

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 1 May 2024
7.30pm

Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider violin
Saleem Ashkar piano

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

Violin Sonata (1914-5, rev. 1916-22)

I. Con moto • II. Ballada • III. Allegretto • IV. Adagio

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 121 (1851)

*I. Ziemlich langsam - Lebhaft • II. Sehr lebhaft •
III. Leise, einfach • IV. Bewegt*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Violin Sonata (Sonatina) in A minor D385 (1816)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Menuetto. Allegro •
IV. Allegro*

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Violin Sonata in E flat Op. 18 (1887)

*I. Allegro, ma non troppo • II. Improvisation. Andante
cantabile • III. Finale. Andante - Allegro*

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There are two significant relationships peering over **Leoš Janáček**'s shoulder in his Violin Sonata – first Kamila Stösslová, the young married woman Janáček met in 1917 (he was 63; she was 26), whom he fell for in a torrent of unconsummated passion; second, the operatic role of Kát'a Kabanová, which Stösslová inspired. While other works reflecting his passion, such as the later Second String Quartet, flew from his pen, the Violin Sonata took the best part of eight years to arrive at the form finally published in 1922, after many revisions – music was discarded or rewritten, movements re-ordered, removed or published separately. The process started around 1914 and continued throughout the First World War, but the published version sounds impulsive and improvisatory.

Janáček knew how to give the shortest melodic tag maximum impact. The first movement is full of his signature obsessive repetitions and fierce contrasts, with cymbalom-like *tremolandi* from the piano underpinning the violin's declamatory melodic strivings. The *Ballada* second movement is a lullaby that strains against its restful agenda. In the scherzo-like third movement the piano picks out a banal, naïve tune that leaks into trills and other wilder distortions from both players. The fourth movement begins with a rising figure from the piano accompanied by jittery interjections from the violin, which then opens into one of Janáček's sweetest, most cryptic melodies, and the work ends in an ambiguous sense of loss.

By 1851, **Robert Schumann** had been in post as Düsseldorf's director of music for over a year. What had started off well for him and his wife Clara turned sour – he was difficult to deal with, and, crucially, he was a hopeless conductor in charge of the city's choir and orchestra. Yet this Düsseldorf period saw a surge of works, mostly chamber and symphonic music, on a par with his 'year of song' in 1840 – including two Violin Sonatas and the G minor Piano Trio. The first Violin Sonata was a dark, relatively compact work, which he completed within a week. Towards the end of 1851 came the Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor, likewise swiftly composed but a much more expansive work in four movements, the first and the fourth both in sonata form, which has the effect of stoking the work's overall temperature and breadth.

The writing for both instruments is virtuosic and large-scale, but the violin part rarely strays above the treble stave for overt display. The work opens with a rhapsodic, Zigeuner-style flourish for the violin and then moves on to two big brooding melodies. The passionate fluency escalates in a powerful development, capped by a highly romanticised return of the opening. The mercurial scherzo and the slow movement's variations are linked by a reference to a traditional chorale tune, which is alluded to rather than stated in the violin's *pianissimo pizzicato* accompanied by the piano's equally remote role, marked to be played 'mit Verschiebung' (where two strings are struck rather than three), before the variations gather in substance and harmonic scope. The finale's turbulence is mollified by the second theme's relative lyricism, before the music steers towards a confident close in D major.

Franz Schubert had been playing the piano since he was five and the violin since he was eight, and as an

accomplished teenager he was giving music lessons and playing the viola with his father and brothers in the family string quartet. He had also composed a prodigious amount of music, from songs and works for solo piano to symphonies and masses. His guiding star at this time was Mozart, whose spirit hovers over the set of three violin sonatas Schubert composed in the spring of 1816.

Although the one in A minor is described, as was the classical-period convention at the time, as a sonata 'for piano, with violin accompaniment', the violin quickly outdoes the piano's expressive opening in the first movement with dramatically wide leaps, and the flavour of the movement as a whole recalls the anguish of Mozart's famous Piano Sonata K310, written in 1777 and also in A minor. Schubert lays out the first section over three themes and keys instead of the usual two, and the third turns to remote F major, brought back in the closing section after the brief and static middle section. This anticipates the F major home key of the song-like *Andante* – Mozart had made the same move in his A minor Piano Sonata – for a movement that is a set of variations draped over another wide tonal scheme, with a long modulation back to the home key. The terse *Menuetto* in D minor is relieved by the short trio in B flat. And again F major has a significant say in the rondo finale, which is dominated by the sad little melody first heard in the A minor home key.

Richard Strauss wrote his only Violin Sonata in 1887, and it was his last chamber music work. He was 23 years old and already had a substantial number of small-scale instrumental works behind him – cello and piano sonatas, a string quartet and a piano quartet – not to mention larger works including concertos and two symphonies. They were all written around the time that he was learning his craft as a conductor, and with *Aus Italien*, *Macbeth*, *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* had embarked on the brilliant and flamboyant series of tone-poems that would see him through the 1890s. Songs were a constant part of his output, and with his fast-developing, formidable skills as orchestrator and conductor, opera would dominate his career in the new century.

An impressively complete musician, Strauss was also a fine pianist and violinist, factors immediately obvious in the virtuosic Violin Sonata, written in the supremely confident key of E flat. After a slightly formal opening paragraph, the first of the three movements moves swiftly into the sort of unchained melody that poured out of Strauss. He also changes meter between common (4/4) and triple (3/4), the latter yielding something more malleable and unbuttoned before being brought back into 4/4 assertiveness. The second movement – an *Andante* later published on its own as an '*Improvisation*', although the score's detail is pretty clear – settles onto an upholstered A flat, with the violin taking flight over a luxuriant, comfort-blanket piano accompaniment. The middle section is more spontaneous, with a roving tonal range and no key signature, but then the two soloists get ever more closely acquainted in music that soars and swoons with sensuous, mutual flattery. A rather sober piano prelude briefly lowers the temperature before the launch of the *Finale*'s fireworks and heroics.

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