

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 25 January 2024  
7.30pm

Ning Feng violin  
Zee Zee piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

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

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 100 (1886)  
*I. Allegro amabile • II. Andante tranquillo - Vivace •  
III. Allegretto grazioso, quasi andante*

Interval

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

Violin Sonata No. 3 in D minor Op. 108 (1886-8)  
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Un poco presto e con  
sentimento • IV. Presto agitato*

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Johannes Brahms published three violin sonatas. It seems likely that others were composed, mulled over, deemed unsatisfactory and rejected. Their music would either have been recycled into other compositions or destroyed. Brahms was one of the most organised and self-conscious of composers, and did not want musicologists rummaging through his archives after his death and unearthing material he did not consider worthy of him.

His penchant for organisation was manifest in his routines, too. Parts of the day were set aside for composition; other hours were just as strictly reserved for playing cards with friends. His summer months were spent away from Vienna in pleasant resorts, though even there he worked at his compositions with the same discipline.

All of Brahms's published violin sonatas were largely composed on these summer breaks, the First in 1878 and 1879 at Wörthersee in southern Austria, the Second and Third in 1886 at Lake Thun in Switzerland. It is highly probable that the composer will have played through the sketches with his friend the violinist, conductor and composer Joseph Joachim, whom he had met in 1853 in the home of Robert and Clara Schumann. In October of that year, when Joachim was due to call again at the Schumanns' house in Düsseldorf, Robert came up with the idea of a novel welcoming gift for the violinist: he, his student Albert Dietrich and the newcomer Brahms would write the individual movements of a collaborative sonata for violin and piano. They would present it to Joachim to play, and ask him to guess which movement was by which composer.

The resulting sonata had a first movement by Dietrich, a brief *Intermezzo* by Schumann, a powerfully stern *Scherzo* by Brahms and a *Finale* again by Schumann. The work was christened the '**F-A-E' Sonata** in reference to Joachim's personal motto, *Frei aber einsam* ('Free but alone'). In the event Joachim correctly named the respective composers without a moment's deliberation.

25 years later, Brahms brought out the official, complete **First Sonata** 'for piano and violin' as he styled such works, ever mindful of tradition. Woven into its fabric are motifs from two songs from his Op. 59 set: 'Regenlied' ('Rain Song') and 'Nachklang' ('Echo'). The texts are by Brahms's friend the poet Klaus Groth, and both use the imagery of falling rain bringing forth nostalgic and melancholic memories.

The opening lines of 'Regenlied' translate as, 'Pour, rain, flow down, reawaken the dreams that I dreamt in childhood.' This is the song whose melody and sentiment most permeate the Sonata, with explicit musical quotation in the finale. Thus prompted, we may also discern allusions to the sound of raindrops falling at various points as the work progresses.

The **Second Sonata** is also suffused with song melodies. It was composed in 1886, 'in anticipation of the arrival of a beloved lady friend', according to Brahms's early biographer Max Kalbeck. There is no mystery about the identity of this 'lady friend' – she was the contralto Hermine Spies, and she seems to have been as taken with Brahms as he was with her. The aforementioned poet Klaus Groth was also much enamoured with the singer, though none of this appears to have caused tensions between the three friends.

One of the songs whose tunes emerge in the Sonata has a text by Groth: 'Wie Melodien zieht es mir leise durch den Sinn' ('Thoughts, like melodies, steal softly through my mind'). Another is a setting of Hermann Lingg's poem 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer', specifically a phrase at the words, 'If you want to see me again, come soon', which occurs in the Sonata's finale. Another song with words by Groth expresses the same thought ('Komm bald'), and commentators have identified its characteristics in the Sonata's very opening. All these songs were written for Hermine Spies to perform. Even the unusual tempo marking for the first movement, *Allegro amabile* ('quickly, with love'), suggests that amorous thoughts were behind this predominantly warm and smiling sonata. Note, incidentally, how ingeniously the *Andante* combines a slow movement and a scherzo.

The **Third Sonata** was begun in Thun in 1886, but Brahms was not immediately satisfied with it. Back in Vienna in October 1888, he felt confident enough to send the work to trusted friends for trial play-throughs and comment. In December he took it with him to Hungary, where he was to conduct his Fourth Symphony. In Budapest, three days before Christmas, he gave the first performance of the Sonata, with the violinist Jenő Hubay.

The Sonata is dedicated to the conductor Hans von Bülow, named on the title page as 'friend'. The work has certain 'symphonic' characteristics less apparent in its predecessors. It has four movements instead of the three that previously sufficed, though the thoughts are extremely concentrated and it does not take any longer to perform than the others. There is also something imposing about its personality, as if it is addressed to an audience in a large space – although, like the Third and Fourth Symphonies, it has many moments of introspection and intimacy.

As mentioned above, Brahms would have sought the advice of Joseph Joachim when writing and revising these Sonatas. Curiously, though, Joachim did not give the first performances of any of them, nor did he receive a dedication. Do not feel too sorry for him, however: Brahms's Violin Concerto was written for, premièred by, and dedicated to him.

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