

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 25 November 2022
7.30pm

Miklós Perényi cello
Imre Rohmann piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Viola da Gamba Sonata No. 3 in G minor BWV1029
(before 1741)

I. Vivace • II. Adagio • III. Allegro

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in B flat Op. 45 (1838)

I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante • III. Allegro assai

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Rondo in G minor Op. 94 (1893)

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

5 Stücke im Volkston Op. 102 (1849)

Mit Humor • Langsam •

Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen •

Nicht zu rasch • Stark and markiert

Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960)

Cello Sonata in B flat minor Op. 8 (1899)

I. Allegro ma non troppo •

II. Scherzo. Vivace assai • III. Adagio non troppo •

IV. Tema con variazioni. Allegro moderato

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Every authority agreed that Carl Friedrich Abel was the finest viola da gamba player of his age. 'Justly admired as he was at his public Performances' recorded his obituary in the *St James's Chronicle* after his death in 1787, 'it was a few only of his intimate Friends in private who were Witnesses of his most wonderful musical Powers'. Abel came from a dynasty of virtuosos on this (by then) all-but-extinct instrument; his father Christian Ferdinand had played in Bach's court orchestra at Cöthen and Carl had studied under **Bach** himself at the Thomasschule in Leipzig.

Bach might have written his three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord for either father or son – with no manuscript in existence, it's frustratingly unclear. Scholars have suggested dates from around 1725 to the early 1740s. In any case, though, this was late in musical history to be writing for the gamba, and there's an air of melancholy about the serene, reflective central *Adagio* that isn't quite dispelled either by the energy of the first movement or the whirling passagework and pensive, bittersweet lyricism of the last.

The young **Mendelssohn** grew up in a home filled with chamber music: Fanny was the pianist, Felix the violinist and younger brother Paul was the cellist. Paul went on to pursue a career in finance, but he seems to have been a fine amateur cellist well into adult life: Felix wrote his *Variations concertantes* Op. 17 for Paul in 1829, and a decade later, in the summer of 1838, followed them with his Cello Sonata in B flat, Op. 45.

Paul received a manuscript copy of the score, though Mendelssohn was uncertain about whether he should make it public – 'I must first write it out and have it played before I decide whether it is suitable for publication at all', he told the publisher Novello. Cello and piano begin together, before finding their own, eloquent course through an *Allegro* that gives each instruments ample scope both to sparkle and sing. The pensive *Andante* moves with a Bach-like poise – a sort of slow-motion intermezzo – before the cello unfurls the graceful opening melody of the finale: a flowing, glittering rondo whose expansive pace and gentle sunset finish must surely have been known to Brahms.

By 1888, when the 33-year old Hanuš Wihan was appointed professor of cello at the Prague Conservatoire, he was already the most distinguished Czech cellist of his day. 'Mr Wihan's playing is absolutely free of superficial glitter', wrote the Russian critic Nikolay Kashkin. 'He conquers every technical difficulty, but does so quietly and simply, as if there was nothing remarkable about it'. **Dvořák** wrote the cello part of his 'Dummy' Trio Op. 90 (1891) with Wihan in mind. Together with the violinist Ferdinand Lachner, Dvořák and Wihan premièred the Trio in Prague in April 1891, and in the following spring they took it on tour round some 40 towns in Bohemia and Moravia. But the Trio wasn't long enough to fill a whole concert, so along with several other transcriptions Dvořák composed a Rondo (Op. 94) for Wihan: a concise, gloriously tuneful celebration of

the cello's capacity to dance, to dazzle and – of course – to sing.

'Schumann's chamber music', wrote Gerald Abraham, 'may, even more than the orchestral, be regarded as an extension of his piano music'. But it would be a grave error to assume that Schumann's instinct for the piano made him insensitive to the colour and expressive possibilities of other instruments. Time and again he wrote for those most typical instruments of German Romanticism: the horn, the clarinet and the cello.

Still, you might not guess, from the playfulness and poetry of the *5 Stücke im Volkston* ('5 pieces in folk style') that he'd completed them in April 1849 – just months after he and his wife Clara had fled their home in Dresden, as violent revolution spread through the city. He dedicated them to the cellist Andreas Grabau, of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, and put a tongue-in-cheek quote from Goethe – 'Vanitas, vanitatum' – at the head of the first piece: an indication that the 'folk style' embodied in these five miniatures is an invitation to the performer to exercise their own imagination, creativity and wit. Clara, of course, heard them first – noting in her diary that they 'absolutely beguiled me with their freshness and originality'.

When **Ernő Dohnányi** was born, Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and artists moved freely between Vienna and Budapest. The young Dohnányi met Brahms and toured Europe, but like so many Hungarians, he ended up at the sharp end of 20th-century history. His son Hans was executed by the Nazis after conspiring to assassinate Hitler, and Dohnányi himself died in exile – he's buried in Tallahassee, Florida.

But he never lost his Hungarian accent, even when – as in this impassioned Cello Sonata, completed in the autumn of 1899 while Dohnányi was touring as a concert pianist in Britain – he was most deeply immersed in the imaginative world of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. Brahms (who had commented admiringly of Dohnányi's Piano Quintet Op. 1 that 'I could not have written it better myself') is a potent presence, particularly in the sweeping first movement, and the form of the finale: an original theme (marked *semplice*) and nine (often virtuosic) variations. But the idyllic, rapturous *Adagio* introduction to the finale and the skittering, fiery *Scherzo* are unmistakably the work of a composer of a new generation, with energy and fantasy to spare.

Dohnányi dedicated the sonata to his friend, the Budapest-born cellist Ludwig Lebell, with whom he gave the première at St James's Hall, London, on 4 December 1899. The critic of *The Daily Telegraph* admired its 'attractive and suitable themes, infinite variety of ideas, and discriminating estimates of effect, together with a certain freshness of treatment that continually stimulated attention' – though Dohnányi, in his excitement, played so powerfully that Lebell was almost overwhelmed.

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