

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 30 December 2024
7.30pm

Francesca Dego violin
Alessandro Taverna piano

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Phantasy Op. 47 (1949)

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Violin Sonata in E flat Op. 18 (1887)

*I. Allegro, ma non troppo • II. Improvisation.
Andante cantabile • III. Finale. Andante - Allegro*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Violin Sonata No. 9 in A Op. 47 'Kreutzer' (1802-3)

*I. Adagio sostenuto - Presto • II. Andante con
variazioni • III. Finale. Presto*



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Schoenberg wrote his Phantasy for Violin and Piano at the very end of his composing career, and in a portion of his life he was lucky to see. His health was already declining when, in 1946, he suffered a massive heart attack which would have killed him, but for the swift intervention of doctors. He recovered enough to manage a further five years of teaching and composing in Los Angeles, which had been his home since 1936. Here he wrote this Phantasy, his final instrumental work, in 1949, and it came together in an unusual manner, as Glenn Gould explained to Yehudi Menuhin in a 1966 TV broadcast performance of the piece. 'It was conceived as a solo violin line', says Gould. 'It's entirely melodic, and all of the piano comments were interpolated later, which is probably why I play on the cracks all the time, you have all the lines'. Though using the serialist technique of constructing melody and harmony from a sequence of 12 notes, which Schoenberg had pioneered in the 1920s, the piece nods to older forms, such as the waltz; violinist Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, after giving a performance of the piece in this very hall some 20 years ago, commented, 'it's very Viennese, don't you think?'

The 24 year-old **Richard Strauss** was on the cusp of greatness when he completed his Violin Sonata in 1888. He had been left frustrated by his faltering performing career – accepting the third position in the Munich conducting hierarchy had turned out to be a mistake – but by the time he completed this sonata, he was at work on the orchestral tone poem *Don Juan*, the first truly great statement of his distinctive musical voice. That same voice is immediately evident in the sonata's opening bars, which begin with a heroic declamation from the piano, cut from the same cloth as *Don Juan*; the first and second themes unfold in vintage-Strauss manner, though of course this is moment in which the inimitable style was being born.

In the year that the sonata took to complete, Strauss had met and fallen in love with Pauline de Ahna, the soprano whose volcanic temper contrasted strikingly with his own more neutral demeanour. Their life-long relationship (they were married in 1894 and were together for six decades) was the stuff of gossipy legend. Her singing voice, though, was a source of constant inspiration; Strauss composed many songs for her, and the beautiful melody of the 'Improvisation. Andante cantabile' could almost have been written for her to sing.

The grave passage which begins the Finale gives way to a burst of brilliant sunlight, the violin scurrying upward in a series of excited arpeggios. Strauss largely left chamber music behind after composing this Violin sonata, and there's a sense in this last movement of him straining at the edges of the capabilities of the violin and piano to produce the kind of big-boned, sweeping orchestral scale that was clearly taking over as his primary mode of musical expression.

Many works by **Beethoven** attracted additional titles, but the histories of those monikers were rarely straightforward. The composer never referred to his Piano Sonata Op. 27 No. 2 as the 'Moonlight', and the 'Eroica' Symphony only received its name after Beethoven, appalled at the imperial ambitions of Napoleon, had angrily scratched out the dedication 'Bonaparte' at the head of the manuscript. The Violin Sonata in A, Op. 47, reaches us with a title derived from the final dedication to Rodolphe Kreutzer, but the famous French violinist had virtually nothing to do with it, disliked Beethoven's music in general and refused to play the piece.

In reality, it was written for Polish-born, mixed race violinist George Bridgetower, with whom Beethoven had become friendly in 1802. Beethoven hastily completed the first two movements for him in the Spring of 1803, adding them to a finale he had written a few years earlier, and a performance followed so quickly that Bridgetower had to sightread much of the piece at its first performance, without a rehearsal. But upon publication, two years later, the title page carried Kreutzer's name; in the interim, Bridgetower had managed to greatly offend Beethoven (not, in fairness, a difficult task), apparently by making insulting comments about a female acquaintance of the composer, and 'The Bridgetower Sonata' became a title lost to history.

The name and the story around it was not, however, what made the sonata's reputation. Rather, it was the way in which Beethoven had escalated the scale of the instrumental sonata, and the violin's centrality within it. Much has been made of the way in which these pieces were published as sonatas for piano with violin, but in describing this piece as 'Sonata for the piano and one obligatory violin in a highly concertante style like a concerto' in his sketchbook, the composer indicated clearly how much he was expecting from the violinist.

It opens deceptively, in a great arching phrase for the violin alone, launching from a broad A-major chord, and answered by the piano with a thoughtful wander into new keys. The impression of much of what follows, though, is of a chase: a nifty, tetchy gallop as the instruments tussle and spar. In the first movement, they take pause, occasionally, but return always to the fray, in music of sometimes mechanical insistence.

The second movement presents a serene theme which seems to rise a fall like a series of breaths and, as so often in Beethoven's sonatas, variations follow. And though the finale might have been a cast off from a previous sonata, it fits here perfectly, answering the helter-skelter tension of the first movement with a playful and buoyant romp.

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