

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 1 November 2024
7.30pm

Steven Isserlis cello
Joshua Bell violin
Irène Duval violin
Blythe Teh Engstroem viola
Jeremy Denk piano
Connie Shih piano

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Op. 13 (1875-6)
*I. Allegro molto • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivo •
IV. Allegro quasi presto*

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Piano Trio No. 1 in F Op. 18 (1864)
*I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante • III. Scherzo. Presto •
IV. Allegro*

Interval

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

3 pièces for cello and piano (1914)
*Modéré • Sans vitesse et à l'aise • Vite et nerveusement
rythmé*

Gabriel Fauré

Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor Op. 15 (1876-9, rev. 1883)
*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro vivo •
III. Adagio • IV. Allegro molto*



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With his First Violin Sonata, the 32 year-old **Gabriel Fauré** made a late but auspicious debut as a composer of chamber music. After its 1877 première, the work was praised by Fauré's teacher and mentor, Camille Saint-Saëns: 'Above it all floats something magical', he declared in a review for the *Journal de Musique*. And Fauré's own pupil, the composer Florent Schmitt, hailed the first performance as 'a red-letter day for the history of chamber music'.

Despite this cross-generational approval from Fauré's fellow musicians, publishers were less enthusiastic. Their caution was based on the very qualities that had delighted the composer's peers – the Sonata set out on a new path, something that sounded more quintessentially French than the prevailing Germanic musical style. Eventually Fauré had to settle for a one-off fee, with the publisher receiving all the royalties from subsequent performances.

Schmitt's assertion of its importance proved well-founded, since Fauré's Sonata provided the model or inspiration for a number of significant works for violin and piano by French (or Belgian) composers – César Franck's ubiquitous Sonata followed in 1886, Guillaume Lekeu's Sonata in 1892, and the line stretches to Debussy and Ravel and beyond. It is worth mentioning that Saint-Saëns himself did not put his signature to a violin sonata until eight years after Fauré's had appeared.

The new French accent that Fauré's music had acquired came via a combination of not-particularly French influences. Saint-Saëns had introduced him to the chromatically exploratory compositions of Wagner and Liszt as well as the rhapsodic fantasy of Schumann. To this Fauré added a fondness for music based on the modal scales found in early church music. Blended together, these elements produced a personal language capable of drifting in and out of a dreamlike state, and not rooted to tonic-dominant harmony. The gateway to Impressionism had been opened.

The 60-year friendship between **Camille Saint-Saëns** and Gabriel Fauré began as a teacher/pupil relationship and retained something of that flavour for a long time, even though Saint-Saëns was only ten years older than Fauré. When they met, Fauré was a 16-year-old student at the Ecole Niedermeyer where Saint-Saëns, ever one to keep a distance from the establishment, taught in preference to seeking a post at the Paris Conservatoire. Whereas the Conservatoire focused on opera, Ecole Niedermeyer was founded on church music traditions. Saint-Saëns (paradoxically?) introduced his students to music regarded as dangerously modernist, and shared his love of chamber music, considered at the time to be suspiciously un-French. Fauré's compositions suggest that these influences could not have been passed on to a more receptive pupil, or one better equipped to resist mere imitation.

The Piano Trio in F was the first of Saint-Saëns's full-scale chamber works to be published. It was written in 1864, as he approached the age of 30, with much of the

composition undertaken while he toured the Pyrenees and the Auvergne. In these mountainous regions of France, the folk music is permeated by the sound of the hurdy-gurdy, a stringed instrument worked by cranking a handle to produce a bagpipe-like drone. At several points in the Trio, most obviously the beginning of the *Andante*, allusions to this effect can be heard. The whole work has a pleasing aspect of fresh air and vigorous energy.

Mentions of **Nadia Boulanger** usually begin with a list of her illustrious pupils, a roster that includes many of the most celebrated composers and performers of the 20th Century. Her own most important early teacher was Gabriel Fauré. She joined his classes at the Conservatoire when she was nine, and continued to study composition with him until 1904, by which time she was 18. Throughout her career she championed his music. The 3 *pièces* for cello and piano were composed in 1914, four years before the early death of her sister and fellow composer Lili, upon which Nadia practically gave up composing in favour of teaching and performing.

Saint-Saëns continued to shepherd Fauré's career well beyond his time as the younger man's tutor. A vital part of this was introducing him to 'salon society', the close-knit group of intellectuals, artists and wealthy patrons who met in each other's homes to exchange ideas and, in modern parlance, to network. It was not only professional and artistic associations that were forged at these events – potential marriage partners were frequently steered together, and not always with happy outcomes.

The soirées of the contralto and socialite Pauline Viardot were particularly prestigious affairs. It was there that Fauré met Viardot's daughter Marianne, who seems to have been even more shy than he was. An awkward romantic relationship continued between them for about five years, eventually being formalised as an engagement in July 1877. Within four months Marianne had withdrawn her consent, much to Fauré's distress and embarrassment.

It was during this time that Fauré wrote the C minor Piano Quartet. Perhaps the stress and uncertainty of the relationship, and the gloom that followed its demise, contributed to the slow process of composition, which lasted from 1876-9. Even then he was unsatisfied with the finale; he rewrote it in 1883, three years after the work had been premiered at the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris.

Even if we subscribe to the theory that the personal circumstances of composers' lives are reflected their music, we shouldn't expect this work to embody a particular mood. It was after all a period of intense but fluctuating and uncertain emotions. Rather it is a masterly consolidation of all the elements that would from now on characterise Fauré's individual style: rhythmic and harmonic ambiguity, shimmering textures, and here and there the faint aroma of liturgical incense.

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