

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 27 October 2021 7.30pm

Frank Peter Zimmermann violin

Martin Helmchen piano



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Violin Sonata No. 8 in G Op. 30 No. 3 (1801-2)

I. Allegro assai • II. Tempo di menuetto, ma molto moderato e grazioso • III. Allegro vivace

Violin Sonata No. 9 in A Op. 47 'Kreutzer' (1802-3)

I. Adagio sostenuto - Presto • II. Andante con variazioni • III. Finale. Presto

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven

Violin Sonata No. 10 in G Op. 96 (1812 rev. 1814-5)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio espressivo • III. Scherzo. Allegro – Trio • IV. Poco allegretto

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In April 1802 **Beethoven** moved on the advice of his doctor from his lodgings in central Vienna to the village of Heiligenstadt, in order to alleviate his encroaching deafness. In his portfolio were the virtually complete Second Symphony and sketches for three violin sonatas. Working swiftly, Beethoven finished the sonatas during May. They were published as Op. 30, with a dedication to the enlightened young Russian Tsar, Alexander I.

The G major Sonata Op. 30 No. 3 shows the composer at his most genial. If there is a tension-free Beethoven sonata, this is it. Launched by a flurry of scales and a whoop of glee from the violin, the opening *Allegro assai* is an inspired *jeu d'esprit*, with violin and piano in close, conspiratorial collusion. Contrasting ideas include a mock-vehement outburst in the minor key, a skittish little rustic tune over a drone bass and a closing theme disrupted by offbeat accents and chuckling trills.

The lyrically beguiling *Tempo di menuetto*, in the warm key of E flat major, is first cousin to the *Menuetto* in the near-contemporary Piano Sonata in E flat Op. 31 No. 3. Both are surrogate slow movements that put a Romantic gloss on the leisured elegance of the *ancien régime* minuet. Sentiment is summarily banished in the rollicking finale, which evokes the spirit of his one-time teacher Haydn, and in particular his famous 'Gipsy Rondo'. Beethoven gleefully conjures the Hungarian *Pusztá* with 'exotic' sharpened fourths (ie, C sharps), repeated scraps of folklike melody and pervasive bagpipe drones.

In the spring of 1803, just before embarking on the 'Eroica' Symphony, Beethoven was introduced to the celebrated mixed-race violinist George Bridgetower. For him Beethoven rapidly composed a violin sonata which the two of them triumphantly premièred at a concert in Vienna's Augarten. True to form, Beethoven then fell out with Bridgetower, allegedly after a quarrel over a girl. When the sonata appeared in 1805, it bore a dedication to the French virtuoso Rodolphe Kreutzer who, ironically, branded it as 'outrageously unintelligible'!

That first edition described the work as 'Sonata for piano and violin obbligato, written in a distinctly concertante style, like a concerto'. Living up to its billing, the 'Kreutzer' is the longest and most flamboyantly assertive violin sonata composed to date: an essentially 'public' work, counterpart to the 'Waldstein' and 'Appassionata' sonatas and the 'Razumovsky' quartets (the alarmed critic of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* dubbed it 'an act of artistic terrorism'). Beethoven establishes the absolute parity of the two instruments at the start of the slow introduction, opening with the violin alone in sonorous multiple-stopping, and continuing, with a drift from major to minor, by the piano. A nagging two-note figure proves to be the seed of the main *Presto*, cast, against expectations, in A minor. This is music of hectic brilliance, with the players vying with each other in devil-may-care virtuosity. In Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (which in turn inspired Janáček's First String Quartet) it even drove the protagonist Pozdnyshov to stab

his wife in a jealous rage. Only the chorale-like second theme brings momentary repose.

Virtuoso display, now skittishly ornamental, is also to the fore in the slow movement, a set of variations on a theme of tender simplicity. One of the composer's friends recalled that Beethoven played this theme with 'such chaste expression' at the première that it had to be encored twice. The finale, re-establishing A major for the first time since the sonata's opening bars, is a coruscating 6/8 tarantella that Beethoven had originally conceived for the Sonata Op. 30 No. 1 before rejecting it as out of character with that predominantly gracious work. There is wit, albeit of a frenetic sort, in this music, with violin and piano now colluding rather than colliding head-on, as they so often had in the first movement.

At the polar extreme from the 'Kreutzer' is Beethoven's final violin sonata, in G major Op. 96, completed in December 1812 for the visiting French violinist Pierre Rode. Beethoven took longer than usual over the finale because, as he wrote to the work's dedicatee, Archduke Rudolph, 'In our finales we like to have rather rumbustious passages, but R[ode] does not care for them so I have been somewhat hampered.'

'Hampered' or not, Beethoven turned Rode's apparent distaste for 'rumbustious passages' to advantage, and created a work of sublime poetic inwardness. Unfolding almost casually from its quizzical opening phrase, proposed by violin and echoed by the piano, the gently paced first movement is a rarefied *Ländler* (the waltz's country cousin), with hints of spiritualised yodelling. In the 'Kreutzer' Sonata violin and piano were often locked in mortal combat. Here they dream and commune with infinite tenderness, like a pair of lovers. Each of the lyrical themes seems to grow naturally from its predecessor. Musing on a two-note figure from the exposition's closing theme, the development floats and hovers over a ceaseless flow of triplets. Typically of Beethoven, the recapitulation reinvents rather than repeats, quickly gliding to the mellow key of E flat for new reflections on the opening theme.

The recapitulation's drift to E flat prepares us for the key of the slow movement, *Adagio espressivo*. Beginning with an assuaging, chorale-like melody, sounded by the piano alone, this deepens the first movement's mood of rapt tranquillity. Beethoven's sketches for this theme reveal a simultaneous process of simplification and lyrical intensification. Next comes a tetchy G minor *Scherzo* with stinging offbeat accents - a striking contrast with the mood of the sonata as a whole. The coda brightens into G major, preparing for the pastoral, almost child-like theme of the variation finale. Despite occasional bouts of brilliance, the tone is one of subdued gaiety. Variation 5 (*Adagio espressivo*) dissolves the theme in a meditative fantasia, while the rustic revelry of Variation 7 breaks off for a spectral chromatic fugato: the kind of extreme dissociation, half-comic, half-unsettling, that looks ahead to many a work of Beethoven's so-called Third Period.

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