

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 21 September 2024
7.30pm

Leila Josefowicz violin
John Novacek piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Violin Sonata in G minor (1916-7)

*I. Allegro vivo • II. Intermède. Fantasque et léger •
III. Finale. Très animé*

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Myths Op. 30 (1915)

The Spring of Arethusa • Narcissus • Dryads and Pan

Interval

Charlotte Bray (b.1982)

Mriya (2023)

Commissioned by Wigmore Hall

*I. Freely • II. Skittish • III. Expressive, dark • IV. Delicate,
floating - Intense*

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Divertimento from *The Fairy's Kiss* (1928 arr. 1934)

*I. Sinfonia • II. Danses suisses • III. Scherzo • IV. Pas de
deux*

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Debussy wrote the first two movements of his sonata in 1916, but then had difficulties with the *Finale*, which he seems to have completed only shortly before the first performance, in the spring of 1917. All three movements depend on shifts into different lights – of harmony, colour or melodic shape – and backward-glancing allusions than on the clear markers of traditional formal patterns. The central image in the middle movement is close to ragtime; that of the *Finale*, if Neapolitan in its gaiety, is faced with obstinacy and threat from the leading secondary material, provoking a characteristic drama of musical types.

Writing to his friend Robert Godet two days after the première, Debussy remarked on this *Finale*'s combination of 'happiness and uproar'. 'In future', he went on, 'don't be taken in by works that seem to fly through the air; they've often been wallowing in the shadows of a gloomy brain.' Seriously ill at the time, Debussy had cause to feel gloomy, but the shadows are ultimately dispersed by the spirit of dancing delight. In his own words, the movement 'goes through the most curious contortions before ending up with a simple idea which turns back on itself like a snake biting its own tail'. In a sense the whole work does that, since the third movement begins with a reminder of the first movement's principal theme. The argument is, it becomes clear, continuous. The second movement starts out by brushing aside what went before; the *Finale* reinstates it, then discovers something else.

Szymanowski wrote his Greek scenes just a little earlier, in the spring of 1915, for himself and his friend Pavel Kočański. The set opens with sprays of Ravelian water music for Arethusa's spring. According to the myth, Arethusa was a nymph of Arcadia who, bathing in a river, found herself attracting the attentions of its resident deity, Alpheus. She prayed for help to Artemis, who transformed her into a stream and had her flowing below the sea bed to emerge on the island of Ortygia, just off Sicily. Alpheus, however, being also aqueous, was able to bend his course her way and mingle his waters with hers. In Szymanowski's interpretation, tremulous exotic harmonies support a super-high violin melody, which comes down to join them.

Narcissus is, of course, again a water scene, the pool suggested at the start by a rich, immobile chord gently pulsating, awaiting the youth's gaze of rapt self-adoration to come in on the violin in a high register. Imitation from the piano produces a mirroring effect, and the image is developed towards a new music of violin double stops and then into a reprise folding everything in the movement together, up to a final lingering look. The violin begins the final piece of the set buzzing between D and the note a quarter-tone below, provoking leaps and eventually bounds from the piano that surely represent the dryads (wood nymphs) Pan has his eye on. When the chase scene has come to an end, the violin is heard alone again, now playing harmonics as Pan's flute. This seduction tactic evidently works, for a love scene ensues, delicately playful but also mountingly passionate, before a return to the opening, a recollection on the way to sleep.

Charlotte Bray's new sonata also has elements of narrative, for which we are partly and poetically prepared by the foyer

installation by Caroline Burraway, with whom the composer has collaborated before. *Soniasnyk* ('Sunflowers') depicts the national flower of Ukraine, once vibrant and bright, now bleached grey and white to signify the scoured land; there remain, however, tiny patches of yellow beneath the cracks. All is not lost.

The linked inspiration unfolds in Bray's note: 'The Ukrainian word *mriya* translates as dream, vision, ambition and vow. The piece is inspired by the immense courage, conviction and integrity of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and a resilient Ukrainian people. A persistent struggle runs through the music, between the dream of freedom, driven by hope and resolve, and the darkness of war. This opposition is expressed in the dreamlike opening with a mysterious, peaceful, introspective sound-world coexisting with one that is dark, threatening and hostile in nature. There are fleeting moments of hope, particularly in a playful second section within the first movement. Time hangs heavy.

"In the second movement, innocence flees in haste, the dream of peace dissolves abruptly, and the rising, horrifying darkness of war commands fast, rhythmic and irregular music. The disquieting, distressing feelings this arouses are conveyed through the violin playing tremolo almost throughout, and the piano providing a nervously energetic accompaniment. Still, within, determination and fortitude hold on tenaciously.

"The stark, sparse third movement largely separates the two instrumental voices. Each is resolute: expressive, dark and impassioned, suggesting separation, displacement, trauma, destruction, injury and loss. The slow finale that follows is precise and poignant. A floating, delicate melody transforms into one that is muscular, powerful and grounded. The piano pulsates around the melodic voice, growing to an emotional and expressive climax – pushed to the limits – before both voices recede into more muted material, with a glimpse of hope.'

Finding another work a composer wrote to perform with a violinist friend, again with a Polish accent, the programme ends with one of several arrangements **Stravinsky** produced for himself and the Polish-American artist Samuel Dushkin. This *Divertimento from The Fairy's Kiss* was, in a sense, already an arrangement, for Stravinsky based the original ballet score on songs and piano pieces by Tchaikovsky. The opening, drawn from a Tchaikovsky song, 'Lullaby in a storm', is followed by a chase and a reprise. In the ballet, a mother carrying her baby son is pursued by spirits, who capture the child. A jump-cut carries us on a couple of decades to when the baby is a young man in Switzerland, taking part in communal dances. The medley invites us to imagine an accordion as well as a fiddle in the band. The *Scherzo*, with its slower middle section, then takes us to the young man's wedding, where he and his bride dance a *Pas de deux*. This begins with an adagio on Tchaikovsky's 'None but the lonely heart', goes on to a fast, delicate number, and ends with a coda, presto.

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