

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 16 December 2021 7.30pm

Centenary of Saint-Saëns's Death

Steven Isserlis cello

Connie Shih piano



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

**Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835-1921)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in C minor Op. 32 (1872)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante tranquillo sostenuto • III. Allegro moderato*

**Franz Liszt** (1811-1886)

Romance oubliée S132 (1880)

**Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924)

Romance Op. 69 (1894)

**Camille Saint-Saëns**

Romance in F Op. 36 (1874)

**Joseph Hollman** (1852-1926)

Carmen fantaisie *based on Georges Bizet*

Interval

**Gabriel Willaume** (1873-1946)

La noce bretonne Op. 14 (pub. 1924)

**Reynaldo Hahn** (1874-1947)

2 improvisations sur des airs irlandais (1894 rev. 1911)

*The Little Red Lark • The Willow-Tree*

**Augusta Holmès** (1847-1903)

Noël d'Irlande (1897) *arranged by Steven Isserlis*

**Camille Saint-Saëns**

Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Op. 123 (1905)

*I. Maestoso, largamente • II. Scherzo con variazioni •*

*III. Romanza. Poco adagio • IV. Allegro non troppo, grazioso*

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Within the necessary limits of this programme note, it is impossible to offer an overview of the remarkable polymath Camille Saint-Saëns. It is hoped that the mere snapshots that follow will, along with the music we hear, illuminate some facets of the composer and the fellow musicians within his circle.

The music that **Saint-Saëns** wrote for solo cello continued the work of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Chopin in establishing the instrument as an individual singing voice. The First Cello Sonata was completed in December 1872, as soon as the ink had dried on Saint-Saëns's First Cello Concerto. The composer had experienced personal bereavements, some due to the political turbulence France was undergoing, which may have influenced the dramatic nature of the first movement. The E flat *Andante*, the composer said, originated in an organ improvisation at the newly built Eglise Saint-Augustin in Paris. The stirring finale was written to replace the original one, which the composer destroyed after his mother declared it to be unsatisfactory!

When the composer delivered his Second Cello Sonata to the firm of Durand in 1905, he commented 'Here it is, finished at last, the damned sonata!' This might indicate a certain amount of nagging from the publisher, who had waited 33 years for a follow up to the highly successful First Sonata. The first performance was given in November by the composer and the cellist Joseph Hollman. Despite considering it one of his finest works (Fauré concurred), Saint-Saëns described his sonata in self-effacing terms: 'The first movement is not an Allegro but practically an Andante – with many demisemiquavers... In the Scherzo con variazioni I have not followed the trend in which the variations have about as much in common with the theme as the moon does with a pickled herring... The Adagio will draw tears from sensitive souls, whereas the Finale should wake up anyone put to sleep by the other movements.'

Between the two sonatas, in 1874 Saint-Saëns wrote the graceful *Romance* in F, originally for horn and orchestra or piano. An alternative cello part was published with the first edition.

The warm relationship between Saint-Saëns and **Franz Liszt** was of great benefit to both men. Saint-Saëns introduced Liszt's 'progressive' music to France through both his teaching and his performances. Liszt personally saw to it that the Frenchman's opera *Samson et Delila* received a première in Weimar when Paris was still reluctant to take it on. Liszt's *Romance oubliée* is one of several of his compositions to include the French word *oubliée* ('forgotten') in its title. This time, the search for a fragment of memory may have been literal. In 1880 the composer was asked to authorise the reprint of an earlier song. For identification purposes his publisher sent a page of that piece. Liszt's response was to fashion a new work for viola and piano based on the single leaf he had been sent.

Liszt, along with other 'modernists' such as Schumann and Wagner, was one of the composers that Saint-Saëns was quick to

bring to the attention of his pupil **Gabriel Fauré**. The 15-year-old Fauré had been sent by his father to the 25-year-old Saint-Saëns in the hope that the dreamy boy could be steered towards a secure career in church music. Fauré recollected: 'After allowing the lessons to overrun, he [Saint-Saëns] would go to the piano and reveal the works of those masters excluded from the strictly classical study programme... from this time dates our almost filial attachment ... my immense admiration, unceasing gratitude.' Fauré's *Romance* came slowly to fruition, originating in a piece for cello and organ that never made it to publication. It acquired its final form in 1894 and immediately became a popular recital piece.

Dutch-born, the cellist **Joseph Hollman** studied in several European capitals including Paris, before embarking on an international performing career. When he made his London debut in 1885 his recital partner was Camille Saint-Saëns, a regular musical collaborator (including performances at this very hall): Hollman received the dedication of Saint-Saëns's Second Concerto of 1902. One of several showpieces he composed or compiled for his own instrument, Hollman's *Carmen fantasie* honours **Georges Bizet** – another life-long friend of Saint-Saëns.

**Gabriel Willaume** is most often mentioned in relation to Ravel's Piano Trio, as he played violin in its première in January 1915. But he also recorded four 78 rpm sides of works by Saint-Saëns, with the composer at the piano. Willaume's *La noce bretonne* ('The Breton wedding') was published in 1924 with an explanation and performance notes: the wedding procession, headed by a hurdy gurdy or bagpipe player, approaches, passes and goes on its way.

Saint-Saëns was among the many teachers of **Reynaldo Hahn**. Born in Venezuela, Hahn lived in Paris from the age of 14, composing numerous *chansons* and becoming the close friend of many upper-echelon artists, including Proust and Bernhardt. With Saint-Saëns's encouragement he composed *3 Préludes sur des airs populaires irlandais* in 1894, basing the piano duets on Irish songs. They were dedicated to Augusta Holmès. In 1911 Hahn's *2 improvisations* appeared, arrangements for cello and piano of two of these pieces.

Though Irish by descent, **Augusta Holmès** was born in Paris and acquired the accent on her name when formally adopting French citizenship. As a composer and personality she cast a powerful spell over salon society. César Franck fretted that she aroused 'unspiritual desires' in him. Saint-Saëns unsuccessfully proposed marriage to her, but he was also appreciative of her compositions and her ability to inspire the musicians and artists who flocked around her. Holmès's *Noël d'Irlande* is a song from 1896 delivering a Christmas message in response to years of hunger, and acknowledging a growing spirit of nationalism.

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