

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 24 October 2024
7.30pm

James Ehnes violin
Orion Weiss piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Violin Sonata No. 4 in C minor BWV1017 (c.1717-23)
*I. Siciliano. Largo • II. Allegro • III. Adagio •
IV. Allegro*

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Violin Sonata in A minor (1952)
*I. Fantasia. Allegro giusto • II. Scherzo. Allegro
furioso ma non troppo • III. Tema con variazioni.
Andante*

Interval

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Suite from *Much Ado about Nothing* Op. 11 (1918-9)
*I. Mädchen im Brautgemach • II. Holzapfel und
Schlehenwein • III. Gartenscene •
IV. Mummenschanz*

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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Bach is most readily associated with his time in Leipzig. But before he moved to the Saxon city, he was Kapellmeister in Cöthen, north of Halle. The composer's five years at the court proved to be a golden period in his instrumental output, reflecting not only the relatively spare liturgy of its chapel but also Prince Leopold's keen interest in music as a source of entertainment.

The C minor Violin Sonata was written during Bach's time in Cöthen and is the fourth in a series of six dating to around 1720. Sadly, the scarcity of autograph materials means that it is almost impossible to establish a clear chronology for the work or to know for what purpose it was composed. But with its four-movement, slow-fast-slow-fast structure, this *sonata da chiesa* may well have been used within a spiritual context.

The piece certainly includes material Bach would later associate with the religious: the opening *Siciliano* inspired the violin obbligato in the aching 'Erbarme dich' from the *St Matthew Passion*. The fugue, on the other hand, is purely abstract, rivalling even *Die Kunst der Fuge* in its intricacy, while liberating the keyboard from a continuo role. The third movement mirrors the first, now couched in the relative major, before the finale provides a dancing reflection on the earlier fugue, instigated by the keyboard in the first section and then by the violin.

Vaughan Williams wrote his only Violin Sonata at the very end of his life. Completed in 1952, it was first heard two years later on the composer's 82nd birthday. The performers at the première were the work's dedicatee Frederick Grinke, a great exponent of *The Lark Ascending*, and the pianist Michael Mullinar. Unlike Vaughan Williams's earlier work, however, the pastoral mood of this Sonata is much darker, more in the scheme of Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which was soon to inspire the composer's Ninth Symphony.

The first movement fuses a free *Fantasia* with elements of sonata form. The piled-on thirds in piano suggest bells, even scudding clouds, before the violin enters low in its range, speaking with a sombre voice. Even the hushed tones of the second subject cannot impart calm, instead turning more spectral. That mood then continues in the *Scherzo*, full of the mordant humour the composer shared with his late friend Holst, whom he had first met in 1895.

In the Sonata's finale, Vaughan Williams even harks back to that period, basing its variations on a theme from the 1903 Piano Quintet. It spurs an extended exploration of motifs with a broad emotional spectrum, ranging from the cerebral canon of the second variation to a jig in the sixth. There is even a hint of the famous lark, before the theme finally claws its way towards the light.

Korngold's music for *Much Ado about Nothing* was written around the same time as his operatic masterpiece *Die tote Stadt*. A production of

Shakespeare's play had been planned for Vienna's Burgtheater in 1919, but costs ran too high, and it was mounted instead at the Schlosstheater at the Schönbrunn Palace in 1920. Having provided the score, Korngold also had to adapt his incidental music when the run was extended, given that the original chamber orchestra (including members of the Vienna Philharmonic) was no longer available.

It was the second iteration that provided the basis for later concert works. Cutting the chattering Overture, the Suite opens with 'The Maiden in the Bridal Chamber', originally accompanying Hero's wedding preparations. The music hints at both her excitement and her trepidation, given the defamatory accusations she will soon receive from her beloved Claudio. Hero's dishonour is investigated by Dogberry, Messina's ineffectual nightwatchman, introduced here by a wonderfully pompous march. A rather different mood pervades the waltzing intermezzo, 'Scene in the Garden', as Beatrice and Benedict's animosity melts, before the Suite closes with a virtuoso hornpipe, taken from one of the play's party scenes.

No stranger himself to Shakespeare, **Prokofiev** was working on *Cinderella*, his successor to *Romeo and Juliet*, when he travelled to the Urals in 1943. He was intending to work with the exiled Kirov company on plans for the second ballet's première. While he was there, however, Prokofiev also managed to pen a work for flute, 'an instrument which I felt had been undeservedly neglected'. It took the form of 'a sonata in delicate, fluid Classical style', which entranced the violinist David Oistrakh, who then offered to help transcribe the work.

'It occurred to me that it would sound very well on the violin. I felt that this beautiful piece of music ought to live a fuller and richer life on the concert stage. [...] It was the first time I had seen Prokofiev at work, and it was a revelation to me: I had never believed it possible to work with such speed and efficiency. He asked me to make two or three versions of each passage in the score that required editing, numbering each one carefully. As I submitted the pages to him, he marked the version he considered suitable and made a few pencil corrections here and there. Thus in no time the violin version of the Sonata was ready'.

In mood, the work is closely linked to the magic and mayhem of *Cinderella*. The first movement is a case in point, juxtaposing an amorous theme with touches of Mendelssohn. A more mocking humour comes to characterise the *Scherzo*, with hints of the ballet's Ugly Sisters, before the *Andante* unfolds with an attractive sense of melancholy. Prokofiev's finale, on the other hand, is both peppy and positive, even recalling the striding march of the hero from his 1936 masterpiece *Peter and the Wolf*.

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