

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 31 March 2023
7.30pm

Anastasia Kobekina cello
Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasiestücke Op. 73 (1849)
*Zart und mit Ausdruck • Lebhaft, leicht •
Rasch und mit Feuer*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor Op. 38 (1862-5)
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Allegretto quasi menuetto •
III. Allegro*

Interval

Robert Schumann

Adagio and Allegro in A flat Op. 70 (1849)

Johannes Brahms

Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Op. 99 (1886)
*I. Allegro vivace • II. Adagio affettuoso •
III. Allegro passionato • IV. Allegro molto*

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30

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'For some time now,' **Robert Schumann** wrote to a friend in 1849, 'I've been very busy – it's been my most fruitful year.' Now in his late thirties and living in Dresden, Schumann wrote almost 40 new works in this year alone. Among them were three *Fantasiestücke* for piano and clarinet; but, mindful of the need to make such chamber pieces flexible for amateur domestic performance, the printed score also listed violin and cello as alternative melody instruments. Strikingly, the original manuscript of this opus was headed '*Soiréestücke*', which may account for the introspective and rather dreamy tone of the first piece. The second is more energetic and optimistic, the third highly dramatic. Schumann marks an '*attacca*' between each, binding them into a whole which, as an earlier reviewer remarked, yields an overall sense of 'a rapturous state of excitement, sometimes tinged with the breath of melancholy, sometimes building to jubilant tones of joy.'

While Schumann was enjoying a highly creative year in 1849, 16-year-old **Johannes Brahms** was still in Hamburg, in his second year of public concertising. Four years later he would set off on tour around north Germany and, in the autumn of 1853, meet Robert and Clara Schumann. 12 years after that, in 1865 (nine years after Robert Schumann's death), Brahms composed his Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor.

Although Brahms is best known to us as a virtuoso pianist, as the son of a working musician who played the flute, horn, violin and double bass, he was encouraged to try many instruments – including the cello. If his cello teacher had not subsequently run off with his instrument after only a few years, musical history may have been rather different! Instead, this Sonata was dedicated to his friend Josef Gänsbacher, an accomplished singer, pianist and cellist.

We begin with a lyrical, if lugubrious *Allegro* in which Brahms cunningly transforms his opening minor-key theme into a singing major-key theme with only a few tiny adjustments. The dancing second movement is all lightness on the outside, and all Chopin in the middle, particularly in its shimmering pianistic passagework. And the finale draws directly upon the music of JS Bach, with an opening subject that is nearly identical to that of Contrapunctus XIII in *Der Kunst der Fuge* – which is then turned into a three-part fugue. In this final movement, it is particularly challenging to allow all three voices of the fugue (the right and left hands of the piano, plus the cello) to 'speak' clearly, given their overlapping ranges. Indeed, we are told that during an informal performance of the piece by Brahms and its dedicatee, Gänsbacher, the cellist complained that he couldn't hear himself. Brahms, ever the diplomat, was heard to growl in reply, 'Lucky you!'

We return now to Schumann, and that productive year of 1849. The *Adagio and Allegro in A flat* was written immediately after the *Fantasiestücke*, and is another piece with flexible instrumentation: horn is the

first-named instrument on the published score, with violin and cello once again serving as alternatives. Indeed, when the piece was run through at the Schumanns' home in March 1849, Clara Schumann accompanied a local horn player; but at the première in January 1850 she performed with a violinist who was, rather improbably, named Franz Schubert.

The opening *Adagio* is positively songlike for both players, long-breathed and meditative, whilst the *Allegro* shares the energy and fire of the third of the *Fantasiestücke*. Here too, cello and piano are intimately intertwined, a richly-woven chamber texture. Clara was particularly delighted on playing it through shortly after its composition: 'The piece is splendid, fresh and passionate,' she wrote in her diary, 'just as I like it!'

Brahms's Cello Sonata No. 2 in F was written two decades after his first, and its creation was due in no small part to the virtuoso cellist Robert Hausmann. Hausmann played in a string quartet led by Joseph Joachim, whom Brahms had first met back in 1853 on that tour of north Germany (and who was, in turn, responsible for introducing Brahms to the Schumanns). Brahms and Hausmann premièred the Sonata together in Vienna in November 1886, by which time the composer was also at work on a Double Concerto for Hausmann and Joachim to play together.

This Sonata is a rather different beast from the first, and is as closely related to the Third Symphony (completed three years earlier in 1883) as it is to Brahms's earlier piece for the same forces. With tangible reference to the Symphony in the first and third movements (the Sonata's scherzo is based on material from the Symphony's finale), it is little wonder that this piece has such an intense, orchestral feel to it. But Brahms is careful never to overpower the cello, or overload the texture, by writing an over-crowded accompaniment: even the symphonic-sounding tremolos of the piece's opening work in compliment to, rather than in competition with, the piano's partner instrument.

This opening movement is all the more astonishing for the substance of the opening 'theme', such as it is: the energetic tremolos of the piano balanced with a fragmentary opening cello line (indeed, Arnold Schoenberg was later to refer to the cello writing in this movement in his attempt to explain the fragmentary nature of his own orchestral variations). This is succeeded by an *Adagio* movement in the far-distant key of F sharp major – a substantial movement in itself, and followed by an equally substantial scherzo in F minor. By comparison, the final movement is much shorter than its predecessors; the texture is lighter too, as if simply implying rather than realising the orchestral colours of the previous movements.

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