

WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 23 April 2026
7.30pm

Mark Steinberg violin
Jonathan Biss piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Violin Sonata in A K305 (1778)

I. Allegro di molto •

II. Tema con variazioni. Andante grazioso

Violin Sonata in E flat K380 (1781)

I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •

III. Rondo. Allegro

Interval

Violin Sonata in C K303 (1778)

I. Adagio – Molto allegro • II. Tempo di menuetto

Violin Sonata in B flat K454 (1784)

I. Largo – Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegretto



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Mozart's first published pieces for violin and keyboard were the work of a precocious child. Issued in 1764, the year he turned eight, they were billed as 'sonatas for harpsichord which can be played with violin accompaniment'. The description is entirely correct: the uncomplicated pieces work perfectly well without the fiddle. A few more appeared two years later, after which Mozart did not return to the form until adulthood.

The stimulus for this renewed interest came during a tour of European cities, 1777-8. The composer, now 21, was hoping to find a better employer than Archbishop Colloredo, in whose Salzburg court Mozart felt undervalued and underpaid. The Archbishop may indeed have treated his musicians as servants (which in stark terms they were), but he had to tolerate Mozart's frequent prolonged absences from court as the cocky young man sought to better his prospects elsewhere.

His first major stop on the 1777 excursion was in Munich, where Mozart encountered the violin sonatas of the German-born Joseph Schuster, whose major successes had been in Italian opera. Mozart's imagination was caught by both the musical substance of these sonatas and their popularity with the public. When he sent copies home for his family to play, he described them as 'duets' – i.e. the two instruments were in dialogue. In response, Mozart's subsequent sonatas gave the violin a more prominent role, although it remained the conventional practice to publish such works as 'for piano and violin' for decades to come.

His tour took him on to Mannheim, where a group of composers and a flourishing musical community were attracting much attention for their innovations in instrumental music. Eventually Mozart arrived in Paris, where an audience had been cultivated for public concerts. As well as composing a symphony for the French capital, he published a set of six mature violin sonatas (K301-306), incorporating stylistic features he had picked up from the music he had heard and the musicians he had met on his recent travels.

Among these, the **Sonata in A, K305**, remains one of the most popular. By comparison with Mozart's juvenile essays in the genre, the greater independence given to the violin part is immediately apparent. The first movement has an initial theme that dances around the notes of the triad, and a serpentine, bar-line-defying second idea. The second movement is a genteel but eventful theme and variations.

Although Mozart gained much in musical terms from his trip around Europe, it was a failure with regard to finding employment. Moreover his mother, who had travelled with him, fell ill and died in Paris. There was another crushing blow on the way home. In Mannheim he had met and fallen in love with Aloysia Weber, a young soprano whom he had tutored, and now hoped to marry. But when he encountered her again in Munich her career had taken off and her interest in him had faded. He reacted by insulting her in public.

So, it was back to the drudgery of serving Archbishop Colloredo. In 1781 the court relocated temporarily to Vienna. There, Mozart's frustration over the hindrance to his career and his employer's exasperation over the musician's frequent absences reached boiling point. Mozart attempted to resign from his post but was instead kicked out. For the rest of his short life he got by as a freelance musician, all the while striving but failing to find a lucrative and secure position at another court.

Staying in Vienna, he moved in with the Weber family, who were now resident there. The scars from his bust-up with Aloysia appear to have been healed. Although their close relationship did not rekindle, he started a new one with one of her sisters, Constanze, who would become his wife in August 1782.

However, during his first months in the Austrian capital, there was gossip that he was romantically involved with another pupil, the pianist Josepha Auernhammer. She received the dedication of his next set of violin sonatas (published 1781). The **Sonata in E flat, K380**, like the others in this set, is in three movements. The music is full of intricate detail, examining the motifs in new and unexpected ways. The intense slow movement is especially affecting.

The **Sonata in C, K303**, is part of the earlier 1778 set and brings a Mozartian soul to the mannerisms of Mannheim. Though both movements are in sonata form, they are unconventional. The first refuses to settle in one tempo or key. The second adopts, but frequently disrupts, the character of a minuet; the recapitulation employs the Mannheim device of reversing the order of the two subjects.

On 24 April 1784, Mozart wrote to his father to tell him he was writing a new sonata to play with Regina Strinasacchi, a Venice-trained fiddler in her early twenties who had arrived in Vienna. She was renowned for her *cantabile* playing, having also studied opera singing. As promised, Mozart and Strinasacchi performed the **Sonata in B flat, K454**, at the Kärntnertor Theatre the following Thursday. But although the keyboard part was fixed in his mind, Mozart had not had time to write it out. Instead he put sheets of blank paper on his music stand. According to Constanze's reminiscences, this innocent subterfuge was discovered by the Emperor Joseph II, who spotted the empty pages through his opera glasses.

The first movement has a spacious, dignified introduction that ushers in an *Allegro* of playful give-and-take. The *Andante* also has a flavour of operatic duet about it, this time *seria* rather than *buffa*. The harmonies become extraordinarily advanced, approaching polytonality if not atonality. The finale rondo is erudite and urbane, with extra brilliance and sparkle added for the coda.

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