

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 2 January 2023
1.00pm

Paul Watkins cello
Huw Watkins piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)	Cello Sonata (1915) <i>I. Prologue • II. Sérénade • III. Finale</i>
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	5 Stücke im Volkston Op. 102 (1849) <i>Mit Humor • Langsam • Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen • Nicht zu rasch • Stark and markiert</i>
Michael Zev Gordon (b.1963)	Roseland (2008)
Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)	Cello Sonata No. 2 in G minor Op. 117 (1921) <i>I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivo</i>

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Of the three sonatas **Debussy** completed in wartime – three from a projected six – that for cello and piano came first, in the summer of 1915. This is also the most compact of the three, and the most varied in character, displaying the cello as impassioned, melancholic, quirky, crazy, playful and much else besides. Quick changes of mood suggest a certain amount of pretence, and Debussy considered giving the work a subtitle referring to one of the *commedia dell'arte* characters revived in French culture by such poets as Verlaine: 'Pierrot angry at the moon'. Presumably he was thinking especially of the middle movement, with its erratic alternation between pizzicato strumming and extravagant bowed gestures.

The first movement has the cello seeming to discover its true voice a little way into the piece, but then moving in different directions before characteristically looping back to the two themes of the opening, both of which now seem equally valid. Also typical of Debussy is the *Finale's* achievement of ebullience by means of what sounds like a singing game.

Of the several sets of instrumental pieces **Schumann** wrote in quick succession, the cello instalment of 1849 tends to appear on programmes least often, probably because it comes under a label less inviting than 'Fantasy Pieces' or 'Fairytale Pictures'. This is delightful music and hardly less picturesque, though plain-speaking, or, in Schumann's terms, 'im Volkston' - in the style of folk music. There are excursions perhaps to Scandinavia in the second piece (the Danish composer Niels Gade was a friend) and Hungary in the last.

The opener carries a familiar motto from Ecclesiastes: 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.' Most likely, Schumann was thinking of the Goethe poem in which the truth of that statement is enlarged upon by an old soldier, who punctuates his story with cries of 'Juchhe!' ('Whoop!'!) and 'O weh!' ('Woe is me!'). Schumann seems to be translating these when he has the cello kick down at phrase endings, usually with the piano in support. Running semiquavers provide contrast – as well as, perhaps, an image of the whirl of emptiness – and return differently in the middle section, which is in F to the main music's C major.

In F throughout, with a middle section in the minor, the second movement is in the nature of a lullaby.

Short phrases and repetitions in the next piece might suggest someone relating an old ballad. Here the major-minor switch is reversed, with outer sections in A minor around a centrepiece that glows not only with A major light but with the rich gleam of the cello's sixths placed on full chords from the piano.

The brief and buoyant fourth movement has a main theme in D reminiscent of Schumann's clarinet pieces. Here, the middle section is in the relative minor, B minor, and restless. It appears to be just about to cadence when instead it leads neatly into the reprise.

In the strong finale, the cello alternates between ruggedness and song, which it discovers by touching a high E, the key being A minor. The middle section enters abruptly, but is soon folding back towards the principal material.

Michael Zev Gordon wrote his cello meditation for the 2008 Cheltenham Festival, where it was played by Huw Watkins with, on that occasion, Robin Michael. The composer writes of it as: 'A series of fragments in search of a centre. Some may be quite familiar in shape, two or three are actual quotations. Other fragments recollect less, as though the piece is a musical equivalent of a painting on the borders between the figurative and the abstract. Gradually the piece moves toward a point of tranquillity. Such territory of allusion and memory has been of particular interest to me for some time now. And, increasingly explicitly, so too has the desire to write music that, as Cage put it, "sobers the mind". The title of the piece refers to a remote and very serene region of Cornwall.'

Though more than a decade and a half older than Debussy, **Fauré** outlived his colleague into a golden sunset. Chamber music and songs occupied most of his attention at this time, but he also, in February-March 1921, wrote a *Chant funéraire* for a state commemoration of the centenary of Napoleon's death. This he soon drew into the fold of his central output by arranging it as the slow centre of a cello sonata, whose outer movements he wrote in the summer at Ax-les-Thermes, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Gérard Hekking and Alfred Cortot, the team responsible for the première of the First Sonata in 1917, gave the first performance in Paris in May 1922.

Syncopation in the piano thrusts the music at once into a condition of agitation, even breathlessness, against which the first melody unfolds in slow waves. So the opening movement continues pretty much all through. That initial melody is proposed by the piano with echoes from the cello; then the roles are reversed. The two instruments draw even closer together in a passage where they are in canon, before they move into the brighter, open second subject. Canon recurs in the development, though everything in this movement is so seamless, with syncopation maintaining drive through territory where the harmony is unstable.

Fauré may well have thought of rescuing his Napoleon memorial as a piece for cello and piano on account of the success of his *Élégie* for these instruments from over 40 years before. The slow march in E flat is stoically unpompous, and has a middle section that culminates again in canon.

Some of the first movement's features recur in the third, including incessant semiquavers in cross-rhythm with statelier melody proceeding scalewise. There are also patches reminding us that the composer's span had taken him from the Paris of Meyerbeer to that of Stravinsky, viewed through a polished Fauréan lens.

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