

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 March 2023
7.30pm

Beatrice Rana piano
Simone Lamsma violin

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

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

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in F minor Op. 80 (1938-46)
*I. Andante assai • II. Allegro brusco •
III. Andante • IV. Allegrissimo*

Interval

Lera Auerbach (b.1973)

From *24 Preludes for violin and piano* Op. 46 (1999)
*Prelude No. 22 in G minor • Prelude No. 11 in B •
Prelude No. 18 in F minor*

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

Violin Sonata in B minor (1917)
*I. Moderato • II. Andante espressivo •
III. Passacaglia. Allegro moderato ma energico*

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The violinist Joseph Joachim had already worked closely with both Mendelssohn and Liszt before, at the age of 22, he met Robert Schumann at the Lower Rhine Music Festival in May 1853. Schumann was immensely impressed with him, and even more impressed when, on 30 September, Joachim introduced his newly discovered protégé, the 20-year-old **Johannes Brahms**. Schumann hatched a secret plan to write, with his student Albert Dietrich and with Brahms, a composite violin sonata for Joachim. The violinist arrived in Düsseldorf to play in one of Schumann's orchestral concerts on 27 October, and the next day he was presented with the Sonata, which he sight-read with Clara, Schumann's wife, at the piano.

Dietrich wrote the long and interesting first movement. The three conspirators had agreed to use the notes FAE, the musical version of Joachim's motto 'Frei aber einsam' ('Free but lonely'). Dietrich created a soaring melody based on the semitone E to F, and then revealed that it fitted with FAE as a counter-melody. Schumann wrote the *Intermezzo* (with FAE in the bass and the violin melody) and the *Finale*, and Brahms contributed the penultimate movement, a vigorous *Scherzo*, a style he had already made his own in the *Scherzo in E flat minor for solo piano of 1851*, and of which many more examples would follow.

Curiously, neither of the last two movements present FAE as thematic material. Those first listeners who had heard Dietrich's first movement, with the semitone theme that used FAE as a counter-melody, would realize that Brahms's movement was in fact based on the semitone theme, which stood in, as it were, for FAE. As for Schumann's *Finale*, perhaps he had other things on his mind. A disastrous choral rehearsal in the middle of October meant that the concert was his last in Düsseldorf. He was effectively given the sack. It had been a crowded month.

The other tensions at that first performance may be deduced from a letter Brahms wrote to Joachim the following year:

'I believe I do not respect and admire [Clara] so much as I love her and am under her spell. Often I must forcibly restrain myself from just quietly putting my arms around her and even – I don't know, it seems to me so natural that she would not take it ill. I think I can no longer love a young girl. At least I have quite forgotten about them. They but promise heaven while Clara reveals it to us.'

Clara was in her mid-30s; Brahms, 21.

Prokofiev's mother, Maria, came from a family of former serfs once owned by one of Russia's most enlightened great families, who encouraged their dependents to pursue the arts and theatre. Maria, having made a fortunate marriage, spent Sergey's early childhood having piano lessons in Moscow or St Petersburg for two months every year, and the boy benefited from her contacts – the composer-pianist Glière spent several summers at the Prokofievs' house, teaching him. Prokofiev was a controversial student at the St Petersburg Conservatoire, but acquired enough admirers of his then shockingly dissonant style to be able to hold his own after the death of

his supportive father. He left the Conservatoire having won a grand piano for his performance of his First Piano Concerto.

In 1914, he travelled to London, where the ballet impresario Diaghilev encouraged him to be more Russian, and commissioned a ballet. *Chout* underwent many changes as Diaghilev and choreographer Massine explained their requirements, but when it was produced in Paris in 1921 Ravel pronounced it a masterpiece, and even Stravinsky, a serious rival in the ballet stakes, praised it.

The F minor Violin Sonata was eight years in the making. It is one of Prokofiev's darkest works – the first and third movements were played at his funeral. He once described the sinister violin scales as 'wind blowing through a graveyard'.

Lera Auerbach was born in Chelyabinsk, Russia. Her mother was a piano teacher, and Lera began composing when she was four years old. At the age of 18, she defected during a concert tour of America. She studied at The Juilliard School in New York with the pianist Joseph Kalichstein and the composer Milton Babbitt; she also read literature at Columbia University, and went on to study the piano in Hanover. Her works include four symphonies, four violin concertos, nine string quartets, four piano trios, ballets and choral works. Her *24 Preludes*, one of three cycles of preludes (the others being for cello and piano and piano solo, respectively), were written as standalone miniatures that could, when played together, form a unified complete work.

Ottorini Respighi was born in Bologna into an artistic family. His early musical studies were haphazard, but he was able eventually to surprise his father by playing a complicated piece of Schumann which he had learnt in secret. He studied at the Bologna Conservatory, and played in the local opera orchestra. In 1900 he went to St Petersburg, where he led the viola section in the opera, and studied with Rimsky-Korsakov, whose virtuoso orchestration greatly influenced him. Returning to Bologna, he led a chamber group until he moved to Rome in 1913. His pioneering editions (or rather, transcriptions) of works by Monteverdi took him to Berlin, where he had great success. In Rome he taught composition, and in 1919 he married his student, Elsa. During the Great War, Respighi composed his first Roman tone-poem, *Fountains of Rome*, and arranged some Rossini piano pieces into a ballet for Diaghilev, *La Boutique fantasque*. *Pines of Rome* appeared in 1924, and *Roman Festivals* in 1928. From 1921 till his death from bacterial endocarditis, Respighi toured the world as composer, conductor and pianist.

The Violin Sonata in B minor is a big work, and so difficult that Ricordi of Milan were reluctant to publish it. The first movement sweeps along in compound triple rhythm; the accompanimental figuration of the slow movement uses hesitant prime-number rhythms with wonderful effect; and the finale is a set of variations on a bass – a *Passacaglia*, in short.

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