

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 29 July 2026
7.30pm

Johannes Moser cello
Andrei Korobeinikov piano

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

3 Pièces for cello and piano (1914)
*I. Modéré • II. Sans vitesse et à l'aise •
III. Vite et nerveusement rythmé*

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*

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Vocalise Op. 34 No. 14 (1912 rev. 1915)

César Franck (1822-1890)

Violin Sonata in A (1886) arranged by Jules Delsart
*I. Allegretto ben moderato • II. Allegro •
III. Recitativo-Fantasia. Ben moderato •
IV. Allegretto poco mosso*



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The **Boulanger** sisters – Nadia and Lili – were born into an established musical family in Paris in 1887 and 1893 respectively. Although both embarked on careers as composers, Nadia was convinced that Lili's was the greater gift. Lili's premature death in 1918 caused Nadia to abandon composition altogether, and she devoted the rest of her long life to teaching (she died in 1979, aged 92, and was buried in Montmartre next to her sister and parents). The *Three pieces for cello and piano* were published in 1915 and show what a distinctive musical personality Nadia possessed. Two of the movements were originally written for organ in 1911 but were soon revised for cello and piano. The opening *Modéré* is reflective and improvisatory, suggesting perhaps a song without words in the style of Boulanger's teacher, Fauré. *Sans vitesse et à l'aise* is a canon between the two instrumentalists, rather in the vein of a student exercise in simple counterpoint. The group concludes with a lively movement marked *Vite et nerveusement rythmé*. When Boulanger premièred it in Paris in November 1913, it was billed as a 'dance espagnole', a tribute to the longstanding fascination French composers have had for Spain and its music.

On her father's side, Boulanger was French. Her mother, though, was a Russian princess, Raissa Myshetskaya, and throughout her life, Boulanger was an ardent advocate of the music of Stravinsky (she conducted the première of his chamber concerto, *Dumbarton Oaks*, in May 1938). **Britten's** interest in Russia was sparked by his admiration for the music of Shostakovich, as well as by his close friendship with the cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich, and was nurtured during the five trips he made to the Soviet Union between 1963 and 1971. Britten and Shostakovich first met in 1960, when the Soviet composer visited London for the British première of his first cello concerto, with Rostropovich as soloist. As Shostakovich later recalled to Rostropovich: 'at the concert tonight, every time Britten admired something in your playing, he would poke me in the ribs, and say, "Isn't that simply marvellous!"'

Britten would soon embark on a series of works inspired by Rostropovich's artistry, including three suites for solo cello (1964, 1967, 1971), a symphony for cello and orchestra (1963) and a song cycle on words by Pushkin, *The Poet's Echo* (1965), written for Rostropovich's wife, Galina Vishnevskaya (and with Rostropovich at the piano rather than on the cello). The first work that Britten wrote for Rostropovich was, though, the Cello Sonata in C, Op. 65, which was sketched on a holiday to Greece in the autumn of 1960 and completed early the following year. It was premièred at the 1961 Aldeburgh Festival by its composer and dedicatee. Its five movements are closer to a suite than a conventional sonata, and it abounds in technical challenges that reflect Rostropovich's personality and technique. According to the *Times* reviewer, the new work reflected Britten's

'own impression of the character of the player to whom it is dedicated: gay, charming, an astonishingly brilliant executant, but behind all these qualities a searching musician with the mind of a philosopher.'

Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* was inspired by the singing of the soprano, Antonina Nezhdanova. It was written in 1915 and was the result of an unusually close collaboration between composer and performer, as Nezhdanova's memoirs reveal: 'Together, we deliberated over nuances and inserted breath marks in the middle of phrases to make it more convenient to perform. As we rehearsed together, he would suddenly stop and change various passages, each time finding some alternative harmony, new modulation, or other nuance.' Rachmaninov added it to the sequence of 13 songs he had completed in 1912 as his opus 34, although it is generally performed as a solo number, either for voice or in one of the many instrumental transcriptions that have been made of it.

Franck composed his Violin Sonata as a wedding present for his friend, Eugène Ysaÿe, who married Louise Bourdeau on 26 September 1886. After a hurried rehearsal, it was performed to the assembled guests that very day, followed by a public première in Brussels later that year. At the time, Franck was best known as one of Paris's leading organists and composition teachers, and his rather austere, not to say churchy manner gave rise to his nickname of 'Père Franck'. However, in a series of late chamber and orchestral compositions, he developed an intensely passionate musical language, inspired by the tone poems of Liszt and the music dramas of Wagner. They may also reflect the intense feelings he is rumoured to have developed for his student, the Irish-born composer Augusta Holmès.

The sonata is constructed according to Franck's trademark cyclical technique, in which individual themes – a little like Wagnerian leitmotifs – are repeated and developed not just within individual movements, but across the sonata as a whole. Its four movements unfold in a slow-fast-slow-fast structure, culminating in a flourish of radiant, peeling joy that is wholly fitting for a wedding celebration. No wonder that Ysaÿe adored and cherished it, programming it regularly in his many recitals over the years. A year after its première, the French cellist, Jules Delsart, heard a performance in Paris and promptly asked Franck for permission to transcribe it for his own instrument. Franck readily agreed, and Delsart's arrangement appeared in print in 1888. Some 80 years later, the great Catalan cellist, Pablo (Pau) Casals, claimed that Franck had told Ysaÿe that the sonata had been conceived for cello in the first place. Whatever the truth of such a claim, the sonata works perfectly for either instrument – an ideal marriage between string soloist and their pianistic partner.

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