

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 1 July 2026
7.30pm

Leonidas Kavakos violin
Kirill Gerstein piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Violin Sonata in B flat K454 (1784)
I. Largo – Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegretto

Interval

Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in E minor Op. 36a (1898-1900)
*I. Langsam • II. Presto •
III. Andante, piuttosto grave*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Violin Sonata No. 2 BB85 (1922)
I. Molto moderato • II. Allegretto



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By the spring of 1784, **Mozart** had been living in Vienna for three years. His opera, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, had opened to great success at the prestigious Burgtheater in July 1782, and just a few weeks later, he married Constanze Weber in St Stephen's Cathedral. The composer – still not yet 30 – was much in demand as a pianist, giving performances of his concertos and sonatas in concert halls and private residences across the city. In April 1784, the capital welcomed another virtuoso, as Mozart reported in a letter to his father: 'We now have the famous Strinasacchi from Mantua here – a very good violinist. She has much taste and feeling in her playing. I am just now writing a sonata which we will play together in the theatre on Thursday at her benefit concert.'

The new work – the Violin Sonata in B flat K454 – was premièred in the Kärntnertor Theatre on 29 April, with Emperor Joseph II in the audience. Mozart composed the work with such speed that he managed to write out only the violin part – he reputedly performed the piano part from memory, completing the score after the event. The music betrays no sense of haste, only abundant inspiration. As befits such an important public occasion, the Sonata opens with a dramatic slow introduction, as if calling a boisterous audience to attention. The *Allegro* that follows pits both instruments against each other in playful dialogue – this is music for two gifted individuals gleefully revelling in each other's virtuosity. The *Andante* middle movement was evidently designed to showcase Strinasacchi's songlike tone, yet beneath its lyrical surface there is an often unsettling sense of harmonic daring. Mozart was clearly set not just on pleasing his patrons, but equally on pushing the boundaries of classical convention. The *Allegretto* finale is genial in tone, setting toes tapping in the hall and sending a contented audience skipping on their way.

Born in Tuscany to a Corsican father and an Austrian mother, **Busoni** spent his earliest years in Trieste, then under Austrian rule. A child prodigy, he performed the solo part in Mozart's C minor Piano Concerto aged just nine. Shortly thereafter, he moved to Vienna to study at city's conservatory. After further studies in Leipzig, he accepted a sequence of teaching positions in Helsinki, Moscow and Boston, before settling permanently in Berlin from 1894. Having initially achieved fame as a pianist (noted for his performances of the Mozart concertos), he devoted himself increasingly to composition. He considered his Violin Sonata No. 2 in E minor, Op. 36, to be his first mature opus.

Composed in the summer of 1898, it was premièred that September in Helsinki by the violinist Viktor Nováček, with Busoni himself at the piano. Revisions followed over the next few years, before the sonata finally appeared in print in 1901, now framed with a

dedication in memory of Viktor's elder brother, Ottokar. The opening movement, marked *Langsam* (slowly), is predominantly wistful in mood. The *Presto* that follows takes the form of a *tarantella*, a vigorous dance-form from the south of Italy that was, according to tradition, caused by the bite of a venomous spider. The concluding *Andante* is expansive and reflective, and its initial solemnity gives way to a sense of lambent radiance. More than twice the length of the first two movements combined, it clearly echoes the similar short-short-long structure of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 (the two works also end in the same luminous key of E major). There is another musical debt too – to Bach's chorale melody, 'Wie wohl ist mir', written for his wife, Anna Magdalena. Busoni subjects this theme to a series of six variations that allow him to show off his deep command of form and technique.

Busoni may have revered the Austro-German classics, but his open-minded and cosmopolitan worldview meant that he welcomed new voices. He first met **Bartók** in Berlin in 1903, and a few years later, praised his *14 Bagatelles*, Op. 6, for solo piano, describing them as 'at last something truly new'. In the bagatelles, Bartók put to good use the lessons he had learned on a field trip with Kodály where the two young composers collected traditional Hungarian melodies. From now on, Bartók's music would achieve a remarkable alchemy between ethnography on the one hand and experiment on the other (he learned much, for example, from Debussy and Schoenberg).

Bartók had written three youthful violin sonatas as a student, very much in the late Romantic style. His two numbered sonatas date from 1921 and 1922 respectively and were inspired by the playing of the Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Áranyi, who had long been resident in London. Both were first heard in the British capital, with the composer himself at the piano. The Violin Sonata No. 2 eschews the conventional three movements of the classical sonata, preferring instead the bipartite structure of the Hungarian *verbunkos* (a popular dance form used by the recruiting gangs who roamed the Austrian empire in search of volunteer soldiers). The opening *Molto moderato* is languid and improvisatory, perhaps suggesting something of the melancholy expanse of the Hungarian plain or the heavily ornamented playing of a Romani fiddler. This is followed by an energetic *Allegretto*, full of percussive effects and topsy-turvy rhythmic displacements that would wrongfoot anybody rash enough to try to dance to it. In theory, the home key of the Sonata is C major – the simplest, most straightforward key of all. In reality, the Sonata is highly dissonant, pushing the very limits of conventional tonality. All the more miraculous, then, are the Sonata's final bars, which seem to resolve all of the turmoil that has gone before.

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