

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 14 April 2022 7.30pm

**Jean-Guihen Queyras** cello

**Alexander Melnikov** piano

Supported by the Rubinstein Circle

**Claude Debussy** (1862-1918)

Cello Sonata (1915)

*I. Prologue • II. Sérénade • III. Finale*

**Fryderyk Chopin** (1810-1849)

Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 65 (1845-6)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo • III. Largo • IV. Finale. Allegro*

Interval

**Anton Webern** (1883-1945)

3 little pieces Op. 11 (1914)

*Mässig • Sehr bewegt • Äusserst ruhig*

**Sergey Rachmaninov** (1873-1943)

Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 19 (1901)

*I. Lento. Allegro moderato • II. Allegro scherzando • III. Andante • IV. Allegro mosso*

CLASSIC *f*M

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The four works that make up this evening's programme trace an expansive arc from the mid-19th Century to the outbreak of the First World War, leading us from Paris to Vienna and Moscow, and juxtaposing the lushness of Chopin and Rachmaninov with the astringency of Debussy and Webern.

In 1915, **Debussy** embarked on a series of six sonatas for various instrumental combinations, of which he managed to complete three before his death in 1918. The Cello Sonata was the first of these and was followed by the Sonata for flute, viola and harp, and then the Violin Sonata. Debussy is sometimes seen as an 'impressionist', and the titles of many of his earlier works – often poetic, literary, or artistic in inspiration – seem to evoke atmospheric haziness rather than analytical precision. Yet on completing his Cello Sonata, Debussy wrote proudly to his publisher: 'I like its proportions and form, which are almost classical in the best sense of the word.' Its classicism is not, though, that of Mozart or Haydn, Beethoven or Brahms. The war had stirred a spirit of patriotism in Debussy, who signed the sonatas as being the work of a 'musicien français'. Instead, he looked back to works by Couperin and Rameau, as well as to the paintings of Fragonard and Watteau. The opening *Prologue* recalls a French Baroque overture and the *Sérénade* that follows is full of the sounds of strumming guitars. At one point, Debussy even considered titling his sonata 'Pierrot, angry with the moon', in reference to the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. The sonata is not, however, a work of retrospection or nostalgia. In it, Debussy exploits many of the most advanced techniques of cello playing, and its quicksilver changes of mood seem to usher in the jazz age.

Another composer much admired by Debussy was **Chopin**, whom he described as 'the greatest of them all, for through the piano alone he discovered everything.' Best known for his scintillating works for solo piano, Chopin began work on his Cello Sonata in G minor in 1845. It was a natural choice of instrument – Chopin's piano writing often seems to sing, and the cello would allow him to spin the kind of long, lyric lines which he could coax out of his own instrument. Yet work was arduous and frustrating. 'I write little and cross out a lot,' he wrote to his sister. 'Sometimes I am pleased with it, sometimes not. I throw it into a corner, then I pick it up again.' Suffering increasingly from ill health and tormented by the decline in his relationship with George Sand, he was still at work on the sonata in 1846. When it appeared in print the next year, it was his last published composition. It was premièred – without its opening movement – on 16 February 1848 at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. The cello part was taken by Auguste Franchomme, with Chopin himself at the piano in what would be his final public performance. Yet for all that it is a late piece (albeit by a composer who died so young),

and one written under trying circumstances, it combines spontaneity of inspiration with a powerful command of musical form. Its four movements conform to the Classical ideal, with an opening sonata *Allegro*, followed by a *Scherzo* and trio, a soulful *Largo*, and a rondo *Finale* which ends in the major. Almost all of its thematic material is derived from its opening bars, lending the sonata a surprisingly sense of concentration, alongside its ready lyricism.

Concentration of an entirely different kind characterises **Webern's** *3 little pieces* Op. 11 (1914). Austere, atonal miniatures, they last barely two minutes, yet merit as much attention as the whole of Wagner's *Ring*, if not more. To hear them in performance is to find oneself attuned to the tiniest of expressive details, as well as the silence that separates them. To see the manuscript in New York's Morgan Library is to be captivated by Webern's exquisite calligraphy and reminded of Paul Klee's dictum that 'drawing is taking a line for a walk.'

**Rachmaninov** thoroughly disliked what he called 'the wanton eccentricities of latter-day musical sensationalism', so would probably have balked at appearing in a programme with Debussy and Webern. He would, however, have loved featuring alongside his beloved Chopin, whose piano works he performed – and later recorded – regularly. Indeed, Rachmaninov's Cello Sonata (1901) shares its home key of G minor with Chopin's sonata, and both works have the same basic four-movement structure: *allegro*, *scherzo*, slow movement, and *finale*. But where Chopin's sonata is a work by an ailing composer, Rachmaninov's marks its composer's vigorous return to health after a period of creative silence. In 1897, his First Symphony had received its disastrous première in St Petersburg. Stung by the negative critical reaction (and disappointed by Glazunov's careless conducting of it), Rachmaninov fell into a profound depression. He made ends meet by taking on a series of conducting engagements, but composition proved impossible. It was only after a course of hypnotherapy with Nikolai Dahl in early 1900 that he began to feel well enough to write again. By April 1901, he had completed his second piano concerto, which he dedicated to Dahl in gratitude. The Cello Sonata followed soon after and was premièred that December in Moscow, with Rachmaninov himself taking the piano part. The piano writing is, of course, everything that one might expect from a virtuoso pianist, yet Rachmaninov was wise enough to work closely with the cellist, Anatoly Brandukov, to ensure that the solo part was idiomatically written. When it was published, the sonata was dedicated to Brandukov, who also happened to act as best man at Rachmaninov's wedding in April 1902.

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