

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 30 October 2022
7.30pm

Joshua Bell violin
Peter Dugan piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 12 No. 2 (1797-8)
I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante, più tosto allegretto • III. Allegro piacevole

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 121 (1851)
I. Ziemlich langsam - Lebhaft • II. Sehr lebhaft • III. Leise, einfach • IV. Bewegt

Interval

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) Violin Sonata in G minor (1916-7)
I. Allegro vivo • II. Intermède. Fantasque et léger • III. Finale. Très animé

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) Rhapsody No. 1 BB94a (1928 rev. 1929)
I. Lassú. Moderato • II. Friss. Allegretto moderato

Plus additional works to be announced from the stage



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Beethoven wrote his first three violin sonatas between 1797-8 and dedicated them to Antonio Salieri, with whom he was studying vocal composition at the time. Grouped as his Op. 12, today they are acknowledged as having a Haydnesque feeling about them in terms of their scale and touch. However, a review from June 1799 stated, 'I have looked through these strange sonatas, overladen with difficulties... without any pleasure, [they are] bizarre, learned and have nothing natural and no song in their striving for strange modulations. If Beethoven denied himself, he might do a great deal for an instrument which he has so wonderfully under his control.'

The instrument referred to was, in fact, the piano. Several early authorities, who were dismissed by Beethoven as 'knowing nothing about music', thought of these works as piano sonatas with an obligato violin addendum. The Violin Sonata No. 2 is in A major, a key Beethoven used for two other violin sonatas. Written in three movements, the first movement is graceful and conversational between the two instruments. Two major themes are developed and contrasted with lively whimsy; only the exposition section brings in a serious tone. The coda returns the movement to a reflection upon its opening notes. The middle movement is written in A-B-A form, the lyrical outer sections of which are in the key of A minor and find the instruments exchanging similar phrases with one another. A significant innovation is encountered with the violin's entry: after the piano has stated the first theme it plays an octave above the piano. C minor is used for the more intimate middle section, which might have led Friedrich Niecks to write that 'its charm lies in its simplicity and naïveté and the truth of its tender, plaintive accents'. The final movement, written in rondo form, has the main theme repeated throughout with little variation. Off-beat *sforzandos* emphasise the theme's syncopation, whilst the concluding bars' insistent ending is somewhat undermined by the piano's seemingly ill-timed final note.

An entry in Clara **Schumann's** diary from October 1851 excitedly reported, 'Robert is working away on something new. I cannot get him to tell me what, but I have the feeling that it is a piece for piano and violin. Am I right?' Clara was correct: her husband was working at speed on his Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor, Op. 121, which he dedicated to the violinist Ferdinand David. A mere ten days later, having seen the manuscript, Clara wrote again, 'I am extraordinarily enchanted by the entire character of the work, and can hardly wait to play through it.' After several private performances, the public première came two years later when Clara accompanied Joseph Joachim in the work. Joachim later wrote, 'I consider it one of the finest compositions of our times in respect of its marvellous unity of feeling and its thematic significance. It overflows with noble passion, almost harsh and bitter in expression, and the last movement reminds one of the sea with its glorious waves of sound.'

Commentators and musicologists have pointed to this sonata as an embodiment of Schumann's fragile mental health, some even finding evidence of declining compositional powers as a result of this. More recent scholars, however, accept that Schumann thought of composition as part symptomology and part self-therapy. Opening with a flourish of chords and octaves on the piano, the violin contrasts with a quasi-recitative vocalise melody. Thereafter, the two themes are vigorously contrasted, often with the piano taking the lead in shifting the dynamic. The second movement rapidly contrasts two further themes before culminating with a quotation from the chorale *All praise to you, Jesus Christ*. The chorale then becomes the basis for the third movement's set of variations. The fourth movement presses ahead from first note to last, both instruments emphatically insistent in their repetition of the thematic material.

Debussy's Violin Sonata in G minor dates from 1916-7, when his terminal cancer had taken hold. His final completed composition, it is the third of an incomplete series of six sonatas. He wrote, 'I only completed this sonata to be rid of the thing, [it] will be interesting as an example of what may be produced by a sick man in wartime.' Debussy's interpretation of the violin-piano duo is distinctive: one instrument leads against the other's counter melody, rather than accompanying each other *per se*. This creates a different sonority and texture; the instruments challenge one another but, ultimately, are brought closer together. The first movement's poignant opening piano chords immediately transport the listener to a subdued, sad atmosphere. The movement is filled with rhythmic and harmonic ambiguity with an ongoing momentum, regardless of speed. By contrast, the middle movement is mostly light in tone, with capriciousness and coquettishness. The second theme is as melodious as it is sensuous. The final movement begins with running notes on the piano, punctuated with a melodic emphasis from the second theme of the previous movement. The violin then enters with a modified handling of the nostalgic theme from the sonata's opening. The movement, however, requires agility and confidence. Debussy employs an extremely wide violin pitch range, whereas the pianist articulates tremolo-like tempi with an atmospheric lightness of touch.

Bartók wrote his Rhapsody No. 1 for violin and piano in 1928. Its two movements draw on slow and fast idioms in the *czárdás*, folk tunes and violin techniques heard whilst travelling around Hungary and Romania. Intentionally sounding improvised throughout, the dotted rhythms of the *Lassú's* outer sections feature a Romanian tune over a drone accompaniment, whilst the mournful central section derives from a genuine Hungarian lament. The *Friss* presents an unconnected succession of spirited dance melodies, played with abandon at an ever-accelerating tempo.

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