

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 March 2023  
1.00pm

Steven Isserlis cello  
Jonian Ilias Kadesha violin  
Irène Duval violin  
Eivind Ringstad viola  
Tim Posner cello  
Lucy Shaw double bass  
Maggie Cole harpsichord

Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805)

String Quintet in D minor Op. 13 No. 4 (1772)  
*I. Allegro • II. Andante sostenuto •  
III. Fuga. Allegro giusto*

Cello Sonata No. 2 in C minor (pub. 1772)  
*I. Allegro • II. Largo • III. Allegretto*

Cello Concerto No. 7 in G (pub. 1770)  
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro*

BBC  
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

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**Luigi Boccherini** was of a generation of professional musicians who had to work hard to gain a reputation. He was born in 1743 in Lucca, Italy, 11 years after Haydn and 13 years before Mozart. He had some advantages from the start, many of his family being musicians, poets or dancers. He soon became a cello player of such quality that at the age of 14 he successfully auditioned, together with his double bass-playing father, to join the orchestra of the Vienna Burgtheater.

As a young man he toured extensively playing chamber music. The legend of his virtuosity was enhanced when he once stood in for an indisposed violinist, playing the fiddle part at the original pitch – this soon became his party trick. By his mid-20s his efforts to become recognised had paid off. From 1768 until his death in 1805 he lived in Spain, employed to write and supervise music for a succession of noble households.

In 1770 Boccherini arrived in Madrid to take up an appointment as court composer for Don Luis, younger brother of King Carlos III. Included in his contract were duties as a performer. The court already had a resident string quartet (whose members were drawn from a single family), so it was natural that Boccherini should join them, thus creating a two-cello quintet. It was equally natural that he should start composing for this novel medium – novel enough to render the resultant compositions somewhat uncommercial on the wider market. Although he apologised to a publisher that including a second cello was ‘a necessity’ in his current circumstances, his enthusiasm for the musical effect it created cannot be doubted. His works for string quintet with two cellos would comfortably exceed 100 by the end of his working life.

Cataloguing and dating Boccherini’s works has been an ongoing concern for musicologists for some time. However, there is consensus that the six Quintets published as Opus 13 were composed in 1772. The D minor Quintet Op. 13 No. 4 opens in an atmosphere of darkness and disturbed waters, but calmer, brighter thoughts soon emerge. The richly varied exposition of the first movement encompasses operatic question-and-answer, chirruping birds, Handelian yearning, evocations of guitar strumming (we are in Spain, after all), and circular phrases that intertwine and whirl along like well-regulated clockwork. The sultry middle movement is perfectly poised between the worlds of the Baroque and Classical. Similarly the closing *Allegro giusto* adopts the arch-Baroque form of fugue, but brings it into a new age, as Beethoven, Mendelssohn and others were to do in the next century.

It is impossible to say when Boccherini’s 30-plus cello sonatas were written. He did not include them in his own catalogue of works, which he began compiling in 1760, when he was 17. Does that mean they predate his adult life? Some musical detectives have been tempted to speculate along those lines, especially as

the composer’s father was a double bassist, and the cosy picture of Papa and little Luigi playing together at home is an appealing one. Stylistically the sonatas are less advanced than most of Boccherini’s output, with an outgoing solo part accompanied by a dutiful bass line that can, if wished, be filled out with keyboard harmony. But we really don’t know why they went unacknowledged and unpublished by their creator. His indifference towards them has not been shared by others; unofficial editions appeared in his lifetime, and the sonatas are still performed.

The C minor Sonata (G.2 in the catalogue published by the scholar Yves Gérard in 1969) contains an initially busy *Allegro* whose motor rhythms rather surprisingly give way to less assertive music. In the musing *Largo*, the cello offers a series of quizzical phrases while exploring a wide range of pitch. The final movement sets out as a formal minuet, but once again its character turns out to be not as unbending as first impressions suggest. Is it fanciful to suggest that the work as a whole has a Spanish flavour, and might therefore belie the ‘juvenilia’ theory?

The Cello Concerto in G (G.480) is another work omitted from the composer’s own thematic catalogue, and again we don’t know why. It was published in Paris in 1770, and was possibly one of a handful of his own concertos that Boccherini played in the French capital. Its slow movement is the second-best-known piece of music by Boccherini (the first-best-known being the minuet from his Quintet Op. 11 No. 5, thanks to its inclusion in the 1955 British comedy film *The Ladykillers*). But it acquired that familiarity due to an act of musical butchery by the 19th-century cellist Friedrich Grützmacher, who wrenched it from its original place and plonked it into his gaudily romanticised arrangement of the B flat Concerto (G.482), along with chunks ripped from other Boccherini concertos. Well into the recording era this Frankencerto remained popular with cellists unable to resist its opportunities for showmanship.

The bona fide Boccherini G.480 is much less of a display piece, though it would have provided plenty of opportunity for an 18th-century soloist to demonstrate state-of-the-art technique. Scored for soloist and strings without woodwind (and with the soloist’s passages characteristically accompanied only by the violins), it begins with a high-stepping *Allegro*. The solo cello soon wanders off chromatically to find high registers where it dances with delight. Any shadows that fall in this movement are gentle and passing. But the *Adagio* takes us into a more serious and contemplative realm, to touching effect. The *Allegro* finale shares with the first movement several Vivaldi-like characteristics, and is a celebration of imitative counterpoint and extended pedal harmonies as well as the simple joys of life.

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