

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 20 March 2025
7.30pm

Elena Urioste violin
Tom Poster piano

Charlotte Sohy (1887-1955)
Guillaume Lekeu (1870-1894)

Thème varié Op. 15 (ca. 1922)
Violin Sonata in G (1892)
*I. Très modéré - Vif et passionné •
II. Très lent • III. Très animé*

Interval

Mel Bonis (1858-1937)

Andante religioso Op. 78 (1909-10)
Allegretto ma non troppo Op. 84 (1904-10)

César Franck (1822-1890)

Violin Sonata in A (1886)
*I. Allegretto ben moderato • II. Allegro •
III. Recitativo-Fantasia. Ben moderato •
IV. Allegretto poco mosso*



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Charlotte Sohy was born in Paris in 1887, the daughter of an industrialist father and a mother who was an amateur singer. She studied the organ, took composition lessons with Mélanie Bonis, and in the 1890s attended the newly-founded Schola Cantorum conservatoire. Here she met her future husband, the composer and conductor Marcel Labey. During their long marriage, their social circle included Albert Roussel, Albéric Magnard, and Vincent d'Indy.

Sohy's *Thème varié* was completed by 1921, and dedicated to Nadia Boulanger – born a few months apart, this towering figure in music pedagogy was a childhood friend. The work's theme is grave and expansive, a melody in D minor that sighs over deep piano chords. The first variation is much livelier, with a bubbly energy that subsides for a more reflective variation on the theme's second part. The third variation begins as an obsessive motif, and drives the gradual crescendo that leads to the return of the main theme, now transformed into the major mode, for a peaceful conclusion. Altogether the form is rather like a compressed sonata, and Sohy was sufficiently pleased with it to make an orchestral version.

Guillaume Lekeu was born in Belgium in 1870. A pupil of César Franck, he became part of the so-called 'bande à Franck' of young composers who gathered around this fatherly figure. Among his disciples, Lekeu perhaps showed the greatest promise, before his tragic early death at the age of 24 from typhoid fever. Stories from his short life paint a picture of an archetypal highly-strung romantic: a young man who carried a score of Beethoven's late quartets wherever he went, and was so overcome by hearing *Tristan and Isolde* at Bayreuth that he fainted.

The Violin Sonata in G is probably Lekeu's most frequently performed work, and was commissioned by no less a figure than Eugène Ysaÿe, after the great virtuoso had heard part of a cantata that he had entered for the Belgian Prix de Rome. The opening of the first movement, with its gentle melody over piano chords, gives little indication of what will follow: a post-Wagnerian outpouring of sustained melodic lines, near-constant modulations and big-boned accompaniment. The slow movement, however, shows a more distinctive personality emerging. The tender main theme has an irregular metre of 7/8, which is handled so skilfully as to sound entirely natural, while a contrasting section introduces a melody to be played 'with the feeling of a popular song' – in one particularly charming passage, the piano doubles the violin for the tune two octaves above.

After two movements in the major mode, Lekeu begins the finale in a stern G minor, while reprising the feverish intensity that characterised much of the first movement. We can also discern the influence of 'cyclic' form – particularly associated with Franck and his acolytes – as Lekeu blends material from the first movement into the thematic mixture. When the

inevitable transition to G major arrives for the triumphant conclusion, there is no shortage of virtuoso pyrotechnics in either part.

Mélanie Bonis was born in 1858 in Paris, into a devoutly Catholic family. After piano lessons, she studied organ with Franck at the Paris Conservatoire. She composed over 300 works, many of which were published, but her *Three Pieces*, dating from around 1910, only appeared posthumously in 2019. We'll hear two of these charming miniatures, which were perhaps envisioned for domestic music making. The *Andante religioso* has an intimate feel: though lyrical, the expressive range is demurely controlled. The following *Allegretto ma non troppo* is more free-flowing and expressive, as the violin line is borne aloft on billowing piano arpeggios.

César Franck wrote relatively little chamber music. After a few youthful forays, the composer was well into middle age before his Piano Quintet appeared in 1879. His Violin Sonata came seven years later, in 1886: and both formed part of a move away from composing church music in the late period of his life. Though Ysaÿe was the recipient of this composition, in this case it was not a commission but a wedding gift for the violinist, who hailed from Franck's own birthplace of Liège.

The opening *Allegretto ben moderato* introduces a theme based on the interval of a third. Its pervasive rocking character suggests a lullaby in its quieter moments, while the piano part remains mostly unobtrusive – Franck originally intended this to be a slow movement, but Ysaÿe persuaded him to adopt a more flowing tempo. After this gentle start, however, comes a storm: the D minor *Allegro* sees the violin writhing chromatically over ferocious piano figurations. Though this tempestuous music finds places of stillness, its thrilling energy, which speeds towards a grand finish, could easily raise the roof as a finale. But on that score, Franck had a trump card up his sleeve.

The third movement, *Recitativo-Fantasia*, begins with wandering violin solos and a general feel of improvisation. The music gradually coalesces over rippling arpeggios, and a slow chromatic sequence builds a sense of grandeur, before fading away. But this formal looseness turns out to be a prelude to the classical elegance that follows, as Franck offers up one of his most inspired creations. The famous canon between the instruments in the finale, unfolding expertly from his organist's contrapuntal training, is as sweet a rendering of marital union into music as one can imagine. And when, after two reprises of the chromatic sequence from the previous movement, we're led to a joyous conclusion of overlapping descending scales, there's surely a hint of wedding bells.

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