

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 28 May 2023  
7.30pm

Stephen Kovacevich piano  
Tamsin Waley-Cohen violin

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

Piano Sonata Op. 1 (?1907-8)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

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*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)  
*I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo  
II. Allegro molto  
III. Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo*

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Violin Sonata in G minor (1916-7)  
*I. Allegro vivo • II. Intermède. Fantasque et léger •  
III. Finale. Très animé*

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'A very tall youngster, extremely timid,' was Arnold Schoenberg's laconic description of his pupil **Alban Berg** in 1904. Berg would long retain an almost childlike reverence for his teacher, whose own music was gradually evolving towards atonality. Finished in late 1908, Berg's sole Piano Sonata, in a single movement, mirrors the stage that Schoenberg had reached in his stylistic evolution. In it we can sense a struggle between atonality and the late-Romantic idiom of Wagner, Mahler and Richard Strauss. Berg envisaged the sonata as the first movement of a three-movement work, but found himself unable to continue. Schoenberg reassured him that his creative impasse meant that he had 'said all there was to be said', and encouraged him to publish the movement on its own.

Berg builds his sonata-form movement on three interrelated ideas, each with its own tempo. The hushed opening, with its *Tristan*-esque sinking semitones, quickly becomes more agitated, setting a pattern for the whole movement. The second theme, again marked by drooping chromaticisms, evokes a slow-motion minuet, while a third, Romantically soaring melody reminds us that the young Berg idolised Mahler.

In the development the ideas of the exposition are treated in a series of waves, culminating in a massive *ffff* climax. The recapitulation then works the opening theme to a new pitch of anguish, before a hushed coda finally resolves the harmonic tensions in an unambiguous B minor - the key fitfully glimpsed during the sonata's 12-minute course.

The last of **Beethoven's** ten violin sonatas, Op. 96, lies at the opposite extreme from its flamboyant predecessor, the so-called 'Kreutzer'. Beethoven composed it towards the end of 1812 for the visiting French violinist Pierre Rode, who was evidently past his virtuoso best. We get a hint of this in the composer's letter to the sonata'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 distaste for 'rumbustious passages' (i.e., rapid bravura) to advantage, and created a work of 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*, with hints of spiritualised yodelling. Violin and piano dream and commune with infinite tenderness, like a pair of lovers.

The mood of rapt tranquillity deepens in the *Adagio espressivo*, beginning with one of Beethoven's assuaging hymn-like melodies. In extreme contrast, the third movement is a tetchy G minor *Scherzo* with stinging offbeat accents. The *Scherzo's* coda brightens into G major, in preparation for the naïvely pastoral theme of the theme-and-variation finale. Despite occasional rumbustiousness, the tone is one of subdued gaiety, in keeping with the whole sonata. 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.

In the Romantic imagination Beethoven wrote his final three piano sonatas, Opp. 109, 110 and 111, and his late string quartets for himself and posterity, in isolation from the

world. The prosaic truth is that they were all composed at the behest of a friend, publisher or patron. In the three sonatas, dating from 1820-1822, Beethoven draws back from the gigantism of the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata to return to the speaking intimacy of the sonatas Opp. 90 and 101. There is little room for strenuous rhetoric. Instead, Beethoven cultivates what the American musicologist Maynard Solomon calls an 'etherealized, improvisatory tone'.

Unfolding against the background of a minuet, the *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo* of the A flat Sonata Op. 110 is the most lyrically benign of Beethoven's first movements. A laconic, wilful F minor scherzo, full of blunt dynamic contrasts, jolts us out of reverie. The scherzo's tiny coda dissolves into a recitative and *Arioso dolente*: a grieving operatic *scena* translated into pianistic terms. Distress is then assuaged by the most serene, most Bachian of Beethoven's fugues, the antipode of the rebarbative fugue in the 'Hammerklavier'. In spirit and melodic shape (built on rising fourths) the vocally inspired fugue subject also echoes the sonata's opening.

Thwarting expectations of an exultant close, the music slips to the far-distant key of G minor for a reprise of the arioso, its phrases broken with stifled sobs. The fugue begins again in G major, with its theme inverted. Beethoven then treats the theme in augmentation (i.e. with doubled note values), diminution and double diminution (i.e. with the notes four times as fast) while modulating back to the home key of A flat for an ecstatic apotheosis. Multiple rewritings in the autograph reveal how hard-won was the glorious sense of inevitability engendered by the sonata's final pages.

**Debussy's** sole violin sonata was the third in a planned set of six sonatas in which he sought to recreate the spirit of the French *clavecinistes* Couperin and Rameau in terms of his own style. When he composed the sonata during 1916-7, he was already mortally ill from the cancer that would kill him in March 1918. It was to be his final work. Debussy himself gave the première, with the violinist Gaston Poulet, in Paris on 5 May 1917.

Debussy described the sonata as 'an example of what may be produced by a sick man in time of war'. Yet while the sonata is shot through with stabs of desolation, it is also music of intense energy and vitality of invention. As Debussy wrote to the publisher Jacques Durand, 'In spite of my sad frame of mind, it was all the same a real joy.'

Rather belying its marking '*vivo*', the first movement, with its characteristic fluidity of rhythm, is essentially elegiac in tone. In the violin's passionate lament near the close we hear Debussy's love of the authentic Gypsy style. The irresistible intermezzo, 'airborne and fantastic' as its heading suggests, alternates brief dreamy, languorous sequences with snatches of popular-style tunes. Despite moments of brooding introspection, the *Finale* is boldly assertive: hardly the music you would expect from a dying man. After the piano's opening tremolandos, the violin obliquely recalls the first movement's main theme, which later returns, transformed in a joyous G major, to crown the whole work.

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