WIGMORE HALL

Friday 19 April 2024
7.30pm

Ning Feng violin
Nelson Goerner piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Violin Sonata in A K305 (1778)
I. Allegro di molto •
II. Tema. Andante grazioso

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Violin Sonata in A D574 'Duo' (1817)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Presto •
III. Andantino • IV. Allegro vivace

Interval

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Violin Sonata in E flat Op. 18 (1887)
I. Allegro, ma non troppo •
II. Improvisation: Andante cantabile •
III. Finale: Andante - Allegro

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After touring Europe as a musical prodigy throughout his childhood, Mozart spent most of his adult life looking for a steady income and amicable appointment as a court composer. In August 1777 he resigned from his post in the Salzburg court of Prince-Archbishop Colloredo. It is likely he was about to be dismissed anyway, having often been absent from his duties on trips to find more congenial and lucrative employment. Within a month he was back on tour, flattering possible patrons and advertising his talents with concerts.

The journey first took in Bavaria, where he came across some violin sonatas by Joseph Schuster (1748-1812), a Dresden-based composer. Mozart found them sufficiently impressive to send copies home to his family, with a letter to his father saying he had a mind to write six sonatas of his own in the same style, since they were popular with the public. Moreover, he played Schuster's sonatas in recital in Mannheim, the next main stop on his tour.

When he published his Sonatas K301–306 in Paris in July 1778, having completed all six while still travelling, Mozart dedicated them to Electress of Mannheim, Maria Elisabeth, taking particular care to praise the achievements of the city and its musicians. However, no job offer was forthcoming from her, or from any of the cities he visited.

Mozart's first published pieces for this instrumental combination had been 'sonatas for harpsichord which can be played with violin accompaniment' – the work of an eight-year-old. The grown-up composer gives the violin part a little more independence. K305 is one of the most popular of his violin sonatas, with an amicable first movement whose initial theme plays with the notes of the triad. The second movement is a genteel but eventful theme and variations.

In 1816, the year he turned nineteen, Schubert developed a taste for composing for his own first instrument, the violin. He began in a modest way, with sets of dances for one or two fiddles without accompaniment, and three compact sonatas with modest technical demands, suitable for the homes of amateurs. But in the summer of the following year came his A major Sonata, which suggests a composer eager to alert and engage an audience, rather than just a circle of friends.

The 'Duo Sonata' is so-called because of the title given to it by the publisher Diabelli when it first appeared in print, 23 years after the composer's death. Its all-the-time-in-the-world opening leads to a movement of rapid mood swings, and emotional flux characterises the entire sonata. The spritely *Scherzo* is placed second, a good decision given the moderate tempo of the first movement and the similarity of the *Scherzo*'s first theme to the opening of the finale.

The *Andantino* begins as if it is going to be the epitome of ordered calm – in fact, those early bars and their reprises are the only moments of real repose in a movement characterised by fragmentary phrases and ever-shifting harmonies. The finale vaults upwards at its outset and maintains a convivial jauntiness for much of the time; one can perhaps picture tankards clinking to its bounce and swing.

Richard Strauss's Violin Sonata of 1887 can be regarded as marking the end of his 'first period' as a composer. That's not to say that it is an immature work; rather that it comes immediately before the first of the symphonic poems for which he is best known. Although he had already written some orchestral music (including two symphonies that have rarely been performed), the majority of his compositions hitherto had been chamber music, songs or piano works. The 23-year-old composer had just met and fallen in love with the operatic soprano Pauline de Ahna, an emotionally volatile and fiercely outspoken woman who would become his wife in 1894. Despite the challenges of living with a woman who, in Strauss's words, was never the same person she had been the previous minute, it was a long and apparently happy marriage.

At this point programme note writers usually feel obliged to tell us that the Violin Sonata is full of 'amorous' music, reflecting the first flush of the composer's romantic involvement with Pauline. Since Strauss was not clinging to a rockface when he wrote his *Alpine Symphony*, or murdering Scottish monarchs when he wrote his tone poem *Macbeth*, it doesn't automatically follow that his music represented his personal circumstances. That said, his first major work after the Sonata was the orchestral masterpiece *Don Juan*, so perhaps 'amorous' thoughts did preoccupy him, if not exactly the sort to reassure a prospective bride.

The Sonata is a (partial) farewell to both chamber music and sonata form. Having taken his cues from the music of Schumann and his circle at the start of his career, Strauss was becoming increasingly aligned with the modernists, especially Liszt and Wagner. Nevertheless he here crafts his outer movements with the care of a classicist, notwithstanding frequent changes of metre in the first movement – for a short passage early on, the players' parts are even written in different metres. The middle movement is designated *Improvisation*, meaning it follows its own path with a degree of freedom, but also that it can adorn itself with filigree decoration in its later stages. If the other movements turn the page on classical form, this one bids *adieu* to salon music. A subdued piano introduction leads us into a *Finale* in which the ardour is not so much erotic as heroic – with the hero allowed some playful moments.