WIGMORE HALL

Monday 21 April 2025
1.00pm

Alban Gerhardt cello
Alexei Volodin piano

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 119 (1949)
I. Andante grave
II. Moderato
III. Allegro ma non troppo

César Franck (1822-1890)

Sonata in A (1886) *arranged by Jules Delsart*
I. Allegretto ben moderato
II. Allegro
III. Recitativo-Fantasia. Ben moderato
IV. Allegretto poco mosso

BBC RADIO 3

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Prokofiev completed his Cello Sonata during a period of great personal stress. Just the year before, in 1948, the composer had been the victim of an artistic purge, triggered by the première of an opera by fellow composer Vano Muradeli. *The Great Friendship* was supposed to be a positive tribute to Stalin's native Georgia, but Muradeli had misjudged his characterisation of one of Stalin's political rivals. The Soviet dictator was incensed, and the cornered Muradeli did the unthinkable. He blamed his fellow composers Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian and Myaskowsky (the 'big four'), for infecting the waters of Soviet music with what he termed their 'formalist' music. He was, he claimed, simply led astray.

During a week of meetings in February 1948, the new Secretary General of the Union of Soviet Composers, Timon Khrennikov (a composer himself), denounced their works, paying particular attention to Prokofiev, much of whose music was effectively banned, including a selection of piano sonatas, symphonies and operas. Any new music the Prokofiev composed was also prevented from being performed in public.

An exception was the Cello Sonata, which made its public debut on 1 March 1950 in a performance at the Moscow Conservatoire by two of Prokofiev's closest friends and greatest champions, the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and pianist Sviatoslav Richter. In fact, a few months before, the Sonata had been heard in secret by the Union of Soviet Composers, and again in front of the 'Radio Committee' – both organisations had to deem it sufficiently tonal and harmonically pleasing to be allowed 'out'.

And so it proves, although the sun rises slowly at the start of the Cello Sonata, its opening bars featuring an almost incantational line on solo cello before the piano offers to anchor the introduction and move it inexorably towards a resplendent main theme. But this is Prokofiev, and any sunniness is quickly and fleetingly overshadowed. There's a defiance to this music, as if the composer is acknowledging the diatonic, folk-like ideals of his Soviet overlords, but is desperate to dismiss them at any given opportunity. The opening movement ends in a blaze of glory that tips over, finally, into a delicate display of false harmonics on the cello, ushering in a peaceful conclusion.

The brief second movement *Moderato* is perhaps the most typically 'Prokofiev' of all, with its playful martial opening and soaring second theme that recalls moments of his ballet music for *Romeo and Juliet*.

The *Allegro ma non troppo* finale is at first distinguished by strident rhythmic figures and virtuosic interplay between cello and piano before a more settled, albeit impassioned central section. The nervousness soon appears once again in the form of a flittering figure in the cello, before the whole settles down once more in an altogether more Romantic vein. The final minutes display that defiance of the opening movement, before Prokofiev teases us with a series of false endings (with no doubt his audience of Soviet policy makers in mind). The ending is strikingly Classical in style – a quick, final nod to the authorities.

Prokofiev never truly recovered from his humiliation and it's likely the constant worry contributed to his quick decline in health. He died just a few years later, on 5 March 1953 – the same day, ironically, as Stalin.

César Franck's star was in the ascendant as he began work on his Violin Sonata (presented here in a version for cello and piano by the 19th-century cellist and teacher Jules Delsart, the only arrangement sanctioned by the composer). The Belgian composer's students had brought about something of a revolution, scheming successfully to replace Saint-Saëns with Franck as president of the influential Société Nationale de Musique. This was a highly symbolic move, as it gave credence to Franck's respect for Wagner, a composer detested by the increasingly outmoded Saint-Saëns. And so, the conversation was turned back round to the importance and influence of German Romanticism, a tradition from which the Violin Sonata emerged, with its taught structure and intricate motivic development (with Debussy-esque melodic and harmonic touches).

The work was written in September 1886 as a wedding present for the great violinist-composer Eugene Ysaÿe; Franck was unable to attend the wedding itself, so recruited a friend to present it to Ysaÿe at the wedding breakfast. The violinist performed it as soon as he could, before its public première two months later at a Franck festival in Brussels. Its first performance at the Société Nationale in 1887 was greeted with such applause that the final movement had to be repeated.

The Sonata has perhaps unsurprisingly become Franck's most popular work. Scored in four movements and strictly following the classical model of 'sonata form', it nevertheless wears its sophistication lightly, thanks to its overwhelmingly beautiful nature. The work begins with a lilting, expectant *Allegretto* transforming into one of the composer's most radiant and impassioned tunes. Before long, Franck takes cello and piano back into the shadows in preparation for the restless second movement. The *Allegro*, based on two themes, begins with a virtuosic display on the piano before the melody is restated by the cello. From there, the music ebbs and flows, giving way to the second theme, again amongst one of Franck's most open-hearted.

The third movement is a welcome contrast, entirely free, almost recitative in style and based on a snippet of melody first heard in the *Allegretto*. Finally, the sun appears with a glorious final movement that is so beautifully calibrated and melodically crafted that it is easy to forget it is written almost entirely in canon save for the final declamatory, exultantly passionate few minutes.

Delsart's arrangement stays very close to the violin original – the piano part is identical, while Delsart makes just a few concessions to the technical capabilities of the cello. Otherwise, the solo part is mostly simply transposed to the cello's register.