quixotic, sprightly dance, which proves more outspoken in its second theme, though the constant rocking between modal colours and the underlying tonality of F sharp minor makes for an evasive structure. Not so the finale: a quasi-symphonic act of conclusion. The musicians are equal partners (or rivals) here, delivering an embattled if thrilling tarantella. There are occasional moments of ease, of course, but this is a headlong fight for supremacy.

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