WIGMORE HALL

Monday 18 April 2022 1.00pm

Viktoria Mullova violin
Alasdair Beatson fortepiano

This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

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

Violin Sonata No. 5 in F Op. 24 'Spring' (1800-1)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio molto espressivo •
III. Scherzo. Allegro molto – Trio • IV. Rondo. Allegro ma non troppo

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For their lunchtime concert, the violinist Viktoria Mullova and pianist Alasdair Beatson present two of **Beethoven**'s violin sonatas, having recently released a critically acclaimed recording of these works. Regarding their approach to the pieces, Alasdair Beatson writes, 'We present these sonatas on instruments appropriate to the early 1800s: a 1750 Giovanni Battista Guadagnini violin, strung with gut and played with a classical bow, and a replica of an 1805 Viennese Walter fortepiano built by Paul McNulty. Compared with their modern counterparts, might we feel a heightened intimacy between the instruments, with their shared subtleties of articulation and colour so intrinsic to the repertoire? And might we dare to feel a heightened closeness with Beethoven too, as we delve into the richness of his musical, emotional and spiritual worlds?'

Beethoven composed nine of his ten violin sonatas between 1797 and 1803; as such they are mainly thought of as early works. The frontispiece for the original publications of the manuscripts calls them 'sonatas for the fortepiano and a violin'. This infers, perhaps, a certain equality between the instruments, or even that the violin was optional. Beethoven's continually developing compositional instincts, however, took the sonata form away from that which was common in the late 1780s – exemplified by Mozart's concertante style – to a more personal medium as he stretched its bounds with each successive composition.

Beethoven drew upon his experience as a performer in writing his violin sonatas. In his youth, he had taken violin lessons in his native city of Bonn, where he also played the viola professionally. After moving to the Austrian capital, he studied the violin with Ignaz Schuppanzigh and was highly regarded as a pianist. Beethoven's writing was also shaped by technical advances in the manufacture of violins and pianos at this time: violins gained a longer neck, a strengthened fingerboard and a higher bridge, the cumulative effect of which resulted in greater tension on the strings. The impact of this was a greater range of notes, increased dynamic range and depth of tone. Likewise, keyboard instruments were starting to be manufactured that could sustain louder volumes over a larger range. Beethoven would exploit these facets in his later piano pieces, but the Viennese fortepianos that were still in common use when these sonatas were written had a more subtle action and smaller note range.

In 1802, Beethoven stayed at Heiligenstadt, near Vienna. Whilst there, he completed the three violin sonatas Op. 30, amongst several other pieces. At this time, Beethoven's increasingly pronounced deafness heightened his sense of personal despair. In the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, a letter written to his brother Carl, he wrote: 'How can I, a musician, say to people "I am deaf"? I shall defy this fate if I can […] I only live for music.'

Beethoven employs the C minor key signature for the Violin Sonata No. 7 Op. 30. The pianist Charles Rosen observes, 'Beethoven in C minor has come to symbolize his artistic character: it reveals Beethoven as a Hero.' The first movement begins, as the others do, with an intriguing piano motif. Upon entering, the violin lyrically ornaments the piano part. The brusque, march-like E-flat major second theme reinforces the movement's overall character. Both middle movements are of a more positive temperament. The *Adagio cantabile*'s intricate five-part structure is based on the thoughtful and lyrical opening theme. Beethoven considered omitting the brief and coarsely humorous *Scherzo*. The final movement makes manifest Beethoven's inner struggles. Initially in C minor, this rondo unsettles the listener, after which come three distinct and contrasting episodes. The daringly aggressive *presto* coda builds in energy before ending unexpectedly in C major.

Beethoven was a frequent performer at the house concerts of his patron, Count Moritz von Fries, a Viennese banker and art collector. The Count was also an amateur violinist, which may have motivated Beethoven to dedicate the Violin Sonata No. 5 in F Op. 24 to him in 1801. The fifth violin sonata was paired with the almost contemporaneous fourth violin sonata when originally published; however, the popularity of the fifth sonata saw it assigned with a separate opus number when the score's first reprint took place. The title of the 'Spring' sonata was not Beethoven's own; that came after his death. The association of the F major key signature with depicting nature is extensive, with the most famous example being Beethoven's own Symphony No. 6 Op. 68 'Pastoral', completed in 1808.

The opening *Allegro* movement immediately invokes the feeling of being out in nature. Its initial musical idea, stated by the violin, recalls birdsong whilst the fortepiano contributes a rolling accompaniment that bears similarity to a babbling brook. The atmosphere of this movement influences the sonata as a whole and might have prompted one contemporary critic to write, 'The original fiery and bold spirit of this composer […] is now becoming increasingly serene.' The second movement, a set of three variations, continues in the same vein. With the insertion of a *Scherzo* as the third, this was the first of three violin sonatas Beethoven wrote in four movements; the others being the seventh and tenth sonatas. To many listeners, the most notable feature of this brief movement, originally conceived as a Minuet, is the apparent conflict between violin and fortepiano. Indeed, they goad each other from beginning to end; they neither start nor end together. The final movement *Rondo* starts almost in dancing mood yet is full of contrasting elements: glorious moments of shade and mottled light vie briefly with darker storm clouds before final passages of calm.