

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 28 February 2024
7.30pm

Joshua Bell violin
Shai Wosner piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 100 (1886)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Andante tranquillo - Vivace •
III. Allegretto grazioso, quasi andante*

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Fantasy in C D934 (1827)

*Andante molto - Allegretto - Andantino - Tempo I -
Allegro vivace - Allegretto - Presto*

Interval

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Méditation from *Souvenir d'un lieu cher* Op. 42 (1878)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Divertimento from *The Fairy's Kiss* (1928 arr. 1934)

*I. Sinfonia • II. Danses suisses • III. Scherzo •
IV. Pas de deux*



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Brahms's three published violin sonatas were largely composed on his summer breaks, the First in 1878 and 1879 at Wörthersee in southern Austria, the Second and Third in 1886 at Lake Thun in Switzerland. During these weeks away from his many official duties in Vienna, Brahms, diligent and organised as ever, reserved parts of each day for composing. There was plenty of time left over to enjoy the pleasant surroundings and the company of old acquaintances.

The Second Sonata was composed 'in anticipation of the arrival of a beloved lady friend', according to Brahms's early biographer Max Kalbeck. There is no mystery about the identity of this 'beloved' – she was the contralto Hermine Spies, and she seems to have been as taken with Brahms as he was with her.

The tunes of several songs Brahms had already written are woven into the Sonata. Two have texts by the poet Klaus Groth, a good friend of Brahms who was equally enamoured with the singer. The most prominent is 'Wie Melodien zieht es mir leise durch den Sinn' ('Thoughts, like melodies, steal softly through my mind'). The very beginning of the Sonata alludes to the other, 'Komm bald' ('Come soon'). The same sentiment is expressed more explicitly in the finale, with a quotation from 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer' (text this time by Hermann Lingg), specifically a phrase at the words, 'If you want to see me again, come soon'.

All these songs had been written for Hermine Spies to perform, so she would have had no difficulty picking up the inference. Even the unusual tempo marking for the first movement, *Allegro amabile* ('quickly, lovingly') suggests that romantic thoughts were behind this predominantly warm and smiling sonata. This is Brahms at his most candid and relaxed, but as ingenious as ever: note how the *Andante* combines a slow movement and a scherzo.

According to the critic of the journal *Der Sammler*, the first public performance of **Schubert's** *Fantasy in C* 'rather outlasted the time which the average Viennese is prepared to devote to the pleasures of the intellect'. His review of the January 1828 concert continued, 'The hall gradually emptied, and your correspondent confesses that he too is unable to say anything about how this composition ended.' In other words, the reviewer went to the pub rather than stay to hear the end.

The *Fantasy* is certainly on a high 'intellectual' level. But it is also a work of disturbing emotional power. The violin makes a ghostly entrance through a watery shimmer created by the piano, and just as we appear to be reaching the recapitulation of a sonata-form movement, further piano tremolos prepare the way for a theme and variations section built on Schubert's song 'Sei mir gegrüsst' ('I greet you' – text by Friedrich Rückert). A fourth variation arrives

unexpectedly and disconcertingly just before the end, interrupting what had appeared to be an optimistic finale section.

In the original poem a lover yearns to embrace the person addressed, and finally does so with a kiss. Who is that lover? Within a year of that January 1828 recital, the composer had been claimed by death.

It took **Tchaikovsky** many months to recover from the trauma of his 1877 marriage to, and rapid separation from, Antonina Miliukova, a former seamstress who had become infatuated with the composer. After they parted company (she never granted him a divorce) he suffered a deep depression. In the early spring of 1878 he went to the Swiss resort of Clarens to recuperate in the company of his student and probable lover, the violinist Iosif Kotek. The two men worked together on Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, which was completed quite swiftly, suggesting that the composer's mental state was improving.

The original slow movement of the Concerto was this *Méditation*, but Tchaikovsky replaced it almost as soon as he had written it. It survived, however, as the first movement of a suite for violin and piano titled *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*. The 'beloved place' of that title is the Ukrainian estate of Tchaikovsky's generous patron Nadezhda von Meck, where the suite was completed at the end of May 1878.

Igor Stravinsky was a great admirer of Tchaikovsky and his music, and that admiration remained undimmed even after Stravinsky had moved away from Russian Romanticism in his own compositions. Therefore in 1928, when he received a commission to write a ballet, he took the opportunity to base his music on lesser-known pieces by his predecessor – songs and piano miniatures – as a way of paying homage.

The narrative of the ballet is taken from Hans Christian Andersen's story *The Snow Maiden*, about a fairy who, with a kiss, takes possession of a baby's soul. For Stravinsky this 'suggested an allegory of Tchaikovsky himself' as he later wrote. 'The fairy's kiss on the heel of the child is also the muse marking Tchaikovsky at his birth – though the muse did not claim him at his wedding, as she did the young man in the ballet, but at the height of his powers.' The 'muse' here is obviously music, but perhaps Stravinsky is also alluding to Tchaikovsky's sexuality and its significance to his early death, possibly a suicide.

In 1932, Stravinsky worked with Samuel Dushkin, his regular violinist collaborator, on a suite for violin and piano using about half the music from the ballet score. The resulting *Divertimento* later had a third incarnation as an orchestral piece for the concert hall.

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