

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 22 October 2025
7.30pm

Stephen Kovacevich piano
Martha Argerich piano
Irène Duval violin

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Intermezzo in E Op. 116 No. 4 (by 1892)
Intermezzo in F minor Op. 118 No. 4 (by 1893)
Capriccio in D minor Op. 116 No. 7
Intermezzo in A Op. 118 No. 2
Intermezzo in E flat minor Op. 118 No. 6

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)
*I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo •
II. Allegro molto • III. Adagio ma non troppo – Fuga.
Allegro ma non troppo*

Interval

Johannes Brahms

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

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

En blanc et noir (1915)
I. Avec emportement • II. Lent. Sombre • III. Scherzando
Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1891-4)



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Please note the programme has changed since these programme notes were written.

In the summer of 1892, **Brahms** returned to his beloved summer retreat of Ischl in Upper Austria. Here he began work on a string of piano pieces which were subsequently to appear in his last four opuses for the instrument: the *Fantasien* Op. 116, the *Intermezzi* Op. 117, and the *Klavierstücke* Op. 118 and 119. By the autumn, seven *Fantasien* and three *Intermezzi* were ready for publication; and this was followed by the *Klavierstücke* the following year.

The *Fantasien* comprise a sequence of Capriccios and Intermezzi, the former perhaps recalling JS Bach (whose music Brahms held in extremely high regard), and the latter allowing the freedom of 'in-between' music without ever specifying further context. (There was, after all, already a venerable tradition of writing preludes without their needing to be preludes to anything.) We begin with the dreamy E major Intermezzo, rocking and mysterious; and later encounter the storm of diminished sevenths and sinuous interweaving inner voices of the closing Capriccio in D minor. Around these pieces come three further Intermezzi from the *Klavierstücke* Op. 118. The questing, agitated Intermezzo in F minor allows us a moment of repose only at its centre. The A major Intermezzo is the most famous of this opus, a miracle of long-breathed melodies built from tiny musical gestures that bind the music together across its span. And the E flat minor Intermezzo is perhaps the most enigmatic of all: muted and fragmentary, it feels at once like a pressing drama of the moment, and a memory that drifts in and out of focus before fading into the night.

While the majority of Brahms's friends were deeply admiring of these pieces, there was some discussion, both privately and in public reviews, that they were not really suitable for performance in the concert hall due to their highly intimate and introspective nature: indeed, Brahms largely preferred to play them in the homes of his closest friends, rather than in front of a paying audience. Clara Schumann captured the deeply private character of the *Fantasien* in her diary: 'The Brahms pieces are, in terms of dexterity, not difficult except for a few places; but the spiritual

technique requires a fine understanding, and one must be very familiar with Brahms to attempt to make it show as he thought of it. I have studied it with great love and play it, I think, in his spirit.'

Schumann and her family are also closely entangled with Brahms's Violin Sonata No. 1, completed in 1878-9. Much of the musical material is derived from Brahms's earlier *Regenlied* Op. 59 No. 3, a favourite song of Clara Schumann's. The finale of the Sonata begins almost as a song transcription, the raindrops dripping steadily onto the keyboard beneath the soaring violin line; but traces of *Regenlied* are in other movements too, including the opening dotted rhythm of the very first theme we hear in the *Vivace ma non troppo*. The central *Adagio* is later recalled in the finale, so that each movement is bound and united by song.

This *Adagio* was also directly inspired by Felix Schumann, Robert and Clara's youngest son, to whom Brahms stood godfather. A talented violinist and poet, Felix died of tuberculosis in 1879, aged just 25. When Brahms sent the Sonata to Clara a few months later, he revealed that his slow movement was written with Felix in mind. 'I received it today,' she wrote in her reply, 'and naturally I played through it right away and afterwards, out of joy, cried a great deal over it... Many others could perhaps understand it and speak about it better, but no one could feel it more than I do.'

Almost 70 years before Brahms began work on his late piano collections, **Ludwig van Beethoven** battled ill health and extensive family difficulties to complete – between 1820 and 1823 – not only the *Missa Solemnis* Op. 123, but also three piano sonatas, the *Bagatelles* Op. 119 and the *Diabelli Variations* Op. 120. The three sonatas – his last such compositions – were written at the request of the Berlin-based publisher Adolph Martin Schlesinger, and published in 1821, 1822 and 1823 respectively. However, Schlesinger's editions, produced by his son Maurice in Paris, were so littered with mistakes that Beethoven helped Schlesinger's rivals in Vienna and London to produce corrected editions for sale elsewhere!

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