

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 29 May 2022 7.30pm

**Guy Johnston** cello

**Melvyn Tan** piano

CLASSIC *f*M Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM



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

**Felix Mendelssohn** (1809-1847)

Variations concertantes in D Op. 17 (1829)

**William Sterndale Bennett** (1816-1875)

Sonata Duo for cello and piano Op. 32 (1852)

*I. Adagio sostenuto - Allegro giusto • II. Minuetto caracteristique • III. Allegretto piacevole - Animato*

**Joseph Phibbs** (b.1974)

Cello Sonata

*I. Prelude • II. Threnody • III. Soliloquy • IV. Ghost-dance • V. Notturmo • VI. Vocalise*

*Interval*

**Fryderyk Chopin** (1810-1849)

Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 65 (1845-6)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo • III. Largo • IV. Finale. Allegro*

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**Felix Mendelssohn** was arguably the most precocious musical genius of all time, perhaps the greatest child prodigy in any of the arts. His siblings were no slouches either. His elder sister Fanny was a gifted pianist and composer, while his younger brother Paul was a highly talented cellist. For Paul, Felix composed two demanding cello sonatas and the *Variations concertantes*, written in January 1829 and performed *en famille* in the Mendelssohns' Berlin home.

In a spirit of fraternal give-and-take, the homely D major theme of the *Variations* is neatly shared between piano and cello. The first four variations trace a crescendo of increasing brilliance, culminating in the flamboyant *Allegro con fuoco* of No. 4. Variation 5 is a percussive sparring match between pizzicato cello and staccato piano. After the lyrical sixth variation, No. 7, *Presto e agitato*, plunges into D minor, with ferocious *martellato* octaves for the piano. The theme then returns in its original simplicity before a virtuosic coda that finally vanishes into the ether.

**William Sterndale Bennett** was a pianist prodigy who would become Britain's leading composer of the Romantic age. As a teenager he was encouraged by Mendelssohn, who with Mozart was the crucial influence on his graceful, mellifluous idiom. In a fulsome article of 1837, Schumann praised the 'poetic depth and clarity' and 'benevolence towards the outside world' of Bennett's music. The two men became friends, going on long walks and visiting local taverns together. Bennett found Schumann's music 'rather eccentric'.

Amid a hectic round of playing, teaching and, later, conducting, Bennett presided over an annual series of 'Classical Chamber Concerts' from 1842, first at his London home, then at the Hanover Square Rooms where Haydn had performed half a century earlier. It was at one of these concerts, in March 1852, that Bennett and the famous Italian cellist Carlo Alfredo Piatti gave the première of his cello sonata, published as 'Sonata-Duo for the pianoforte and violoncello'.

Bennett frames the first movement with a soulful *Adagio sostenuto*, a Mendelssohnian song without words fashioned to display the beauty of Piatti's cantabile. A major turns to A minor for the main *Allegro giusto*, which contrasts a coruscating tarantella with a sustained chorale-like melody. Beginning in hushed stillness, the central development juxtaposes and combines the tarantella and the chorale in scintillating dialogue textures.

Curiously titled *Minuetto caracteristique*, the second movement, in A minor, puts a plaintive Romantic cast on the 18th-century courtly dance. The two major-keyed trios are virtuoso showpieces, the first for piano, the second for cello. Living up to its billing *Allegretto piacevole* ('pleasantly'), the finale is an easy-going rondo with a pastoral flavour, capped by a return of the first movement's tarantella in a jubilant A major.

Often viewed, misleadingly, as the archetypal confessional Romantic, **Chopin** was unique among first-rank composers in writing almost exclusively for his own instrument. The only other instrument that stimulated his imagination was the cello, above all in the sonata he composed for his friend Auguste Francomme, cello professor at the Paris Conservatoire. Begun early in 1845, the sonata dates from a

time when Chopin's health, always fragile, was failing. The unfamiliar medium caused him protracted difficulties. 'I write a little and cross out a lot', he wrote to his sister in October 1846, two months before he finally finished the sonata. 'Sometimes I am pleased with it, sometimes not. I throw it into a corner and then pick it up again'.

The opening movement, by far the longest, and the *Finale* caused Chopin the most trouble, especially in terms of balance between piano and cello. When he and Francomme gave the Paris première, on 16 February 1848, they omitted the first movement. Apart from its difficulty, the sonata evidently had deep personal significance for Chopin. On his deathbed in October 1849, Chopin asked Francomme to play it but, overcome with emotion, quickly begged him to stop.

As several biographers have suggested, the clue may be Chopin's gradual, painful estrangement from George Sand, culminating in a final breach in the summer of 1847. A work that preoccupied him at this time was Schubert's *Winterreise*, with its theme of irrevocably blighted love. The first movement's elegiacally falling main theme immediately evokes *Winterreise's* opening song, 'Gute Nacht'. More specifically, each of the four movements is unified by a three-note figure consisting of a rising and falling semitone, first intoned by the cello before it plays the main theme. This same 'lamenting' figure permeates many of the songs in *Winterreise*.

In the first movement pathos and agitation are offset by pools of calm. The *Scherzo* contrasts its cussed, *mazurka*-like outer sections with a lusciously Italianate trio, perfectly fashioned to display the cantabile eloquence of the cello's tenor register. In the rapt *Largo* the contrapuntal interplay between the cello and the piano bass reminds us that Bach was one of Chopin's idols. For his finale Chopin writes a sonata-rondo in whirling *tarantella* rhythm, full of quickfire interplay between the instruments and unpredictable shifts of key.

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Commissioned by Johnston for the 2021 Hatfield House Chamber Music Festival with support from Penny Wright, Andrew Neubauer, and Wigmore Hall, the form of this six-movement sonata resembles a suite, each movement defined by a sharply different mood.

The opening *Prelude* combines urgency with lyricism, before dovetailing into *Threnody*, a song of mourning, whose impassioned melodic line suggests a vocal lament, as found in folk traditions across the Balkans. The fleeting, virtuosic *Soliloquy* that follows (for solo cello) precedes the heart of the work: *Ghost-dance*, the hushed opening of which gradually morphs into a 16th-century pavane by Anthony de Countie, favourite court lutenist of Elizabeth I, who spent much of her childhood at Hatfield House. An agitated *Notturmo* follows without a break, before the sonata finds a note of resolution with the closing *Vocalise*, which soars to the top of the cello's range.

The work is dedicated with admiration to Guy Johnston, and written in memory of Howard Delmonte.

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