WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 19 January 2025
7.30pm

Natalie Clein cello
Marianna Shirinyan piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)	Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor Op. 38 (1862-5) *I. Allegro non troppo • II. Allegretto quasi menuetto • III. Allegro*
Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967)	Sonata for solo cello Op. 8 (1915) *I. Allegro maestoso ma appassionato • II. Adagio (con grand' espressione) • III. Allegro molto vivace*
	Interval
Joseph Joachim (1831-1907)	Hebräische Melodien Op. 9 *arranged by Natalie Clein & Benjamin Shwartz* *Sostenuto • Grave • Andante cantabile*
Johannes Brahms	Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Op. 99 (1886) *I. Allegro vivace • II. Adagio affettuoso • III. Allegro passionato • IV. Allegro molto*

UNDER 35S
Supported by the AKO Foundation
Media partner Classic FM

CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust
www.cavatina.net

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

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • Wigmore-hall.org.uk • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan

Department for Culture Media & Sport
LOTTERY FUNDED
Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

‘A landscape torn by mists and clouds, in which I can see the ruins of old churches…’ With gothic imagery and brooding skies, Edvard Grieg’s appraisal of **Johannes Brahms**’s first cello extols its Romantic temperament. Composed in the 1860s, the work emerged at a time when artists and composers alike were exploring new realms of heightened emotional expression – often taking in dark, ominous landscapes. Yet for all the Sonata’s explosive energy and songlike lyricism, this work for cello and piano has classical roots.
Initially conceived in 1862 as a three-part work, beginning with that mournful, aria-like theme and ending with the delicate, mysterious Trio, Brahms (1833-1897) added the final movement three years later, in 1865. Its mighty fugue was inspired by the 16th and 17th Contrapunctus from Bach’s keyboard masterpiece, *The Art of Fugue*. The German composer’s influence is audible in the austere grandeur of that movement’s opening bars, although the volatile Romantic temperament that Grieg alludes to is never far away.

It is dedicated to – and was composed for – Josef Gänsbacher, a keen amateur cellist who, at the work’s première, reputedly complained that Brahms was playing the piano so loudly that he couldn’t hear himself. (‘Lucky you,’ was the composer’s surly response.) We’ll never know whether Josef’s complaint was reasonable – but the two instruments interweave and complement one another as equals, reflecting Brahms’s instruction that the piano ‘should be a partner… but it should under no circumstances assume a purely accompanying role.’ 'In twenty-five years, no cellist will be accepted into the world of cellists who does not play my piece'.

It was a bold statement by Hungarian composer, **Zoltán Kodály** – but the audacity and energy of this extraordinary work, written in 1915, justifies it. Angular chords erupt across all four strings, and shards of melody howl, whine and wail through the full range of the instrument. Taut *pizzicati* (plucked notes) contrast with slithering *glissandi* (sliding notes); ghostly, glassy noises are produced by playing *sul ponticello*, or close to the bridge, while intricate double-stopping and dazzling semiquaver runs make this work a complete tour de force of technical skill by the soloist. Like his fellow countryman, Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály drew inspiration from the folk music of his native Hungary. Hungarian music, Kodály said, is in general, 'active rather than passive, an expression of will rather than emotion'. Arguably, the Sonata is a test of both will and emotion for the soloist – particularly so in the toe-tapping, whirling dance of the final ‘Allegro molto vivace’.

We return to Romantic landscapes with Hungarian composer **Joseph Joachim**’s (1831-1907) three *Hebrew Melodies*, originally composed for viola and piano in 1854. A protegée of Felix Mendelssohn, and a violinist who studied at the Vienna and Leipzig conservatoires, Joachim counted Johannes Brahms, Clara and Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt among his acquaintances, and became leader of the Berlin 'Hochschule für Musik' in his later career. Subtitled ‘From Impressions of Byron’s Poems’, these deeply affecting Melodies are songlike and melancholy in tone. Even the final, more pastoral Andante cantabile, leaves a bittersweet, nostalgic aftertaste. Although his name is relatively little-known today, Joachim leaves an impressive list of chamber and orchestral compositions, some of which, like this work, take inspiration from his Jewish heritage.

Robert Schumann once referred to Brahms’s chamber words as ‘veiled symphonies’, and so it is with this; a wide-ranging sonata that takes us on a grand journey. Written 20 years after his first cello sonata, Brahms endowed this work, dating from 1886, with a grand, four-movement design. He composed it during a productive summer spent far away from the heat and clamour of Vienna, in the ancient Swiss town of Thun, in the foothills of the Alps. The cellist Brahms had in mind was the great Robert Hausmann, famed for his stamina and expansive tone (and, by coincidence, the cellist in quartet that also featured *Hebräische Melodien* composer and violinist, Joseph Joachim). It was a happy time for Brahms. His career, by that point, was well-established: he was world famous, having completed his Fourth Symphony, and there is a confidence and assuredness to the writing that reflects this.

Yet surprisingly, the première in November 1886 received a lukewarm response from certain commentators, bewildered by the impassioned melodies and rich piano writing. Hugo Wolf, best known today for his characterful art songs, lamented, ‘What is music, today, what is harmony, what is melody, what is rhythm, what is form, if this… is seriously accepted as music?’ Fortunately, history has disagreed with Wolf’s view, and the Sonata has been adopted by cellists – and arranged for various other instruments – thanks to its drama and melodic charm.

The opening Allegro vivace surges into life with unstoppable momentum and bubbling energy. The heroics give way to music of great poignancy and tenderness in the slow movement. The stormy scherzo contrasts with the songlike final movement, where the piano and cello interweave musical ideas in a vibrant and dynamic exchange, bringing the sonata to a triumphant conclusion. It is telling that the work was written for ‘Piano and Violoncello’: this Sonata is yet another showcase for two musical equals, working in partnership together.