

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 20 February 2025
7.30pm

Vilde Frang violin
Lawrence Power viola
Valeriy Sokolov violin

Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)

Sonata for 2 violins in A minor Op. posth.
*I. Poco lento, maestoso - Allegro fermo •
II. Allegretto poco lento • III. Finale. Allegro vivo e
con fuoco*

Interval

Bjarne Brustad (1895-1978)

Capricci for violin and viola
I. Moderato • II. Lento • III. Allegretto • IV. Vivace

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967)

Serenade for 2 violins and viola Op. 12 (1919-20)



UNDER 35S

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Eugène Ysaÿe was one of the first violinists in the generation after Joseph Joachim to play Bach's solo works in public, and perhaps the first all told to present recitals entirely devoted to Bach. His reverence and close familiarity with the composer come through in the unaccompanied sonatas he himself produced, but so they do in the much less familiar work that opens this programme: his Sonata for two violins, which he composed in 1915, but which was not published until 1960. He dedicated it to Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians, to whom he gave lessons, and who established a competition in his honour (later renamed the Queen Elisabeth Competition). The work requires, however, violinists of the first rank - and, indeed, of equal rank, for both parts are technically and musically demanding, and their relative prominence changes all the time.

The spirit of Bach is there from the beginning, in a moderately paced introduction set going by a tag that recurs through this opening movement: a three-note scalar rise followed by a fall, most often, as here at the start, outlining a triad. Bachian echoes occur within a texture, common to much of the piece, more like that of a string quartet. There must be many musicians who have opened the sheet music and thought it needed not two violins but four.

Capacious, the first movement is thrust by its tag into an allegro, after which comes a slow section in F major and, starting about halfway through the movement, a fugue, up-tempo and back in A minor. Soon after a *stretto* on the three-note scale motif, the music strays into A major for a reminiscent dream, from which it is called back into the minor for a more thorough reprise, at an allegro pace with a *maestoso* close.

To contrast with the highly chromatic language of this first movement, the second begins with something like a folk song, the melody having just one accidental, unstressed. This kind of music is interleaved with scherzo-like episodes. At the end the song is sung by both violins.

Relatively straightforward melody bounds through briskly undulating accompaniment in the first part of the finale, which is in A major. When the opening music has completed itself with a middle section (where the instruments take flight towards bell-like harmonics) and a reprise, the movement turns to slower music in F major. The emotional temperature rises and falls, and then the A major music is back, for a long development through to a recollection and excited coda.

For a different way of slicing the quartet we move north from Ysaÿe's Brussels to Oslo, where the Norwegian composer **Bjarne Brustad** was making his living as an orchestral viola player, and where, in 1931, he wrote his Capricci for violin and viola. Brustad was an all-round composer, with nine symphonies to his name (dating from after 1945, when he seems to have had

more time for creative work) as well as a good amount of chamber music.

His Capricci are all short, the whole set done in 11 minutes. The first is in ternary form, weird stuff around a spiky march recaptured at the end. Then comes a luminous folk song and, as the third movement, a folk dance, a *springar*, with some unusual sonorities. The finale is a Rondo that enjoys slipping and sliding in tonality, and that surely also has its roots in Norwegian tradition. It is not surprising, given the folk allegiances and the often burlesque character of these pieces, that Brustad the following year should have gone to Budapest to seek lessons with Bartók. Nor is it surprising that Bartók turned him away, on the grounds he needed no more teaching.

That anecdote conveys us close to Bartók's friend and colleague **Zoltán Kodály**, whose Serenade brings this evening's three musicians together to close the recital. The combination is an unusual one, but, curiously, Kodály had tried it out as a teenager. Second time round, the grouping capped a decade of concentration from him on chamber music, piano collections and songs, his other works of this period including his two string quartets and cello compositions.

Dating from 1919–20, the Serenade was one of a small group of pieces published in 1921 by Universal Edition, at Bartók's encouragement. That brought Kodály into the central circles of the European avant-garde, and the work was included in the festival of new chamber music in Salzburg in 1922. Webern was there. Kodály's piece was played by members of the Amar Quartet, including Licco Amar, who was Hungarian, and Paul Hindemith.

The first movement begins as a dance, but this soon breaks up and the viola picks up cues from the violins to go off by itself with a robust melody. The violins are listening, though, and the melody is taken up by them, two octaves apart. Conversation between viola and violins continues, on this melody and on a couple of related ones. The dance comes back to introduce a coda-reprise. Dance and song are strongly in tune with Hungarian folk music, which Kodály had studied with Bartók in the field a decade or so before, and to which he remained attached his whole life.

Remembering Bartók, we might call the second movement a night-music scene, where the cello sings in an environment of sounds that might seem to come from distant streams and, nearer at hand, animals: insects, birds, small mammals. The dance from the first movement drifts in, but not for long.

The finale is a dance medley, including, quite early on, one in the march style of a recruiting dance.

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