

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 1 July 2022 7.00pm

**Alina Ibragimova** violin

**Eugène Ysaÿe** (1858-1931)

Violin Sonata in G 'Pastorale' (dedicated to Mathieu Crickboom) Op. 27 No. 5 (1923)  
*I. L'Aurore • II. Danse rustique*

**Nicolò Paganini** (1782-1840)

Caprice in B flat Op. 1 No. 13 (c.1805)

Caprice in E flat Op. 1 No. 19 (c.1805)

Caprice in A minor Op. 1 No. 24 (c.1805)

**Luciano Berio** (1925-2003)

Sequenza VIII (1976-7)

*Interval*

**Heinrich Biber** (1644-1704)

Passacaglia in G minor 'The Guardian Angel' (?1674)

**Béla Bartók** (1881-1945)

Sonata for solo violin BB124 (1944)

*I. Tempo di ciaccona • II. Fuga. Risoluto, non troppo vivace •  
III. Melodia. Adagio • IV. Presto*

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Uniquely able to draw top-flight international artists into its intimate space, Wigmore Hall is the ideal arena in which to experience at close quarters the intensity of a solo violin recital. Tonight, Alina Ibragimova traverses 300 years of virtuoso writing for the violin, armed with no more than a wooden box crossed with strings, a horsehair bow, and her bare hands.

First come works by two great virtuoso violinists, fearsome adversaries even for the most skilled players of today. Belgian-born **Eugène Ysaÿe** wrote his 6 Sonatas for solo violin in 1923, creating a compendium of mould-breaking technical challenges and dedicating each one to a fellow violinist. The Sonata No. 5 was dedicated to Mathieu Crickboom (second violinist in the successful Ysaÿe Quartet). According to Ysaÿe's son, Antoine, this sonata presents 'a more thoughtful, more elegiac character' compared to the other sonatas in the set. The first movement, *L'aurora* ('The dawn'), rises from the mists with a motif that initially asserts itself tentatively but forms the basis for elaborate variation, erupting in blazing sunlight at the end. The second movement begins with a rustic dance (the challenge here is to play the terrifying widely-spaced split chords with abandon). The whimsical central section features much double-stopping (playing two notes at once) and recalls the previous movement's rising motif before shards of left-hand pizzicato lead to a return of the rustic dance, then a wild coda.

In 1920, four years before Ysaÿe's sonatas appeared in print, **Nicolò Paganini's** *24 Caprices* were published as a set of études (studies), each one focusing on a particular aspect of playing technique. It's a wonder they were published at all since few were able to play them, but then the revered virtuoso had entered the popular imagination as a mystical figure whose superhuman gifts had been bestowed on him through a Satanic pact. The Caprice No. 13 is nicknamed 'The Devil's Laughter' for the sneering descending thirds of its opening. Left-hand jumps (also while playing thirds) and fast string-crossing with the bow complete the challenges. After an exposed slow opening in octaves, No. 19 involves double-stopped interruptions to its chirruping tune. The fast runs of the middle section are made trickier by being played only on the bottom string. The final Caprice (No. 24) is the most familiar. Paganini added 12 variations to his theme, which other composers, notably Rachmaninov and Brahms, borrowed as the basis for their own variations: Variation 3 is in octaves, the ninth offers a flashy display of rapidly alternating bowed and plucked notes and Variation 10 calls for a sweet tone (and accurate tuning) at the instrument's upper reaches.

Between 1958 and 2002 Italian composer **Luciano Berio** produced a series of 14 virtuosic *Sequenzas*, each for a different single instrument and introducing new or unusual playing techniques. The composer was fond of the violin, calling it 'one of the most subtle and complex of all instruments' and his violin *Sequenza* (No. 8) has

at its root an exploration of the notes A and B (separately and together). Berio saw this reference point as reflecting the chaconne form, in which variations are created over a fixed bass pattern or harmonic sequence. By extension the violin *Sequenza* was a tribute to the mighty *Chaconne* from Bach's D minor Partita for solo violin. The very last sound is the notes A and B played together, *pianississimo* (very, very quietly) and held for 10 seconds – calling for a finely controlled bow-arm, and nerves of steel.

**Heinrich Biber** was the leading violinist of his day and also composed in a variety of genres, including sacred music and operas. In his *General History of Music* (1789), Charles Burney wrote that 'of all the violin players of the last century Biber seems to have been the best, and his solos are the most difficult and most fanciful of any music I have seen of the same period'. Biber's great contribution to the violin repertoire is the *15 Mystery Sonatas* (also known as *Rosary Sonatas*) for violin and continuo, published in 1674, named after the points along the Mystery procession meditating on the lives of Jesus and Mary. After the 15th sonata comes one of the earliest pieces for solo violin: a *Passacaglia* – a form very similar to the chaconne (variations over a repeated bass pattern). Here the pattern could hardly be simpler – the first four notes of a descending G minor scale. But over this short repeating cycle, Biber weaves a fund of decoration and development, creating a tension between the simple, rock-solid theme and the freer, more fantasia-like lines above it.

**Béla Bartók's** Sonata for solo violin is a departure from the generally more appealing, less pungent works of his last years after leaving his native Hungary for America, works such as the Concerto for Orchestra and Third Piano Concerto. It was written for Yehudi Menuhin, whose performances of Bartók's Second Violin Concerto and First Violin Sonata had impressed the composer. Bartók's health had been failing since his arrival in the USA, but he managed to complete the sonata in March 1944: the following month he was finally diagnosed with leukaemia. Bartók was well enough to attend the première in November and was relieved that his bold conception had paid off: 'I was afraid it was too long; imagine ... a single violin for twenty minutes.' The title of the first movement, *Tempo di ciaconna*, reveals the influence of a chaconne though it is cast in a sonata form. The fugue (another reference to Bach) is likewise not a strict fugue. One of its many challenges is to contrast the detached notes of the subject with the *legato* (connected) notes of the countersubject. After the uncompromising, often thorny first two movements, the third, *Melodia*, is more serene yet also mysterious. The finale is roughly in rondo form, with folk-like episodes alternating with the breathlessly fast *perpetuum mobile* motion.

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