

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 May 2023  
1.00pm

Alina Ibragimova violin  
Cédric Tiberghien piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A minor Op. 105 (1851)

*I. Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck • II. Allegretto •  
III. Lebhaft*

Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 121 (1851)

*I. Ziemlich langsam - Lebhaft • II. Sehr lebhaft •  
III. Leise, einfach • IV. Bewegt*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Once, at a mass, he went on conducting after the movement was finished and the priest had begun to intone. At a choir practice the sopranos were singing several high As, and the effect was so ridiculous that they stopped singing and one by one the other parts followed suit until the pianist was left playing alone. Schumann noticed nothing and simply went on beating time...

It had all started so well. When **Robert Schumann** had arrived in Düsseldorf in September 1850, to take over as municipal music director, the townsfolk had welcomed him like a superstar. There were impromptu serenades, civic banquets and endless welcome speeches. Yet within months, incidents like the one related above (by Schumann's biographer Frederick Niecks) had started occurring with worrying frequency – and the whispering campaigns were developing the toxic intensity that only music societies can generate.

No surprise, then, that Schumann told Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski – the leader of the Düsseldorf orchestra, and one of his few allies – that he'd composed his First Violin Sonata while 'very angry with certain people'. That would explain the heading of the first movement, too: *Mit leidenschaftlichem Ausdruck* ('with passionate expression'). Like so many of his chamber works, he dashed the sonata off in a single impetuous burst of activity – in a mere four days between 12 and 16 September 1851.

The form is concise: alone amongst Schumann's major chamber works, the sonata has just three movements, with the second serving as an artless, hesitant *intermezzo*. Schumann published the finished work in 1852 under the Beethoven-era title of 'Sonata for piano and violin', and later claimed to be dissatisfied with it ('I didn't like my first sonata; so I wrote a second one, which I hope has turned out better'). Wasielewski tried it out with Clara Schumann at the piano while the ink was barely dry, on 16 September 1851, and was troubled by the finale's failure to resolve into the traditional major-key conclusion. 'I was unable to bring to it enough of the restive, surly tone of the piece', commented Wasielewski, while Clara found it a 'rather less graceful and more recalcitrant movement'.

Yet it's hard to resist the sonata's ardent lyricism, or such near-subconscious inspirations as the way the finale takes a lively figure from Schumann's 'Rhenish' symphony (premiered seven months earlier), recasts it in a dark minor key, and then – in the closing bars of the sonata – combines it with a reminiscence of sonata's surging opening theme. Schumann was a poor conductor, and worse was to come. But by this stage of his career as a composer he was handling classical forms with an instinctive – and very personal – mastery, and within weeks he was creating again with full confidence and power. Barely six weeks after completing the A minor Sonata he inscribed in the household diary that he shared with Clara, 'Scherzo for 2nd sonata for violin'.

Perhaps that, in itself, is telling: there'd been no joking *scherzando* mood in September. A day later, on 29 October 1851, he added 'Andante for 2nd sonata' and finally, on 2 November, '2nd Sonata more or less finished'. Even assuming he'd begun the first movement some time before that first diary, it was still a bracing pace at which to create a substantial, four-movement work – once again, it seems simply to have poured from him. The scholar Ernst Hettrich believes that this second sonata was the work with which 'Schumann finally freed himself from the depression into which he had fallen due to his dispute with the orchestra'.

The first known performance (documented by Clara in the same shared diary) was given at home by Clara and Wasielewski, and for some months after that Robert seems to have lost no opportunity to have it played through at musical gatherings in Düsseldorf, Leipzig and elsewhere. And yet he hesitated to have it published – possibly associating it with the unhappy period of its creation, and being reluctant (as creative artists sometimes are) to reawaken that particular set of associations.

In the end, it was published by Breitkopf & Härtel of Leipzig in August 1853 – Robert wanted to present it as a gift to Clara on her birthday, 13 September. He dedicated the sonata to his friend Ferdinand David – the dedicatee of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto – 'as a token of remembrance of happy hours spent in young years'. But word of this new masterpiece was already circulating among violinists, and the Second Sonata's first public performance was given in the Cürtenscher Saal, Düsseldorf on 29 October 1853 by Joseph Joachim and Clara Schumann. Joachim was delighted. 'I must not fail to tell you about the new Sonata in D minor', he wrote to his friend Arnold Wehner soon afterwards:

*We played it from the proof-sheets. I consider it one of the finest compositions of our times in respect of its marvellous unity of feeling and its thematic significance. It overflows with noble passion, almost harsh and bitter in expression and the last movement reminds one of the sea with its glorious waves of sound.*

Little further description is required. The dramatic opening gesture finds its way into the sweeping, surging argument of the first movement's *Lebhaft* ('lively') main section, while the galloping, restless scherzo (placed second) climaxes on a grand major-key reminiscence of the Lutheran chorale *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ* – which then forms the basis (transformed into a hesitant *pizzicato*) of the third movement's gently-flowing stream of variations: sometimes limpid, sometimes defiant. And Joachim described the finale best – though he doesn't mention how it finally resolves into a jubilant major key. Here, at the end of Schumann's turbulent autumn, the sun finally breaks through the storm-tossed clouds.

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