

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 13 September 2022
7.30pm

Lera Auerbach Focus

Hilary Hahn violin
Lera Auerbach piano

Lera Auerbach (b.1973) Lonely Suite (Ballet for a Lonely Violinist) Op. 70 (2001)
*I. Dancing with Oneself • II. Boredom • III. No Escape •
IV. Imaginary Dialogue • V. Worrisome Thought • VI. Question*

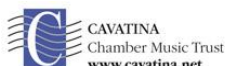
Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953) Piano Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 14 (1912)
*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Scherzo. Allegro marcato •
III. Andante • IV. Vivace*

Interval

Sergey Prokofiev 5 Melodies Op. 35bis (1925)
*Andante • Lento ma non troppo • Animato, ma non allegro •
Allegretto leggero e scherzando • Andante non troppo*

Lera Auerbach Violin Sonata No. 4 'Fractured Dreams' (2019)
*Sogno I: Präludium • Sogno II: Tragico • Sogno III: Recitativo •
Sogno IV: Monologo libero • Sogno V: Misterioso tragico •
Sogno VI: Nostalgico • Sogno VII: Scherzando meccanico •
Sogno VIII: Adagio • Sogno IX: Allegro moderato • Sogno X:
Sognando libero • Sogno XI: Nostalgico curioso • Sogno XII:
Allegro furioso • Sogno XIII: Magico • Sogno XIV: Tragico •
Sogno XV: Solo nervosamente • Sogno XVI: Adagio mortale •
Sogno XVII: Allegro furioso • Sogno XVIII: Postludium*

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'My whole life is a dialogue with time,' **Lera Auerbach** writes about herself. The Russian-American artist is not only an internationally successful composer; she also works as a conductor, pianist, writer, painter and sculptor. Her compositions are infused with a special communicative energy, taking their cues from Russian classical modernism, yet forging their own path. 'Live music performance - on stage and with an audience - is theatrical and ritualistic by its very nature,' the composer says. This attitude produces works committed to depicting images and emotional conflicts.

Lonely Suite, premièred in 2001, is a good example: this 'ballet for a lonely violinist' (as the subtitle reads) is staged in six movements. The miniatures, Auerbach explains, are 'an exploration on the themes of loneliness and fragmentation'.

During the pandemic-induced period of isolation, these parameters made *Lonely Suite* one of the topical works of the moment. Hilary Hahn also released her interpretation in a digital format. Exchanging emails with the violinist, the composer offered a few remarks: 'The more ways you find for it to become a theatrical monologue, pantomime, dance, the better it is. Imagine if Kafka or Gogol wrote a story about a psychologically disturbed violinist locked alone in a tiny practice room, prison cell, or psychiatric ward.' Revealing the performer's very soul, all 'frustrations, fears, doubts' should be expressed fearlessly.

The opening movement, a hesitant waltz, is a journey towards buried memories. The second, 'Boredom', is witty and sad in equal measure: she imagined 'a little kid being tortured by having to practice violin' and 'bored to death', Auerbach wrote to Hahn. 'No Escape' is a restless study with dizzyingly fast double stops and arpeggio effects. Auerbach imagines a 'room with no windows' where you are 'beating your head against the wall'. The 'Imaginary Dialogue' of two lovers follows: dreamy, 'as if you are timidly hoping for romance', declares Auerbach. A monotonous 'Worrisome Thought' cannot be banished. The final, brief 'Question' loses itself in the violin's highest register; the composer wrote to her performer about the 'privacy of this moment'.

A brilliant pianist, **Sergey Prokofiev** had already established a reputation with his sonatas and concertos for his own instrument before making a name for himself as a symphonist as well. In the Second Piano Sonata, the 21-year-old composer found his own voice. The piece is characterised by the stylistic trademarks we have come to associate with Prokofiev: relentless forward propulsion, a harsh lyricism, and the greatest possible transparency of interwoven polyphony.

Prokofiev composed the work in St Petersburg and the spa town of Kislovodsk in 1912. In 1914 he first performed the sonata in Moscow. During the intervening year, his close friend, the pianist Maximilian Schmithof, had committed suicide. Prokofiev was deeply affected by Schmithof's death, and he dedicated his Second Piano Sonata to him.

With a 'steel step' (to borrow the title of one of Prokofiev's later ballets), the first movement's main theme proceeds with some urgency. Soon, however, this field of energy is left behind, in favor of a passage that sounds as if it was seeking something in a dream.

Short dance fragments are interspersed, keeping the musical action suspended in uncertainty. The *Scherzo* anticipates the 'barbarian' style of the *Scythian Suite*, which was to cause a major scandal in 1916. Prokofiev cited Robert Schumann's Toccata Op. 7 as inspiration.

Like a calm lullaby, the *Andante*, a set of variations, begins in the lower register. The second theme is to be played '*con tristezza*' ('with sadness'). By contrast, the finale, with its leaping tarantella temperament, sweeps away any vestige of sentimentality. The secondary theme's stomping staccato invites the listener to an almost jazz-like dance.

The *5 Melodies* for violin and piano are among the most songful compositions Prokofiev wrote. The lyrical stance is no coincidence, as the short cycle is in fact an arrangement of textless songs with piano.

Prokofiev composed the 5 Songs Op. 35 while on a concert tour of the United States. The world première was given in New York in 1921 by soprano Nina Koshetz. Apparently, the *vocalises* did not achieve the effect he had desired. He subsequently rewrote them for violin and piano in 1935. Although Prokofiev endowed the violin part with a number of effects appropriate to the instrument, he eschewed obvious displays of virtuosity.

Lera Auerbach feels a special connection with the violin, having learned to play the instrument as a child, alongside piano and flute. Her collaboration with Hilary Hahn stretches back several years. Together, the two artists performed the world première of her Fourth Violin Sonata, which is dedicated to Hahn, in 2019. Its subtitle, 'Fractured Dreams', draws upon the thoughts and images of dreams and memories: 'a tapestry of hidden truths in our sleep,' says Auerbach.

In 18 brief dream miniatures, short fragments of melodies and dances appear like swathes of memory. Shrill piano chords open the piece like the glare of spotlights - the violin answers ponderously, as if lost in thought. A dramatic change of scenery leads to a rude awakening. Here, the technique of *sul ponticello*, the drawing of the bow near the bridge, is added, creating a 'scratchy' sound. Fragments of imaginary folk tunes blossom with the simplicity of children's songs.

A movement titled *Scherzando meccanico* invites the listener to a grotesque dance. The piano is prepared with bits of plastic underneath the strings, 'to produce a distorted sound reminiscent of a very old broken instrument.' 'With nervous energy,' 16th-note runs suddenly explode, chasing one another. Fragile vocal lines are pitted against even harder chords in the piano. Like a musical saw, the violin whiningly performs a sentimental melody. Is this real kitsch or ironic distance? As with Mahler or Shostakovich, it is hard to say with certainty. An epilogue, reminiscent of a music box, trails off into memories.

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English translation: Alexa Nieschlag 2022

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