

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 2 February 2024  
7.30pm

Jean-Guihen Queyras cello  
Kristian Bezuidenhout piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in B flat Op. 45 (1838)

*I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante • III. Allegro assai*

Variations concertantes in D Op. 17 (1829)

Interval

Song without Words in A Op. 19b No. 4 (1829) *transcribed by  
Friedrich Grützmacher*

Song without Words in A minor Op. 19b No. 2 (1830) *transcribed  
by Friedrich Grützmacher*

Assai tranquillo in B minor (1835)

Song without Words in E Op. 19b No. 1 (1830) *transcribed by  
Friedrich Grützmacher*

Song without Words in B minor Op. 67 No. 5 (1844) *transcribed  
by Friedrich Grützmacher*

Song without Words in B flat Op. 67 No. 3 (?1844) *transcribed by  
Friedrich Grützmacher*

Song without Words in A flat 'Duetto' Op. 38 No. 6 (1836)  
*transcribed by Friedrich Grützmacher*

Cello Sonata No. 2 in D Op. 58 (1843)

*I. Allegro assai vivace • II. Allegretto scherzando •  
III. Adagio • IV. Molto allegro e vivace*

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No composer after Beethoven knew better than Mendelssohn how to write successfully for cello and piano. If it's possible to feel that there is more musical meat in, say, Brahms's F major sonata than in either of the two Mendelssohn sonatas, from the point of view of achieving a satisfactory balance between the instruments the trophy would have to be awarded to Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn's younger brother Paul was an amateur cellist, and the two works in the first half of tonight's concert were both composed for him. The gentle theme of the **Variations concertantes Op. 17**, completed just a few days before Mendelssohn's 20th birthday, gives rise to some surprisingly agitated variations - particularly the fourth, in which it is the pianist who does all the running, and the minor-mode penultimate variation. The final variation, approached via a short cello recitative, is largely given over to a coda which allows the music to wind down to a delicate conclusion.

One of the chief pleasures of the **Sonata in B flat Op. 45** is the manner in which Mendelssohn treats the theme of its finale. The theme seems firmly located in the key of B flat major, yet each time it returns it does so from a different harmonic direction, with the music still modulating during the opening phrases of the theme itself. The witticism is typical of Mendelssohn, and so, too, is the way in which the music ultimately sinks to a resigned *pianissimo* conclusion.

The sonata is set in motion with a gently understated theme whose beginning is given out in bare octaves by both players. When Mozart begins a work in such a 'neutral' manner, he almost always keeps an unexpected harmonisation up his sleeve for a later stage in the piece. The same is true of the Mendelssohn, though the greatest harmonic surprises in his piece are actually reserved for the second subject, whose sense of restlessness arises from a continual thwarting of the music's expected resolution at the end of its individual phrases.

The middle movement is as simple as could be imagined: a melancholy, romance-like theme in the minor, followed by a middle section in the major whose broader melody is accompanied by the first theme's characteristic dotted rhythm. The reprise brings with it a lightening of the texture, the cello now playing pizzicato, and the piano having an intricate 'tripping' left-hand accompaniment. In the coda the pianist traces delicate arabesques, before the music fades away into the distance.

Altogether grander and more ambitious is the **Sonata in D Op. 58**, composed in 1843 for the Russian cellist Mateusz Wielhorski. (It was to him that Schumann dedicated his Piano Quartet Op. 47.) The exuberance of its first movement scarcely lets up for an instant, unless it be in the mysterious ending of the exposition - a passage which is prolonged when it returns in the coda,

in order to launch a final peroration of spectacular brilliance.

No less characteristically Mendelssohnian is the second movement - a delicate scherzo in whose opening theme the piano's 'tripping' staccato is mirrored by the pizzicato of the cellist. The transparent texture does not preclude a reprise of the main theme in a thundering *fortissimo*, before a final appearance of the more lyrical second theme leads to a coda which has the music disappearing into thin air.

For his slow movement Mendelssohn manages to combine two seemingly irreconcilable musical types: the metrical strictness and regularity of a chorale melody on the piano, and the declamatory freedom of a recitative on the cello. At the end, the recitative passes to the pianist, while the cellist sustains the single note G, both bowed on the C string and intermittently plucked with the left hand on the open G string.

Like the opening movement, the finale is a piece of unflagging energy. Its opening bars are designed to break the spell of the preceding slow movement in dramatic fashion (the two are performed without a break), beginning, as it does, with an explosive discord after which it takes a full page for the music to alight on the home key, and for its main theme to appear. Following this, the piece unfurls as though in a single sweep right through until its conclusion.

While travelling from Düsseldorf to Leipzig on 25 July 1835, Mendelssohn dashed off the **Assai tranquillo in B minor**. Although the piece seems to lack an ending, Mendelssohn signed it with a dedication to the cellist Julius Rietz, who at the time was his assistant at the Düsseldorf Opera. It was Rietz who, in his later years as musical director in Dresden, invited Friedrich Grützmaker to join the *Hofkapelle* there. Mendelssohn himself had composed a single, though quite substantial, *Song without Words* for cello and piano, Op. 109, but Grützmaker made arrangements of many of the famous solo piano *Lieder ohne Worte*, often transposing them into more cello-friendly keys. Mendelssohn's very first number, Op. 19b No. 1, for instance, finds itself transposed by Grützmaker from E major into D major, with the melody given first to the cello, and then, at the start of what in the original is a literal repeat, transferred to the piano while the cello has a new countermelody. The well-known 'Duetto' Op. 38 No. 6 is a piece in which both voices are played by the pianist's right hand throughout; but Mendelssohn's layout gives Grützmaker the opportunity to divide the melody more conventionally between two players, and to fill out the harmony of the piano's answering voice each time. Altogether, Grützmaker's transcriptions are both tastefully and imaginatively done, though inevitably they transform Mendelssohn's originals into pieces of a quite different nature.

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