

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 26 September 2022  
1.00pm

Laura van der Heijden cello  
Tom Poster piano

Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1665-1729)	Violin Sonata No. 1 in D minor (1707) <i>I. Lent • II. Presto • III. Adagio • IV. Presto • V. Adagio • VI. Presto • VII. Aria • VIII. Presto</i>
Errollyn Wallen (b.1958)	Dervish (2001)
Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)	Vocalise Op. 34 No. 14 (1912)
George Walker (1922-2018)	Sonata for cello and piano (1957) <i>I. Allegro passionato • II. Sostenuto • III. Allegro</i>

BBC  
RADIO



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This lunchtime Laura van der Heijden and Tom Poster perform music spanning three centuries, beginning with a violin sonata (arranged for cello) by a leading figure of the French Baroque. **Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre** was born into a long line of masons, musicians and instrument-makers. She performed for Louis XIV at Versailles aged 5 and later joined his court as a musician, but in 1684 she married the organist Michel de La Guerre and returned to Paris. The first woman in France to have an opera performed at the Académie Royale de Musique (the *tragédie en musique* *Céphale et Procris*, in 1694), she ranked, according to Évrard Titon du Tillet's chronicle *Le parnasse françois* (1732), alongside Delalande and Marais (the successors to Lully at the court of Louis XIV) and second only to Lully himself.

In 1707 Guerre published a set of six sonatas for violin and continuo. These mostly adopt the Italian style of Corelli's Church sonatas – alternating slow and fast movements – but some movements show the French influence of dance, if only in sound and not in name. The D minor sonata's first movement, for example, has the feel of a sarabande (a slow three-time dance). The first *Presto* features imitative writing between the instruments. A three-part *Adagio – Presto – Adagio* follows, the central, gigue-like section framed by slow expressive recitatives. After the following *Presto* comes an elegant *Aria*, and the sonata is rounded off with a final *Presto*, charged with dramatic upward-rushing figures.

Born in Belize, **Errollyn Wallen** studied briefly in New York and then in London before establishing a varied career led by her eclectic influences and versatile skills. She has won awards for both her TV and classical scores, played in the band Ensemble X and made waves as a singer-songwriter. She has written more than 20 operas and lives in a remote lighthouse on the North Scotland coast. Wallen reminds us that, in dervish dances, contrary to popular belief, 'there is no hedonistic wildness; the swirling skirts move from rapt and still devotion'. Accordingly, her *Dervish* emerges from nothing, soulful and with a mysterious atmosphere. The tension then builds with a tightly circling figure in cello and a rotating pattern of chords on the piano, to which the cello eventually aligns. Cello and piano become locked together in a juddering circular motion that builds to an energetic climax. A return of the piano's chord sequence quells the mood and the cello begins to weave a decorative line around it. But, sooner than expected, the gentle spinning and meditative mood come to a standstill.

**Sergey Rachmaninov's** *Vocalise* is a piece that needs very little introduction, partly since any attempt to reflect in words its simple, endless melody and its poignant wistfulness, is self-defeating. Originally for voice and piano, this is a song carried not by words but by a continuous vowel. It's all about the melody, and few composers could spin one out with the same degree of stirring warmth as Rachmaninov. His concentration on neighbouring notes (the jumps are few and far between) creates both an interiorised mood and a

sense of perpetual unfolding. After the opening melody, the middle section moves forward, and rises upwards, gathering more tension. But the return of the main melody is as lyrical as before, if perhaps a little more bittersweet. Unsurprisingly for such a moving melody, there have been all kinds of iterations, including Don Sebesky's jazz version for alto saxophone and vibraphone, backed by piano, bass, drums and orchestra, as well as a version for Moog synthesizer.

The trailblazing American composer **George Walker**, who died only in 2018 aged 96, was initially destined to be a pianist rather than a composer: he was the first Black pianist to give a recital at New York's Town Hall, and the first Black soloist to appear with the Philadelphia Orchestra. His Cello Sonata began as a surprise commission from a woman who approached him one day when he was practising the piano while a student at the Eastman School of Music (Rochester, NY). She offered him only \$25 but then left the college before he finished the piece. The sonata won him a prize to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, who was so impressed with his technical skill that she exempted him from her harmony and counterpoint classes.

Led by a motoric pattern in the piano, the Cello Sonata's first movement opens with a surging cello theme, wrongfooted by the piano's contradicting pulse. Despite the precision of Walker's writing here – the metre (number of beats per bar) is constantly shifting – the effect is of surging freedom rather than mechanical regularity.

The second theme – more obviously lyrical – begins with the cello playing in double-stops (two notes at once). One commentator has suggested this theme reflects Walker's interest in American folksong, spirituals and hymns. Echoes of the piano's motivic pattern from the beginning are never far from the surface in the stormy development section. After the standard return of the first and second themes, it is this rhythm, in the piano, that sets off the start of the coda, before the movement ends in a brief, but hard-won peace.

The slow middle movement opens with the cello quite high in its range, playing a melody almost disturbing in its intensity. Led by the piano, the middle section offers a little more momentum and a closer dialogue between cello and piano. The movement's opening music returns – that painful lyricism, which Walker clearly recognised as being suited to the cello's particular capacity for concentrated, voice-like (and therefore almost human-sounding) expression.

The *Allegro* finale is not the bright, joyous ending we might expect. A dark, ironic tone falls over it, such as Walker may have heard in Debussy's Cello Sonata or in Prokofiev's Sixth Piano Sonata. There is a clear jazz influence here (Walker once referred to the 'boogie-woogie bass'). The movement closes suddenly, with a flourish that is as brief as it is vigorous.

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