

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 22 February 2023
7.30pm

Leonidas Kavakos violin
Enrico Pace piano

- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Violin Sonata No. 1 in D Op. 12 No. 1 (1797-8)
I. Allegro con brio • II. Tema con variazioni. Andante con moto • III. Rondo. Allegro
- Béla Bartók (1881-1945) Violin Sonata No. 2 BB85 (1922)
I. Molto moderato • II. Allegretto
- Interval
- Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) Violin Sonata No. 2 in G (1923-7)
I. Allegretto • II. Blues. Moderato • III. Perpetuum mobile. Allegro
- 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



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The **Beethoven** starter, from 1797-8, gives us a model of the violin sonata before we encounter some later avatars. The opening movement has a long exposition with several elegant yet pliable themes, followed by a short exploratory development and the usual recapitulation. A melody in a vein of hymnic serenity is then followed by four variations, the third in the minor, before a buoyant *Rondo* concludes.

Bartók dedicated his two violin sonatas to Jelly d'Arányi, whom he had known when she was a child. She came back into his life nearly two decades later in October 1921, when, from her residence now in England, she returned to Budapest on holiday. In her late twenties, and with an aristocratic prefix added to her name, she evidently made a great impression on him, both as a musician and, somewhat to her embarrassment, as a woman. His sonatas for her – works of unusual density, struggle and complexity – were all he wrote during the next year, the second occupying the time between July and November 1922.

The piece is in two connected movements, a version of the slow-fast form of Hungarian recruiting dances. The first movement's opening, though wandering, largely indefinite and highly chromatic, quickly establishes two points of reference: the E at the top of the treble staff and a motif in which a rising whole tone is followed by a three-note scalewise descent, creating a moment of modal clarity rare in this movement. What follows is hard to interpret as a sonata allegro, though it is certainly combative. A coda refers to the eerie moment in the composer's ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* when the eponymous stranger is affixed to a ceiling light by ruffians and his body begins to glow. From here the movement soon reaches its end, with the central motif coming back yet again and an upward slide from the violin precipitating the music into its second part.

Low pounding here from the piano is answered by the violin, plucking out what will become the movement's principal theme, based on an ascending scale in C that starts out whole-tone. The music gathers steam to arrive in *Mandarin* territory once more, with pentatony and a wild chase on the scale theme. The argument of instruments and ideas continues to reach a varied rerun of the chase and, eventually, the violin's rediscovery, after a solo, of the principal motif from the first movement. It then slowly climbs away, up to a super-high E. The piano adds a G in the bass and a middle-register C; this is, indeed, a C major chord, but stretched across almost six octaves and making a very precarious homecoming.

Ravel began his Violin Sonata (sometimes known as No. 2 following the belated publication of a similarly scored sonata from 1897) in 1923, but did not finish it until 1927. Part of the trouble was that he got bogged down in the blues – in the work's slow movement and in the real slough of despond. He also, perhaps to divert himself, finished off his opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges*.

This score duly left its mark on the sonata – very distinctly on some of the jazz touches that are by no means limited to the central movement, and perhaps also on the insouciant separateness of the instrumental lines. The opening gesture comes from the pianist's right hand: an unaccompanied melody in G with the freshness of a folksong. When the violin enters, it is with somewhat similar patterns, but adding up to a quite different whole. There are clear phases of second subject, very much abbreviated exposition repeat (just an echo), development and recapitulation, but in this last segment, as the piano recapitulates like crazy, the violin declines to do likewise.

Ravel's US tour came the year after he finished the sonata, but he had plenty of opportunity to hear jazz in Paris. His *Blues* gives the violin a melody blued by glissando, developing through the movement except when it is shoved aside by pizzicato chords in a more intemperate section.

The finale, sparked off by an idea remembered from the first movement, is nearly all semiquavers for the violin.

The **Franck** sonata came about in 1886, as a wedding present for Eugène Ysaÿe, who, receiving it on the day, went off for a quick rehearsal and returned with the pianist Marie-Léontine Bordes-Pène to present the first performance to the assembled company. The first movement sets out and elaborates a lilting theme that drifts in on the violin as if it were a reminiscence. That may be why it is a prime candidate for the 'petite phrase' that Swann in Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* associates with his beloved Odette, and this same quality fits it to be the guiding idea of the whole sonata. The movement is in two parts, of which the second repeats and outdoes the first.

Tumult in the piano at the start of the next movement might suggest we are now in for a sonata allegro, and though three themes are duly presented, the plan is unusual – and strong. The first theme is strenuous in the atmosphere of the opening, with a tailpiece that is presented separately before being tacked on. Lyrical contrast follows, and then a third theme arrives, even more beautiful, reserved for its place towards the movement's centre. From here, development and recapitulation fold into one another.

In two parts roughly equal in length, the third movement begins as declamation, to arrive magically at slowness and stillness.

The finale starts out openly diatonic (almost no accidentals), to become a little more complex as the piano introduces a second theme beneath running quavers from the violin. Turning from one of these themes to the other, Franck lets us hear his process of thematic transformation. Then, after bells and a ballet episode, this process continues into darker territory, from which the emergence is glorious.

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