

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 19 December 2021 7.30pm

Antoine Tamestit viola
Cédric Tiberghien piano



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Viola Sonata in F minor Op. 120 No. 1 (1894)

*I. Allegro appassionato • II. Andante un poco adagio •
III. Allegretto grazioso • IV. Vivace*

Viola Sonata in E flat Op. 120 No. 2 (1894)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Allegro appassionato •
III. Andante con moto - Allegro*

Interval

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Viola Sonata Op. 147 (1975)

I. Moderato • II. Allegretto • III. Adagio

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It was during the 1880s that **Brahms** developed a fruitful working relationship with the Meiningen Court Orchestra. His purpose was to try out new works, including *Nänie* and the Second Piano Concerto, before official premières in more obviously important musical centres. The composer nonetheless reciprocated the Orchestra's kindness by mounting the first performance of his Fourth Symphony in Meiningen in 1885, as well as touring with the musicians throughout Central Europe.

It was during an 1891 visit that Brahms was properly introduced to the principal clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld. He had begun his career as a violinist, even playing in the first Bayreuth performances of Wagner's *Ring* in 1876, but switched to the clarinet later that year. In 1877, he made his debut in Meiningen, giving a performance of Weber's Concerto that led to a permanent contract. Brahms immediately heard the appeal, iterated in not one but three nicknames – 'Fräulein Klarinette', 'meine prima donna' and 'the nightingale of the orchestra' – as well as the wonderful partnership that ensued. In the year they met, Brahms produced both the Clarinet Trio Op. 114 and Clarinet Quintet Op. 115 – works that effectively brought the composer out of self-imposed retirement. The two Op. 120 sonatas followed three years later.

The contemporary critic Eduard Hanslick's observation that these and Brahms's other late works were 'pensive, graceful, dreamy, resigned and elegiac' has led to another pervasive (and persuasive) description of them as being autumnal in tone. Arguably, that mood is only enhanced when the Op. 120 sonatas are performed in Brahms's own (slightly adapted) versions for viola and piano. But despite the atmosphere, the works were actually written during the summer of 1894. Private performances soon followed for both Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen and Clara Schumann, before official premières in Vienna at the beginning of 1895. When Simrock issued the scores later that year, parts for both clarinet and viola were included.

The overall tonality of the first of the sonatas, F minor, can often signify storminess in Brahms's world. And so it does here, with a bold unison introduction from the piano and a leaping viola theme. Syncopation destabilises the metre, before the piano returns to the tonic for another intense exchange. Eventually, the music moves to D flat major for a more subdued theme, but the sense of calm is brief. Even more challenging dialogues arise, not least during the recapitulation.

The *Andante*, in A flat major, is more reserved, though it too has an unpredictable streak, as does the waltzing third movement, with renewed hints of F minor. The rapid, major-key rondo-finale tries to shrug off these insecurities, with the piano taking the lead. After passing through various key centres, a final statement of the theme puts all storms to rest.

The second of the sonatas, in three rather than four movements, though only slightly shorter in length, is more restrained. Its first

movement recalls the lilting, *Lied*-inspired style of Brahms's Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Op. 78 – a link made even clearer when the Sonata is performed on the viola. But like that 1878-9 work, this music also contains an argumentative element, with the piano occasionally suggesting an orchestral palette.

The middle movement is another waltz, with subverting hemiolas and a broad harmonic range. Together, these test the resoluteness of the tonic (E flat minor). The intervening Trio, introduced by the piano and marked to be played sweetly and sung out, is more unified, before the scudding clouds return. The finale comprises a folk-like theme, rich in modality, which provides the basis for five variations. The first three are graceful, if progressively florid, while the fourth is all calm and quiet. This contrasts both with what has gone before and what follows: a rambunctious variation to cap the Sonata.

While Brahms can be both vivacious and melancholy in his late music, a palpable air of mourning hangs over **Shostakovich's** final years, including his very last work: the Viola Sonata Op. 147. The composer's health had been in decline for some time. Polio had caused weakness in Shostakovich's right hand and prompted the termination of his career as a pianist on 28 May 1966, when he suffered his first heart attack. Having completed the 15th Symphony in September 1971, he then had another cardiac arrest, which prevented any further large-scale compositions. Shostakovich therefore decided to focus on chamber music and song, closing his long life with this Sonata, which he dedicated to Fyodor Druzhinin, the viola player in the ever-loyal Beethoven Quartet.

The composer chose to invert the traditional fast-slow-fast scheme. Instead, Shostakovich opened with a stark *Moderato*, which he nicknamed 'Novella'. The viola's open strings recall the initial gestures of Berg's Violin Concerto (also a last completed work). When the piano enters, its 12-note theme brings a delicate touch, though it also encourages introspection, as well as a violently explosive middle section, with little to unify the players. Finally, the movement skulks into silence.

The *Allegretto* pursues a more ironic path, quoting from the overture to Shostakovich's unfinished opera *The Gambler*, which he was writing during the Second World War. As the result of this mordant interlude, the final *Adagio* sounds rather otherworldly. Shostakovich said it was written 'in memory of a great composer'. With the 'Moonlight' Sonata evident in both the piano's arpeggios and the viola's dotted motif, it is easy to guess who he had in mind. But by the time he was completing this work, Shostakovich had also realised he was writing his own Requiem and the Sonata had its première in Leningrad on 1 October 1975, two months after the composer's death.

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