

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 1 November 2021 1.00pm

Mischa Maisky cello

Lily Maisky piano



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

7 Variations on 'Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen' from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* WoO. 46 (1801)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 65 (1960-1)
*I. Dialogo • II. Scherzo - Pizzicato • III. Elegia •
IV. Marcia • V. Moto perpetuo*

Ástor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

Le Grand Tango (1982)

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'Wir wollen uns der Liebe freu'n
wir leben durch die Lieb' allein.'

'We all yearn for love,
love is what we live for.'

So sing Pamina and Papageno, newly-acquainted friends in the magical world of *Die Zauberflöte* ('The Magic Flute'), Mozart's *singspiel* (or musical play) from 1791. By this point in the action, the story has featured a monstrous serpent, a Queen of the Night, and a band of lecherous slaves – so this duet is an oasis of calm, and a disarmingly touching one, at that.

The text was written by Emanuel Schikaneder, an actor-producer who was also the original Papageno. Its naivete is echoed in the charm of Mozart's musical setting, whereby a folk-like tune is passed between two equal voices as they share their thoughts on the meaning of life and love. Conversation, equality, hope: what better foundation for friendship?

It would be false, however, to suggest that Mozart and **Beethoven** were friends, although they did meet. Born in Bonn in 1770, Ludwig van Beethoven was 14 years Mozart's junior, and a great admirer of his work. On a visit to Vienna in 1787, the teenage composer had insisted on meeting his idol, persuading the reluctant Mozart to become his tutor, but it wasn't to be: family illness summoned Beethoven back to Bonn, and by the next time he came to Vienna, Mozart was dead.

Beethoven composed these *7 Variations on 'Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen'* in 1801, 10 years after Mozart's death, and three years after his cello and piano variations on Papageno's solo number, 'Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen' ('A girlfriend or a little wife'). Clearly *The Magic Flute* had cast an enduring spell on him.

After a grandiose opening chord, the piano takes the melodic lead, before the cello transposes the tune to its higher register. Variation by variation, Mozart's melody is embellished with rippling scale passages, skittish arpeggios, and even transformed by a sombre, minor-key incarnation. But as in the opera, darkness gives way to light, and the optimistic spirit of friendship triumphs in the end.

In 1960, the virtuoso cellist Mstislav Rostropovich (1927-2007) was allowed out of Soviet Russia on a rare visit to the United Kingdom. There, at the Royal Festival Hall, he gave the British première of Dmitry Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto. The Russian composer was in the audience that night. So, too, was **Benjamin Britten**, who nudged Shostakovich in the ribs every time the cellist did something to delight him. Apparently, his enthusiasm was so great that he left bruises. Speaking of that night, Britten later said: '[His] was a new way of playing the cello, almost a new, vital way of playing music.'

It's no surprise then, that the British composer insisted on writing a sonata for the great cellist, creating a piece that puts the soloist

through their paces: harmonics, glissandi, four-string chords and intricate *pizzicati* (plucked notes) all feature. Given the towering reputations of the composer and the cellist, there is something endearing in knowing that at the work's first play-through in 1961 in Suffolk, both were so nervous that they required, in the words of Rostropovich, 'four or five very large whiskies' before they could begin. ('We played like pigs,' he added, 'but we were so happy.')

Britten would later make a reciprocal visit to Moscow, conducting the 1964 première of his Cello Symphony, a larger-scale work for Rostropovich and orchestra. Naturally, Dmitry Shostakovich was in the audience – just as he's in this Sonata. You can hear his influence in the splintered waltz of the opening movement, not to mention the demonic Serenade-gone-wrong of the second (those buzzing pizzicato figures!), and the penultimate-movement march that refuses to step in time. The final movement even contains the famous 'DSCH' theme – a four-note, stepwise-descending motif invented by 'D.SCH'-ostakovich as a kind of musical signature (according to German notation). The Sonata – at turns taut, ironic, and passionate – is a testament to severable remarkable friendships. Now as it did then in 1961, it speaks of new beginnings.

As a child **Astor Piazzolla** was a prodigy on the bandoneón; the square-built button accordion that originated in his native Argentina. As a teenager, he made his way performing in tango ensembles with Anibal Troilo, a celebrated bandleader in Buenos Aires, and later studied composition with Alberto Ginastera, and in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. The combination of his experience as a performer and his classical training gave him the tools to experiment with – or, as his critics alleged, to *murder* – the tango. It wasn't until he attained critical acclaim abroad that his deviations into jazz, dissonance and fugal sophistication were accepted at home.

The sonority of the bandoneón stalks *Le Grand Tango* like a dancer's shadow. The opening chords buzz and hiss with dissonance like its rasping bellows, and tumbling asides and passionate interjections from the cello and piano recall the sultry, sexy melodies that rise and unfurl like the smoke in tango bars.

The tango is a dance for two, and every dance tells a story. Here, it feels as if Piazzolla has packed an entire lifetime of experience, devotion, and regret into the piece's 11 minutes. Jagged, syncopated lines bristle with tension, languid harmonies unwind with sensual abandon, and there is a central passage of such poignancy that you can almost hear the whispered words it contains. And always, there is that nagging, beating pulse that refuses to let the listener – or the dancers – go. 'For me,' said Piazzolla, 'tango was always for the ear, rather than the feet.' Perhaps the Wigmore Hall audience will beg to differ: will there be dancing in the aisles?

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