

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 24 November 2023
7.30pm

Frank Peter Zimmermann violin
Martin Helmchen piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Clarinet Sonata in F minor Op. 120 No. 1 (1894)

*I. Allegro appassionato • II. Andante un poco adagio •
III. Allegretto grazioso • IV. Vivace*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Violin Sonata No. 1 BB84 (1921)

I. Allegro appassionato • II. Adagio • III. Allegro

Interval

Johannes Brahms

Scherzo in C minor from *F-A-E Sonata* (1853)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Op. 78 (1878-9)

*I. Vivace ma non troppo • II. Adagio •
III. Allegro molto moderato*

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During the 1880s, **Brahms** developed a strong working relationship with the Meiningen Court Orchestra. His primary purpose in the Thuringian city was to try out works before their official premières elsewhere, including *Nänie* and the Second Piano Concerto. But the composer also reciprocated the orchestra's kindness by mounting his Fourth Symphony in Meiningen in 1885, as well as touring with the ensemble throughout Central Europe.

It was during an 1891 visit that Brahms was introduced to the orchestra's principal clarinettist. He had been told of Richard Mühlfeld's excellent playing by his former pupil Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, but it was not until Brahms formed his own affiliation with the orchestra that he was able to judge for himself. Certainly, their meeting began a happy partnership and Brahms produced several works for Mühlfeld, bringing the composer out of self-imposed retirement.

The pieces included the two Op. 120 sonatas of 1894, which were to be Brahms's last chamber works before his death three years later. Both were issued in alternative arrangements for viola and piano at the time. But we hear a transcription for violin, thereby adding to the composer's already significant catalogue of works for the instrument.

The first of the sonatas begins in F minor, often denoting storminess in Brahms's output. Such thoughts are quelled, if only briefly, by the subdued second subject in D flat major, as well as by the quieter ending to the movement. More introverted, with richly turning lines, is the *Andante*, though it also has an unpredictable streak. So does the ensuing waltz – reminding us of Brahms's adopted Viennese home – before the rondo finale ducks and dives through various key centres, to triumph at last in F major.

Throughout his career, Brahms was drawn to the music of Hungary. And we now turn to the source itself, with **Bartók's** Violin Sonata No. 1 BB84 of 1921, written for Jelly d'Arányi. Here, we witness the composer's complete assimilation of what he called his 'musical mother tongue', gleaned from years of research in the field, as well as a new phase of expressionism, inspired by his interest (though far from complete adherence) to the Second Viennese School.

The tonal foundation of the Sonata is C sharp minor, heard in the pelting *Allegro appassionato* that opens the work. Rhapsodic in form, it could be drawn from one of the chilling tableaux of *The Miraculous Mandarin*, written at the same time, while the piano's rolling arpeggios echo the cimbalom. There are dreamier passages too, indicative of Bartók's continued love of Debussy, albeit from beyond the grave.

The central movement is in three contrasting sections. The first is a prayerful solo for violin, with the French composer's soundworld recurring in the piano, as if *La cathédrale engloutie* had been transported to Bartók's homeland. The middle section is more

ominous, the bells becoming a hollow drumbeat, with a nervousness continuing in the last section. Finally, Bartók delivers a goodly dose of native music. But instead of a simple jig, the rondo is more like his 1912 *Allegro barbaro*: a stamping dance with a devilish glint.

An equally restive quality runs through Brahms's *Scherzo* from the *F-A-E Sonata*, a collaborative work written with Robert Schumann and his pupil Albert Dietrich in October 1853. Brahms's contribution offered both a tribute to the Sonata's dedicatee, Joseph Joachim, whose motto 'Frei aber einsam' ('free but lonely') provided the title for the work, and to Schumann, in that it follows the model of the *Scherzo* from the composer's Second Violin Sonata Op. 121. But you would be forgiven for hearing another presence too: Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. In response to its familiarly insistent rhythms, the trio is more demure, like the eye of a storm, but the initial tattoo soon returns, heralding the close.

Joachim remained one of Brahms's most reliable sources of kindness and criticism, with the composer further paying tribute by dedicating his Violin Concerto Op. 77 to him. And it was while the composer was working on that masterpiece in Pörschach – superseding plans to write a second piano concerto, at least for the time being – that he began the Violin Sonata in G Op. 78. It is an outwardly pastoral work, much like the Second Symphony that was written at the same Carinthian lakeside resort, yet there are deeper currents too.

The tempo marking of *Vivace ma non troppo*, for instance, appears at odds with the opening piano chords; as the violin enters, the accompaniment begins to spiral, revealing rippling cross-rhythms. The second subject, in the dominant, sees the two instruments come together for a particularly ardent melody. And then there follows a more faltering third subject, evoking the childhood memories of 'Regenlied', in the first of two allusions to Brahms's *8 Lieder und Gesänge* Op. 59 – with texts by his friend Klaus Groth. But the rain is but preparation for the stormy development, as in the Second Symphony, which the recapitulation will try to temper, before offering a winning coda.

The second movement is more reserved. The piano now takes the lead, with a chorale in E flat major. While some of the first movement's rhythmic discrepancies reappear, the melody eventually passes to the violin in yet more heartfelt tones. Not all worries have been vanquished, however, given the fretful start to the finale, with the violin's anacrusis from the first movement triggering a recollection of the sobbing 'Nachklang' from the Op. 59 songs. But after more cyclic gestures, developed out of motifs from both the *Vivace* and the *Adagio* – the 'distant echoes' of the song's title – Groth's (here unsung) promise of the returning sun, when 'the grass gleams twice as green', characterises the final optimistic bars.

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