

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 18 February 2024
7.30pm

James Ehnes violin
Andrew Armstrong piano

Jean-Marie Leclair (1697-1764)	Violin Sonata in D Op. 9 No. 3 'Tombeau' (pub. 1743) <i>I. Un poco andante • II. Allegro - Adagio • III. Sarabande. Largo • IV. Tambourin. Presto</i>
Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)	Violin Sonata Op. 134 (1968) <i>I. Andante • II. Allegretto • III. Largo - Andante</i>
<i>Interval</i>	
Christian Sinding (1856-1941)	Suite im alten Stil Op. 10 (1889) <i>I. Presto • II. Adagio • III. Tempo giusto</i>
Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908)	Romanza Andaluza Op. 22 No. 1 (1878) Jota Navarra Op. 22 No. 2 (1879)
Henryk Wieniawski (1835-1880)	Polonaise brillante No. 2 in A Op. 21 (c.1870)

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During his lifetime, **Leclair** was celebrated for raising French violin playing to compete with the Italians; in death, his unsolved murder in an insalubrious neighbourhood of Paris in 1764 persists in the memory. He was born in Lyon and stepped into the Parisian musical fray as an outsider, but his appearances at the *Concert Spirituel* (one of the first concert series in music history) and the publication of his own sonatas for violin in the Italian style quickly had his peers comparing him to the great virtuoso Corelli. Leclair seems, though, to have had an additional talent for making enemies, and when his gardener discovered his body in a pool of blood one October morning, suspicion fell on his ex-wife and his contemptuous nephew, though no charges were ever brought. The Sonata Op. 9 No. 3 belongs to his fourth collection of such pieces, composed three decades before his violent end and considered technically challenging by the standards of the day. Its last movement brings the music of the street into the concert hall with an imitation of the drum beat of the tambourin.

Shostakovich's final years and compositions were dominated by intimations of his own mortality. He spent days, sometimes weeks at a time in hospital, as illness took hold on his body. Almost nothing, though, would stop him working, such was his mental strength as his physical health collapsed, and during a period of frequent hospital visits in 1968 and 1969, he produced a clutch of astonishing late masterpieces, including the Violin Sonata. The piece was written for his long-time collaborator David Oistrakh. Shostakovich had meant to mark Oistrakh's 60th birthday with the composition of a second violin concerto, but the composer was 12 months early, and made amends the following year by writing the sonata.

By the late 1960s, physical deficiencies had robbed Shostakovich of most of his once-formidable skill at the piano, but he invited Oistrakh to his Moscow apartment to run through the completed sonata. Shostakovich struggled through the piano part, writing later to his friend Isaak Glikman, 'I could manage the easy passages alright, but the difficult ones were awful.' Oistrakh, though, was bowled over by the work, telling an invited audience at a session of the Union of Composers in January 1969: 'I'm deeply moved by every single modulation, every single harmony, every single melody.'

At the official première later that year, Shostakovich clung doggedly to Oistrakh and pianist Sviatoslav Richter as they crossed the stage to receive the audience's applause, tottering on his weakened legs and whispering to Richter 'I don't want to cause a scene.' Not a shred of this anxiety made its way into the sonata, though, which is instead as ferocious and unyielding as anything he ever wrote. The first movement begins with a tone row, the modernist device in which a sequence of all 12 notes of the chromatic scale are used. The second,

marked, almost mockingly, *Allegretto*, sends both instruments into dizzying spirals of frantic motion. The finale utilises a favourite Shostakovich form, the passacaglia, in which a repeated bassline underpins variations above. Rising to a moment of musical violence as extreme as anything in the composer's output, the last movement returns finally to something of an echo of the ambivalent calm of the sonata's beginning.

Hailed by some as a successor to Grieg, Norwegian composer **Sinding** grew up in the mining town of Kongsberg and later, after his father's death, in nearby Christiana (present-day Oslo). He was proficient on violin and piano, but a performing career eluded him and he instead decided in 1874, aged 18, to move to Leipzig to study composition. It was there, in the 1880s, that he produced the once highly popular *Suite im alten Stil* ('Suite in olden style') for violin and piano. Its three movements look to the musical past, even by the standards of Sinding's inherently conservative language; the 'in olden style' of the title gestures at an undefined moment in violin music perhaps a century-and-a-half prior, very much in the manner of the Baroque pastiches by Fritz Kreisler, who himself played Sinding's *Suite* in concert. The first movement is a brief toccata and the last a strident whirl of agitated energy, but the real heart is the sorrowful *Adagio* between them – no mere pastiche, this, but a masterful span of sustained melody.

Spanish virtuoso violinist **Sarasate**, a decade older than Sinding, was born in the northern Spanish town of Pamplona. The musical traditions of his homeland are captured in a series of *Spanish Dances* which he wrote between 1878 and 1882: eight in total, with the third and fourth designated Op. 22 and evoking the spirit of the southern region of Andalucia and the north-eastern province of Navarre, of which Pamplona is the capital. Typically for the internationally popular Sarasate, he was on tour, in Scandinavia, when he penned them, and they were dedicated to the Czech virtuoso Wilma Neruda, a violinist greatly admired by Vieuxtemps, Joachim and, in the pages of Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, by Sherlock Holmes.

Finally, **Wieniawski's** *Polonaise brillante* captures the virtuosity of its composer, one of the other preeminent violinists of the 19th Century. Composed in the early 1870s while Wieniawski held a professorship in St Petersburg, this was his second such treatment of Poland's national dances, written as its composer's homeland laboured under the rule of the Russian Empire. By the time Wieniawski utilised the polonaise, it was as much a concert form as something that might actually be danced. For this Polish composer, about to embark on an epic series of tours to the United States, it was also a demonstration of his dazzling art, and a memento of home.

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