

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 22 November 2021 1.00pm

Johan Dalene violin

Nicola Eimer piano



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G (1923-7)

I. Allegretto • II. Blues. Moderato • III. Perpetuum mobile. Allegro

Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928-2016)

Notturmo e danza (1993)

Notturmo • Danza

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in D Op. 94bis (1944)

I. Moderato • II. Scherzo. Presto • III. Andante • IV. Allegro con brio

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The second sonata for violin and piano, **Ravel's** last chamber work, did not come easily to the composer. A prototype had been started once and abandoned, the composer literally casting a completed movement into the fire in the late 1890s (he used the dramatic gesture to underline the importance of self-criticism to a pupil).

By the 1920s, Ravel was depressed and his output had slowed significantly. But the fundamental 'problem' of a sonata for violin and piano started to nag at the composer's intellect. By 1923 Ravel was at work on a piece that would explore the dichotomy of writing for what he considered 'two essentially incompatible instruments.' So engrossed did he become in that challenge that the resulting score took another four years to complete.

That may not have bothered Ravel, but it proved a problem for his intended violinist, Hélène Jourdan-Morhange. So long had she waited for the score that by the time it arrived, arthritis meant she could no longer play it. At the première in Paris on 30 May 1927, that privilege fell to the Romanian composer and violinist George Enescu, Ravel's fellow pupil of Gabriel Fauré. Ravel himself was at the piano.

Jourdan-Morhange grew familiar with the piece and referred to the 'indifference' required of the violin soloist (she observed that it would be better suited to an oboe or clarinet than a violin). Ravel's biographer Roger Nichols describes the 'uneasy quality' that pervades much of the music, itself derived from Ravel's belief in the incompatibility of the two instruments. The violin and piano appear intriguingly independent from one another, at best businesslike in their interactions and protective of their own territory. 'The deliberate lack of relationship between the two parts in many places sounds merely perverse,' concluded *The Times* later in 1927.

To this coy instrumental dance are added elusive tonality and distilled textures in the opening movement that border on the terse. Ravel's second movement reveals his interest in blues and emergent jazz. The composer didn't make his famous visit to Harlem until 1928, but popular music from America was frequently heard in Paris at the time. Hallmarks of the style heard here include music sounding off the beat (syncopation), strident piano playing with hand separation (honky-tonk), easy sliding between notes (*glissandi*) and diminished intervals throwing up what could be considered 'blue notes'.

In the last movement, a series of rhythmic motifs ratchets its way towards the runaway train of a musical *Perpetuum mobile*. Sometimes the piano cooperates with a dutiful accompaniment; at others it attempts to force a derailment.

In 1955, Jean Sibelius was asked to nominate a promising young Finnish composer for a major scholarship. Sibelius pointed unequivocally to the 27-year-old **Einojuhani Rautavaara**. In the years after that endorsement, Rautavaara's musical worldview underwent a full rotation from luscious post-Romanticism to striking experimental atonality – and back. Eventually, his music would settle into a mystical style that appears to operate controls to a distant, fluid universe.

In 1993, Rautavaara wrote *Notturmo e danza* as a test piece for the 1995 Juvenalia Chamber Music Competition in Espoo, a suburb of Helsinki. These violinists were not world-beating virtuosos, but promising schoolchildren.

Like so much of Rautavaara's music, the piece is suggestive of the distinctive and rapidly shifting natural light experienced in the Nordic countries – light that can, in certain parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway, shine through the night or not at all.

In the *Notturmo* movement, a wandering melody is traced over a series of glassy harmonies (both elements typical of Rautavaara), each suggesting a different luminous state. The composer re-used this material for the third movement of his breakthrough work, Symphony No. 7 'Angel of Light'.

The daytime dance of *Danza* follows the nocturnal creeping. The feeling is of a similar harmonic journey undertaken in entirely different conditions – this time, in a cavorting 11 beats to the bar.

In the summer of 1943, **Prokofiev** travelled to the central Asian city of Alma-Ata (or Almaty) to work with the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, scoring his picture *Ivan the Terrible*. Prokofiev used his downtime between the film work to write a sonata for the French flautist Georges Barrère – an old friend from the composer's Paris years.

Prokofiev wanted his sonata 'to have a classical, clear, transparent sonority,' a temperament 'perhaps inappropriate at present, but pleasant' (the reference may well have been to the ongoing German onslaught on Soviet territories). According to plan, the sonata turned out genial and witty, using clear shapes and melodies that, in contrast to Ravel's sonata, interlock easily with their accompaniments.

On hearing the flute sonata, the violinist David Oistrakh became convinced that it 'would sound very good on the violin.' Prokofiev duly arranged the score for violin with Oistrakh's assistance, leaving the piano part unchanged but adapting the flute part to the idiosyncrasies of a stringed instrument and to Oistrakh's distinctive *legato*. On 17 June 1944, Oistrakh gave the first performance of the violin version of the score, with pianist Lev Oborin.

Despite that genteel, classical style, there is something else to this piece – something Oistrakh described as 'profound and significant'. Prokofiev's sunny dispositions are occasionally tainted by the appearance of dark clouds. The acerbic wisecracks of the *Scherzo* have a certain menace, while some sense of the blues appears to tug at the shapely melody of the *Andante*.

Otherwise, Prokofiev focuses on exploring melody and simple, expressive beauty, not least in the neo-classical high spirits of the *Scherzo* and final *Allegro*, whose slight manic tendencies develop into a headlong rush to the finish. So sweet was the melody Prokofiev used in the central interlude of this final movement that the composer Francis Poulenc borrowed it for his own Oboe Sonata.

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