

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 20 September 2021 1.00pm

Anastasia Kobekina cello

Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula piano



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Cello Sonata (1915)

I. Prologue • II. Sérénade • III. Finale

Paul Juon (1872-1940)

Märchen Op. 8 (1904)

César Franck (1822-1890)

Sonata in A (1886) *arranged by Jules Delsart*

I. Allegretto ben moderato • II. Allegro • III. Recitativo-Fantasia: Ben moderato - Molto lento • IV. Allegretto poco mosso

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Of the three sonatas **Debussy** completed in wartime – three from a projected six – the one for cello and piano came first, in the summer of 1915. This is also the most compact of the three, and the most varied in character, displaying the cello as impassioned, melancholic, quirky, crazy, playful and much else besides. Quick changes of mood suggest a certain amount of pretence, and Debussy considered giving the work a subtitle referring to one of the *commedia dell'arte* characters revived in French culture by such poets as Verlaine: 'Pierrot angry at the moon'. Presumably he was thinking especially of the middle movement, with its erratic alternation between pizzicato strumming and extravagant bowed gestures.

The first movement has the cello seeming to discover its true voice a little way into the piece, but then moving in different directions before characteristically looping back to the two themes of the opening, both of which now seem equally valid. Also typical of Debussy is the finale's achievement of ebullience by means of what sounds like a singing game.

Paul Juon was born into a Swiss family living in Moscow, but he spent most of his adult life in Berlin – until 1934, when he retired to ancestral Switzerland. He wrote chamber works in the standard forms, three violin concertos and many sets of character pieces for piano, maintaining the lucid Russian Romanticism of his teachers Arensky and Taneyev into the 1930s. His *Märchen* (Fairytale), Op. 8, is not as early as its opus number suggests; it comes from 1904, the year also of his Second String Quartet, Op. 29, which is in the same key of A minor. The story unfolded by the cello piece is simple and charming, of sweet lyricism giving way to dance in the C major middle section, this recollected towards the end.

From this delicate Swiss German interlude we return to Paris for the sonata by **Franck** – originally a violin sonata, but adapted for cello by **Jules Delsart**, one of the pre-eminent French cellists of the time. As a member of the Marsick Quartet, he was playing in a concert at which Franck's work was also on the programme, in Paris on 27 December 1887. Apparently, he begged the composer for permission to transcribe the sonata, and this was granted. Franck could have been more than willing if Pablo Casals was right in recording that the work had been intended originally for cello. Certainly his agreement is indicated by how the composition was published, as 'Sonate pour Piano et Violon ou Violoncelle', with Delsart's cello part slipped in. Apart from transposing everything down an octave, Delsart left the line almost untouched, and asked for no alteration at all to the piano's contribution.

The opening movement, gently swinging in a 9/8 siciliana rhythm, introduces at once a distinctly Franckian harmonic atmosphere,

simultaneously firm and equivocal. Not until the cello has played its first two phrases is there an A major chord, and this is then instantly undermined. When the piano proposes a second subject – initiated by a grand, falling-scale pattern and going on to show its relation to the cello's solid but mutating theme – the cello falls silent. But it has heard, and incorporates the falling scale into its recapitulation, which follows a short development. It is silent again when the piano brings forward its theme, in the recapitulation and again in the coda, in the course of which A major comes to represent the only possible home.

In sudden contrast, the piano starts the second movement with cascading semiquavers in what soon establishes itself as D minor. The cello joins in, and accepts the piano's invitation to move into calmer water. However, the first music has to be repeated before a fully melodious second subject can take over, in F major on the cello. One of the problems for composers throughout the 19th Century and beyond, from Beethoven to Schoenberg, was that of making a work in several movements tell a consistent story. Franck's solution, following Liszt, was to circle round some kind of stable thematic nucleus, and here in this sonata the second movement begins to display its relation to the first, along melodic-harmonic lines, in tempo and in the piano part's triplets. Seamlessly, the slower music moves into development, and the first subject reappears, first by itself, then in combination with the second. In the recapitulation, the second subject is brought back in D major, and there is then a coda, back in the minor. The very ending is one place where Delsart adjusted the line to remove a leap awkward for the cello (though some cellists accept the awkwardness and restore the original).

What is recitative-like in the third movement is the cello's unaccompanied music, prompted by the piano. The piano responds first time round with a clear reference back to the main theme of the first movement. Second time round the music goes a different way. A longer section, equally reminiscent, settles in F sharp minor.

The finale, all-resolving from the start, alternates a melody in canon with another, and brings back material from the third movement, besides introducing bell music that will give the work an affirmative close back in A major.

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