

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 21 October 2024
1.00pm

Bomsori Kim violin
Danny Driver piano

César Franck (1822-1890)

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

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Nocturne and Tarantella Op. 28 (1915)

Henryk Wieniawski (1835-1880)

Fantaisie brillante on themes from Gounod's *Faust*
Op. 20 (1865)



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Though **Franck** spent much of his life in the organ loft, his name passed into immortality for music written for instruments other than his own. He was born in Liège, Belgium, while Beethoven was still alive, and in his later years, he turned to chamber and instrumental music. None of his works (with the possible exception of his lone Symphony of 1888) has endured like the Sonata for violin and piano, composed in 1886 as a wedding gift for Franck's young friend, the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe.

Ysaÿe, a man of imposing musical and physical stature whose influence seemed to galvanise composers into writing some of their greatest works, championed the sonata tirelessly after giving the first performance on the afternoon of his wedding. A public première followed, on a December evening in Brussels; Vincent d'Indy later recalled that the museum hosting the performance had no artificial light, and as the sun set and the building fell into darkness, Ysaÿe and pianist Marie-Léontine Bordes-Pène, unable to read their scores, had to play much of the new work from memory

The sonata's four-movement form gestures at the symphonic, but Franck had something other than big-boned Germanic construction in mind for his instrumental masterpiece. Instead, he offers something more individual, substituting the typical sonata-form first-movement plan for a structure which alternates a first theme built on an unwavering 'skipping' rhythm with a second theme of wide-eyed wonder, which is only ever played by the piano. In contrast to the usual front-loaded 19th-century sonata, the first movement here has the feeling of a prelude, albeit an emotionally consequential one, and the second a weight and scale which suggests a substantial escalation of the music's ambition and range. The volcanic outer sections of the *Allegro* and the sombre slowness of its centre deliver alternately frenzy and despair; we can only wonder what the Ysaÿes' wedding guests made of the existential depths being probed by the music as the sun faded on a day of happy celebrations.

The flowing, genial opening of the finale presents its melody as a canon, the piano leading the way and the violin echoing what has just been heard. With this device, Franck is able to make something which might stand quite still if presented more plainly seem livelier and, not inappropriately given the occasion of its first performance, like two people singing together, in turn. As so often in this sonata, however, we are reminded that this is far more than simply happy music for a happy time, as plunging and soaring material from the third movement is thunderously recalled, and cascading piano figures accompanying a declamatory violin line signal a fresh defiance in the emotional landscape of the piece. Franck's total command of the material, though, is clear from the manner in which the piano and violin find their way back to the original melody-in-canon, and its

totally convincing accent to the heights of joy in the final moments.

Szymanowski, who in the first decades of the 20th Century was the most significant Polish composer since Chopin, left a brace of fine works for violin. He was himself a notable pianist, but the violin particularly suited his sensuous and luminous musical style, and his contributions to the instrument's repertoire include two vibrant concertos and, from 1915, the three *Myths* Op. 30 and the short *Nocturne and Tarantella*, for violin and piano. He was the son of a wealthy family, who owned an estate in what is now Ukraine; after studying in Warsaw, he had transformative experiences with studies of antiquity and eastern religion, and also with the music of Stravinsky, which, along with that of Debussy, left a strong mark on his own musical voice. Alongside these influences, Szymanowski harboured a desire to create a new kind of Polish musical culture, one which would become all the more urgent with the country's independence after the First World War. The *Nocturne and Tarantella* extend the composer's desire to put the virtuosic potential of the violin to colourful rather than showy effect; the *Nocturne* is veiled in a heady atmosphere typical of Szymanowski's style, while the *Tarantella* is gripped by urgent dance rhythms, as his works so often are.

A half century before Szymanowski reached musical maturity, **Wieniawski** had flown the flag for Polish culture, touring Europe to wide acclaim and favourable comparisons with Paganini. Studies in Paris and the patronage of Tsar Nicholas I of Russia propelled him to a hugely successful career, and for a while he played in a duo with his pianist brother Józef in halls in all of Europe's great cities. Wieniawski's concert programmes read like a roll-call of the violinist-composers of the preceding century, and to their music he added his own, which would eventually include two concertos and the fine miniature *Légende*. In 1865, he added to his oeuvre an opera fantasy (practically *de rigueur* for the mid-19th-century performer-composer) on Gounod's *Faust*, which had opened in Paris in 1859 and which was still enjoying regular performances. The opera, loosely based on Goethe's drama, re-tells the familiar story of Faust's pact with Mephistopheles, which leads to his tragic infatuation with the young and innocent Marguerite. With this *Fantaisie*, Wieniawski could tell the story of the opera in miniature, bringing together motifs and melodies familiar to its first audiences, all the while singing his part with his violin, with flourishes of ornamentation beyond the reach of the human voice.

Across five sections, which proceed without a break, the music of many of Gounod's characters is heard, beginning with Faust's despair at his joyless life and ending with a waltz depicting his first sight of Marguerite, with whom he falls utterly in love.

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