

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 14 September 2025
7.30pm

Augustin Dumay violin
Denis Kozhukhin piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

3 Romances Op. 94 (1849)

*I. Nicht Schnell • II. Einfach, innig •
III. Nicht schnell*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

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

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

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

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Violin Sonata No. 7 in C minor Op. 30 No. 2 (1801-2)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio cantabile •
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegro*



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Robert Schumann composed his 3 *Romances* Op. 94 in December 1849, and gave them to his wife Clara as a Christmas gift. Having written works for horn and clarinet earlier that year, he continued his exploration of wind writing by scoring these *Romances* for oboe and piano. Upon publication by Simrock, however, a transcription for violin was included – no doubt with the publisher's view of maximising sales, but also allowing the melodic line to expand for the instrument's larger range. And indeed, it was with a violinist that Clara first performed the *Romances* for the Schumann household.

These short and attractive works prioritise lyricism over virtuosity, and have proved popular with oboists and violinists alike. The first, in A minor, is wistful and melancholic, with a downward-winding melody and flowing accompaniment. The second, in A major, contrasts a song-like theme with an agitated central section, while the third has a quasi-operatic character, with a minor-key main theme characterised by fitful shifts of tempo and dynamics.

In the summer of 1886, **Brahms** stayed at the resort of Lake Thun in Switzerland. The composer was in his 50s, and had by now achieved considerable fame. His time in these idyllic surroundings would prove productive, particularly for chamber music: for here Brahms composed his second cello sonata, third piano trio and second violin sonata (he even started sketches for the third).

Around this time, the composer was also enamoured with the German contralto Hermine Spies, then aged 29. Though Brahms remained a lifelong bachelor, he wrote to a friend that he had to 'watch himself' in order to not do 'something stupid' over the young singer, while she admitted to harbouring her own 'Johannes Passion'. When Spies visited him that summer, he gave her several songs, one of which, *Wie Melodien* ('Like Melodies'), set words by Klaus Groth.

'Thoughts, like melodies, steal softly through my mind' are its opening lines, and melodies that Brahms composed for Spies weave their way into this lyrical sonata, which may have been written while he awaited her visit. There is certainly a hint of flirtation in its introduction, in which the piano is answered in teasing snippets by the violin, before the second subject makes reference to *Wie Melodien*. There is a happy partnership of sorts in the second movement too, as Brahms combines slow movement and scherzo, alternating with ease between a gentle *Andante tranquillo* and a Vivace folk dance.

The finale, in a rondo form, is a relatively relaxed *Allegretto grazioso*. Its recurring figure of a rising third alludes to another song he composed for Spies, *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* ('My sleep grows ever softer'), at the point of the words 'if you would see me once again'. Perhaps equally significant, however, is that this theme occurs in the violin's low register, matching Spies's vocal range. It is as though Brahms is invoking

her voice through the violin, with his own instrument, the piano, in loving support.

30 years earlier, we find a younger Brahms composing in a much more muscular style. In 1853, the 20-year-old introduced himself to the Schumanns, on the recommendation of the Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim, for whom Brahms would later compose his own violin concerto. Robert was especially impressed by the young man, and was moved to write an article in praise of his music. But a more unusual outcome of their new friendship was a collaborative sonata composed as a gift to Joachim. The *F-A-E Sonata*, named after the violinist's motto *Frei aber einsam* ('free but lonely'), would give the great Hungarian the task of guessing who had written which movement.

A pupil of Schumann, Albert Dietrich, composed the first movement, Schumann provided an intermezzo and finale, while the *Scherzo* fell to Brahms. Driven by a hammering motif, with big-boned piano chords and vivacious rhythmic games, it has all the hallmarks of a young composer aspiring to follow in Beethoven's footsteps. But a tender trio section provides some light relief, while a *grandioso* coda moves us from minor to major, ensuring that his contribution to this gift ends with a friendly smile.

Beethoven's set of three violin sonatas Op. 30 date from 1802. It was a pivotal year in his life, when the 31-year-old was coming to terms with worsening hearing loss. While staying in the rural village of Heiligenstadt, where he had perhaps hoped to benefit from peaceful surroundings and fresh air, he wrote a letter to his brothers, now known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he expressed profound despair at his growing deafness, and intimated thoughts of suicide.

Despite the cruel irony of his condition, Beethoven revealed that his art gave him a reason to carry on living. That sense of resolve is certainly reflected in the second of these sonatas. Like the turbulent 'Pathétique' piano sonata of 1798, and the fateful fifth symphony that would follow a few years later, Beethoven cast the work in C minor, a key which seemed to draw out a particular intensity – all three works open with movements marked *con brio* ('with vigour').

The propulsive first movement unleashes storms of rapid broken chords and octave figures, which repeatedly overpower the jaunty jollity of the second subject. There is playfulness in the slow movement, whose tranquility is briefly rocked by dramatic flourishes, while the mischievous scherzo includes a wonky canon, in which the piano left hand almost trips over itself in chasing the violin. But the *allegro* finale returns us to the familiar furrowed brow of C minor Beethoven, with jump-scare chords, dramatic pauses, and a motoring energy that ultimately culminates in a thrilling *presto* coda.

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