

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 28 November 2022
1.00pm

Andrei Ioniță cello
Naoko Sonoda piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Cello Sonata in C Op. 102 No. 1 (1815)
I. Andante – Allegro vivace •
II. Adagio – Tempo d'andante – Allegro vivace

Anton Webern (1883-1945) 3 little pieces Op. 11 (1914)
Mässige • Sehr bewegt • Äusserst ruhig

2 Pieces for cello and piano (1899)
Langsam in G • Langsam in F

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Cello Sonata in C Op. 65 (1960-1)
I. Dialogo. Allegro • II. Scherzo-Pizzicato. Allegretto •
III. Elegia. Lento • IV. Marcia. Energico •
V. Moto perpetuo. Presto

BBC
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

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In August 1815 **Beethoven** was spending a summer holiday with aristocratic friends, Peter and Maria von Erdődy. Finding Joseph Linke also part of the company (the cellist who had sat alongside him at the premières of the Op. 70 piano trios and more recently the 'Archduke'), he perhaps began remembering his longer history with the instrument, which included three sonatas. The mood of the resulting new sonatas, in C and D, published as his Op. 102, is certainly retrospective. Yet it is also, because the future was to turn out to be all about retrospection, forward-looking. Forms are more compact here, ploys more abrupt, because the conventions are at once observed and outgrown. This is late Beethoven.

The cello enters alone to start the C major sonata, as if bringing to the table an old story. Both instruments muse on this in the manner of a prelude, until the cello plumbs its bottom note. Up from this springs an *Allegro* in A minor and vigorous dotted rhythm, turning briefly more melodious for its second subject, but continuing mostly turbulent. A brief development of the main theme leads into the altered recapitulation, followed by a coda that finds the dotted rhythm drained of energy, until the emphatic close.

After this comes an *Adagio* that works round to beautiful cello melody and then, perhaps even more beautiful, a brief reprise of the work's opening: a memory of a memory. Picking up energy again, the instruments consider and decide on a tag that will give them a rondo finale.

A century later, and not so far away, in Vienna, **Webern** was finding it hard to make progress in the new realm of atonality. As he later wrote, it seemed to him that a composition was over once all 12 notes had been written down, and in 1914, in the last of his Op. 11 pieces for cello and piano, he approached that point, inscribing just 20 notes, in an atmosphere of complete calm – or exhaustion. The other two pieces – slow and quiet, sudden and active – are not much longer; the whole opus is done in about two minutes.

Webern sent the set to his cello-playing father as a birthday present, and presumably it was also for his father that in 1899, as a teenager, and in a very different musical world, he composed two slow pieces, in G and F. Either one of these lasts as long as the whole Op. 11 group, but that still makes them short on any normal scale.

The last work takes us on to September 1960 and some way nearer home, across town in the Festival Hall, where **Britten** and Shostakovich were sharing a box listening to Rostropovich playing the latter's First Cello Concerto. Britten was greatly impressed, and

therefore very happy to accept when Rostropovich asked for a new piece. Acceptance left him, though, with a question: what to write? He had produced no chamber music since *Lachrymae* and the *Metamorphoses after Ovid* at the very beginning of the 1950s. Moreover, in all his music since then, with the sole exception of the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*, he had worked on a frame of words. Evidently the time had come to take the plunge and do something he had avoided since boyhood: address sonata form.

He completed the task in January 1961, his first thought being to call the work a sonatina, on account of its being on the short side. Perhaps it was Rostropovich who persuaded him that what he had written was a proper sonata; the two of them were together again less than a year after their first meeting, to give the work its première at the Aldeburgh Festival, on 7 July 1961.

Britten may have inherited from Bartók's Fourth Quartet his sonata's five-movement form, in which the extra movement is a second scherzo. In a distinct nod to tradition, the piece starts off with a sonata *Allegro*. The opening music features isolated intervals of a second in the cello part, searching up and down to chords from the piano. Intervals, rhythmic tension and dynamic level are all expanded in a hectic section before the luminous second subject arrives, cello and piano in contrary motion. Fully in line now with tradition, the exposition is repeated. There is then the expected development, taking in both subjects, and recapitulation, in which roles are reversed at first, the hectic episode excised and a brief coda added on the first subject, finally carrying the cello up through harmonics.

Aspects of this first movement go on through the rest of the piece: single intervals of a second, major or minor (compare, for instance, the piano's part at the opening of the finale with the cello's from the very beginning of the sonata), textures of dialogue, and complementarity between quite dissimilar kinds of music in the two instruments.

The first *Scherzo* is a *pizzicato* movement, like the second scherzo in the Bartók quartet already mentioned as a possible model. In the centre comes a big slow movement, whose middle section offsets Russian passion against memories from Bali. The sonata ends with a march in burlesque and an intensive, spiky drive. Both these movements were repeated at the first performance: the finale immediately and the march as an encore.

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