

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 January 2025  
1.00pm

Anastasia Kobekina cello  
Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula piano

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

3 pièces for cello and piano (1914)  
*Modéré • Sans vitesse et à l'aise •  
Vite et nerveusement rythmé*

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

Pohádka (1910 rev. 1912-23)  
*I. Con moto - Andante • II. Con moto - Adagio •  
III. Allegro*

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Les berceaux Op. 23 No. 1 (1879)  
  
Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Op. 13 (1875-6)  
*I. Allegro molto • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivo •  
IV. Allegro quasi presto*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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The French musician **Nadia Boulanger** is now remembered primarily as a legendary pedagogue (her pupils included Daniel Barenboim, Lennox Berkeley, Leonard Bernstein, Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland and Philip Glass, to name but a few) and pioneering conductor (in 1936 she became the first woman to conduct the London Philharmonic Orchestra). Earlier in her lengthy career, however, she composed numerous songs and a Fantasy for piano and orchestra, and collaborated on a four-act opera with the pianist Raoul Pugno. She abandoned composition in the early 1920s, grief-stricken at the recent death of her beloved younger sister Lili, whom she regarded as by far the family's most talented composer. But the recent revival of interest in Nadia's music has revealed her as an accomplished and original composer in her own right. The Three Pieces for cello and piano were composed in 1914 and demonstrate both her melodic gift and the fascination with knotty, elaborately worked textures that would characterise her later work as a teacher.

*Pohádka*, **Janáček's** 'Fairy Tale' for cello and piano, had a long and complex genesis. It was first performed in 1910, with three movements that the composer indicated would ultimately form part of a longer work. When it was next heard in 1912, a fourth movement had been added, but this was removed when the work was finally published in 1924. A further, more virtuosic version from 1913 no longer survives. Cellists today almost invariably choose to play the 'definitive' three-movement *Pohádka* from 1924, and it is this version that is performed in today's concert. The 1910 première was accompanied by a programme note indicating that the work was inspired by *The Tale of Tsar Berendyey*, an epic poem by the Russian author V. A. Zhukovsky, in which Prince Ivan falls in love with the beautiful Tsarievna Maria, daughter of the evil magician Kastchei. Intriguingly, Ivan, the Tsarievna and Kastchei also feature in *The Firebird*, the ballet that Stravinsky composed in the very same year, though the two composers were almost certainly unaware of each other's work at this point. By the time *Pohádka* was published, Janáček evidently found the story an unnecessary distraction: he suppressed all references to the poem, and even began to refer to the piece as a 'cello sonata', as if to suggest its abstract nature. So colourful and evocative is *Pohádka's* music, however, that it sounds in performance much more like a piece of storytelling.

Both the pieces by **Gabriel Fauré** that conclude today's programme were composed while he was in his early 30s, newly appointed choirmaster at the fashionable Eglise de la Madeleine, and beginning to make his mark as a composer; neither was originally intended for cello. 'Les berceaux', the first of a sequence of three songs published in 1879, sets a text by Fauré's near-contemporary Sully Prudhomme which likens the motion of cradles rocked by women to that of ships sailed by men. The 12/8 metre and the piano's constant quavers vividly evoke the movement described in the text. So

exquisitely shaped is Fauré's wide-spanning vocal line, however, that it conveys its melancholy meaning without the need for words, making it ideally suited to performance on the cello.

Fauré himself gave the première of his Violin Sonata No. 1 with the violinist Marie Tayau at a concert of the Société Nationale de Musique in January 1877. The Société had been co-founded only six years earlier by Fauré's teacher and long-standing mentor, Camille Saint-Saëns, with the grand aim of re-establishing a national musical tradition in the wake of France's disastrous defeat in its war with Prussia. With this new work, Saint-Saëns felt that Fauré had vindicated the group's existence, composing a masterpiece in the 'pure' form of the sonata which nonetheless had nothing to do with the 'Germanic' models that had hitherto dominated the thinking even of French composers. Saint-Saëns praised his pupil's music in extravagant terms: 'his sonata contains everything that appeals to the gourmet: new forms, wonderful modulations, unusual tone colours, unexpected rhythms. With this work of such modest appearance, M. Fauré has leapt to the top ranks of the masters in one bound.' The sonata quickly attracted numerous other admirers, including performers of the calibre of Eugène Ysaÿe, Georges Enescu and Alfred Cortot, and the writer Marcel Proust, who chose it as the centrepiece of a famous concert he organised at the Ritz in 1907 in Fauré's honour, and used it as a model for the violin sonata by the fictional composer Vinteuil so memorably described in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Although each of the sonata's four movements displays a familiar structure – the first, second and last are in sonata form, the third is a *scherzo* and trio – Fauré's musical language is confidently original. His distinctive melodic impulse is clear from the first movement's opening theme, simultaneously expansive and agitated, while his fondness for adventurously chromatic harmony is evident in the impassioned second-movement *Andante*. The verve, delicacy and subtle wit of the third movement ensured its success at the première, where it was enthusiastically encored. The finale, meanwhile, contains perhaps the sonata's only ostentatiously virtuosic passage, when a series of rapid *spiccato* scales takes flight shortly before the end. The sonata's prioritising of melodic beauty over technical display makes it a particularly suitable candidate for transcription by cellists, like César Franck's equally popular violin sonata in the same key, composed a decade later. Carl Hüllweck's cello arrangement of Fauré's sonata was published by Breitkopf and Härtel in 1889, and was approved and probably proofread by Fauré himself. Hüllweck's edition was out of print for many years, but its recent reissue has prompted cellists once again to rediscover the joys of this most life-affirming of sonatas.

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