

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 19 October 2023
7.30pm

Ning Feng violin

Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)

Violin Sonata in G minor (dedicated to Joseph Szigeti)
Op. 27 No. 1 (1923)

*I. Grave. Lento assai • II. Fugato. Molto moderato •
III. Allegretto poco scherzoso. Amabile •
IV. Finale con brio. Allegro fermo*

Violin Sonata in A minor 'Obsession' (dedicated to Jacques Thibaud)
Op. 27 No. 2 (1923)

*I. Obsession 'Prélude'. Poco vivace • II. Malinconia. Poco lento •
III. Danse des ombres 'Sarabande'. Lento •
IV. Les furies. Allegro furioso*

Violin Sonata in G 'Pastorale' (dedicated to Mathieu Crickboom)
Op. 27 No. 5 (1923)

*I. L'aurore. Lento assai
II. Danse rustique. Allegro giocoso molto moderato*

Violin Sonata in E (dedicated to Manuel Quiroga) Op. 27 No. 6 (1923)

Interval

Nicolò Paganini (1782-1840)

From 24 Caprices Op. 1 (c.1805)

Caprice No. 1 in E 'L'Arpeggio' • Caprice No. 4 in C minor •
Caprice No. 5 in A minor • Caprice No. 7 in A minor •
Caprice No. 9 in E 'La chasse' • Caprice No. 13 in B flat •
Caprice No. 14 in E flat • Caprice No. 17 in E flat •
Caprice No. 20 in D • Caprice No. 23 in E flat •
Caprice No. 24 in A minor

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What was it like to sit in a hall and hear the great musicians of the past play? The sound of Nicolò Paganini's playing is entirely lost to us, save for breathless accounts from those who heard him two centuries ago. The liquid movement of Eugène Ysaÿe's fingers on the violin is within reach, but only just: recorded on wax rolls during the First World War, when contemporaries judged him past his prime. On paper, though, both are vividly preserved, in the great works they wrote for solo violin, imbued with the firm stamp of their own violinistic technique and personality.

By the time **Ysaÿe**, the greatest of the Belgian violinist-composers, wrote his acclaimed 6 Sonatas for violin solo, his performing career was essentially over. He had been acclaimed across Europe as the greatest violinist of his age, but as his playing faded after the First World War, his thoughts turned to what he saw as the poor state of the modern repertoire for his instrument. Travelling home from a performance of Bach's mighty Sonatas and Partitas given by Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti in 1923, Ysaÿe turned over in his mind the possibility of writing something to equal the masterpieces of the past.

The elder statesman of the instrument considered the younger violinists of his age and, in his green leather-bound notebook which he kept perpetually to hand, sketched out works imbued with the hallmarks of their musical personalities. He wrote the first sonata for Szigeti; it nods to Bach's Sonatas and Partitas with its formal *Fugato*, while flashes of Ysaÿe's distinctive whole-tone harmonic palette surface in the serene third movement. The second sonata he dedicated to the Frenchman Jaques Thibaud, and in it achieved a timeless *coup de théâtre* by cutting through quotations from Bach's E major Partita with the medieval *Dies irae* plainchant, suggesting the weight of fate hanging over his attempts to equal the master.

The third and fourth sonatas were written for George Enescu and Fritz Kreisler respectively, and while their names live on in violin legend, the violinists for whom Ysaÿe composed the final pair of sonatas are today almost totally unknown. The fifth bears a dedication to Belgian violinist and Ysaÿe-acolyte Mathieu Crickboom. Its first movement, headed *L'aurore*, is both a depiction of the sun rising and an awakening of the violin itself. In the sixth sonata, a clear Spanish character captures the national identity of the dedicatee, Manuel Quiroga, who was compared in his prime to Sarasate but whose playing career was cut tragically short after he was hit by a truck in New York's Times Square and lost all feeling in one arm.

Ysaÿe portrayed not only his contemporaries in the Sonatas, but also himself, through a myriad of idiosyncratic bowings and fingerings printed in editions of the music. 'Ysaÿe's dream did come true to a great extent', wrote Joseph Szigeti, who served as a judge at the 1937 Queen Elizabeth competition. The young competitors, who had 'never heard the master, were yet ... by the reproduction of those sinuous, baroque,

nervous Ysaÿean passages, arabesques, and whimsical musical ideas, perpetuating something of his essence.' With the exception of Kreisler, all the dedicatees of these Sonatas - and Ysaÿe himself, at the opening concert in 1901 - performed on the Wigmore Hall stage over the years; in 1926, Szigeti played the sonata that had been written in his honour.

Unlike Ysaÿe, **Nicolò Paganini** was for years reluctant to tour beyond his homeland, but a talent for publicity meant that when he did finally grace the stages of Paris, Vienna and London, early 19th-century audiences turned out night after night and readily paid inflated ticket prices to hear him in the flesh. His repertoire was calculated to impress, though contained little of what we would consider 'great' music. He stuck to virtuoso show pieces by the violinist-composers of the time and to his own compositions. These included concertos, variations and a wealth of short numbers, but it was the *24 Caprices* that were engraved upon his legacy as his Opus 1.

Paganini was 38 years old when the work appeared in print in 1820, but the inspiration dated to an earlier phase of his career, when as a student he encountered and devoured the *24 Capricci* by the 17th-century Italian virtuoso violinist Pietro Locatelli. The older Italian's playing had faded from living memory by the time Paganini got to know his compositions, but as violinists, the two men shared a flair for extravagant virtuosity, and Paganini paid homage to his predecessor by quoting from Locatelli's seventh *Capriccio* at the very opening of his own set.

The first of Paganini's *Caprices* scatters ricocheted arpeggios across the whole of the instrument's range (not unlike the opening of Chopin's Op. 10 *Etudes* for piano of 1829), as though mapping out the territory to be explored in the pieces that follow. Meanwhile, the fourth *Caprice* indulges the violinist's desire to sing with the instrument, much like the operatic stars with whom Paganini sometimes shared a stage; it could be an aria.

The ninth has gained the nickname 'La chasse' ('The hunt'), demonstrating Paganini's pictorial impulse with impressions of flutes and horns accompanying some horse-backed bloodsport, and the origin of the thirteenth's sometime moniker 'The Devil's Laughter' is obvious from the opening bar. The fame of the final *Caprice*, however, known simply as 'the twenty-fourth', has far eclipsed that of all the others. Almost no other piece of 19th-century music has fascinated composers quite so much as this; even a young Eugène Ysaÿe penned his own theme-and-variation response to it in his early travelling-virtuoso days. And maybe, decades later, as Ysaÿe added a flash of left-hand *pizzicato* (plucked strings) to his Fifth Sonata, he brought Paganini to mind: a violinist neither he nor we could ever have heard ourselves, but who lives forever in printed black and white.

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