

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 21 May 2024  
7.30pm

Veronika Eberle violin  
Jörg Widmann clarinet  
Dénes Várjon piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Op. 78 (1878-9)  
*I. Vivace ma non troppo • II. Adagio •  
III. Allegro molto moderato*

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

Sommersonate (2010-3)  
*I. Moderato • II. Romanze*

*Interval*

Jörg Widmann

Tränen der Musen (1993-6)  
Fantasie for solo clarinet (1993)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Contrasts for violin, clarinet and piano BB116 (1938)  
*I. Verbunkos • II. Pihenő • III. Sebes*

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This evening's programme presents the music of Jörg Widmann flanked by Brahms and Bartók, two composers engaged with a wide range of European folk music traditions, and, more generally, music's entanglement with the natural world, whether expressed as fantasy or through direct sonic evocations of the seasons; a musical mimesis of raindrop sounds or the buzzing harmonic blur of a summer heat haze.

**Brahms's** Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Op. 78 unravels an enchanting blend of tenderness, nostalgia and passion within its modest form. Its subtitle, 'Regensonate' ('Rain Sonata'), reflects Brahms's use of material from an earlier song, 'Regenlied', including trochaic rhythmic figures resembling raindrops that permeate all three movements. The first movement, *Vivace ma non troppo*, follows a typical sonata form. It commences with a joyful swaying melody, before traversing through stormy outbursts and a lively interplay between violin and piano, where the pianist features not merely as an accompanist, but rather as an equal protagonist to the violinist.

The *Adagio* second movement unfolds as a deep, tender hymn, introduced by the piano's gentle chords, and then quickly departs in an unexpected direction: the violin introduces a bewitching chromatic melody, which flares into an imposing march with occasional flights of rapid scales from the violin, before shifting into a fleeting waltz that adapts the rain motif's dripping rhythms. Drawing on material from the first two movements, the flowing third movement, *Allegro molto moderato*, initially sets the exact same melody and accompaniment of the original 'Regenlied'. The song's text by Klaus Groth (translated below) draws connections between the patter of rain to childhood nostalgia and inner reverie: Pour, rain, pour down,

Awaken again in me those dreams  
That I dreamt in childhood,  
When the wetness foamed in the sand!  
When the dull summer sultriness  
Struggled casually against the fresh coolness,  
And the pale leaves dripped with dew,  
And the crops were dyed a deeper blue.

Complementing Brahms's saturated soundworld, **Widmann's** *Sommersonate* turns to breezier and hotter climes. Comprising two movements, a *Moderato* and *Romanze*, Widmann began the piece in the summer of 2010. The first movement revels in the joy of summer's promise, with, in his own words, a 'bright weightlessness' that's 'flooded in sunlight'. The glow and changeability of the first movement is contrasted by the second, which explores a more nocturnal and cryptic hinterland, redolent of long dusks that slowly fade into the pale darkness of summer nights. For Widmann the piece also represents an experiment in sonata form. He pushes the traditional structure to its very limits without breaking its foundations: 'a continuous gesture of new discovery and free fantasy'.

Widmann's *Tränen der Musen* ('Tears of the Muses'), begun in 1993, looks forward to Bartók's *Contrasts* at the end of tonight's concert. Despite its short duration, this trio roves through wide musical terrains, from klezmer motifs to folkloric elements, lamentations and bell sounds, reminiscent of the Bartók and perhaps Stravinsky more generally too.

Reflecting on the title, Widmann asks: 'Should muses be silent while the guns speak?'

Another piece from his youth, Widmann's solo clarinet *Fantasie* from 1993 consists of four sections, all high energy, and remarkable in their youthful exuberance and virtuosity. For Widmann, the piece links to Stravinsky's *3 pieces for solo clarinet* from 1918, as well as the clarinet notation inventions of Carl Maria von Weber. In his first solo clarinet work, Widmann revels in a motley assortment of materials: exaggerated jazz lines, quotes from *The Rite of Spring*, klezmer references, and wild gestures such as stratospheric glissandi and nasal multiphonics. In Widmann's words, the piece is a 'little imaginary scene uniting the dialogues of different people in close proximity in the spirit of the *commedia dell'arte*.'

In 1938, two years before **Bartók** would finally emigrate to the United States, clarinetist Benny Goodman and violinist Joseph Szigeti commissioned a new chamber trio, with the composer to perform the piano part. The resulting work, *Contrasts*, highlights the two commissioners' instruments in their different sonic characters – hence the title – whereas the piano assumes a mostly accompanimental role throughout. The first movement, *Verbunkos*, is named after a dance that the Hungarian Hussar regiments used to recruit boys into military service. Its swaggering rhythms grow out the initial clarinet melody and percussive violin part, before moving through a range of contrasting sections, from brilliant energetic passages to flowing and lyrical melodic arcs, eventually returning to a refrain of the opening clarinet melody and concluding with an impressive solo clarinet cadenza. The slow movement, *Pihenő* ('rest' or 'relaxation'), evokes an enigmatic nocturnal atmosphere, full of shadowy piano chords, furtive gestures and stalking melodies shared between the violin and clarinet. After the movement's central climax of sinister clarinet trills and violin tremolo, the music recedes into chromatic darkness, with the clarinet dissolving among the piano and pizzicato violin's distant muted bell-like motifs.

In the concluding movement, *Sebes*, the violinist tunes their top E string down a semi-tone to produce a dissonant tritone interval between the top two strings: A and E flat. The *Sebes* was a fast Hungarian dance that boys would improvise and sing to. The opening part of the movement is Bartók in perhaps his most distinctive folk-meets-modernist mode: dizzying *ostinati*; melodies that leap between instruments; stabbing chords that bruise yet groove. A central section diverts to a slower and calmer world, where a lilting 3+2+3 rhythm in the piano gradually floats down from a hushed high register to a resounding bass. The entire trio eventually coalesces in irregular rhythmic unison (13 beat phrases) and appears to retreat into obscurity. Suddenly, the music abruptly returns to the opening hurried material, with interlocking rapid rhythmic figures darting between the trio, interrupted by the violin and its own furious cadenza. The ensuing rhapsodic development quickly shifts through dramatic passages, with the music pressing towards an urgent final climax, becoming ever more unhinged in its increasingly barbaric energy and break-neck speed.

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