

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 3 November 2024  
7.30pm

Steven Isserlis cello  
Joshua Bell violin  
Irène Duval violin  
Blythe Teh Engstroem viola  
Jeremy Denk piano  
Connie Shih piano

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in E minor Op. 108 (1916-7)  
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante • III. Allegro non troppo*

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Op. 92 (1892)  
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Allegretto • III. Andante con moto • IV. Grazioso, poco allegro • V. Allegro*

*Interval*

Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)

Violin Sonata in D minor 'Ballade' (dedicated to George Enescu) Op. 27 No. 3 (1923)

Gabriel Fauré

Piano Quintet No. 2 in C minor Op. 115 (1919-21)  
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Allegro vivo • III. Andante moderato • IV. Allegro molto*



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When the First World War broke out, **Gabriel Fauré** was in Germany, where he had gone to compose without the pressures of Parisian society or the demands of the musical establishment. He could well have been stranded in enemy territory for the duration of the conflict, but was able to find a route home via Switzerland. Back in 1870-1 he had served his country in the Franco-Prussian War; now he looked on with foreboding as his younger son, Philippe, was sent to the front.

He refused to let patriotic fervour distort his aesthetic judgement and declined to sign up to a boycott of German music proposed by his old friend Saint-Saëns. His own music had recently gained international favour, in Russia, Britain and Spain as well as Germany. But this success had come at a time when his hearing loss was becoming acute. His overwhelming mood could not be described as optimistic, and his compositions became less sensuous, though they never lost their characteristic radiance.

The Second Violin Sonata was begun in the summer of 1916, while Fauré was at the spa town of Evian-les-Bains, on the shore of Lake Geneva. More than four decades had passed since the composition of the First Sonata. The completed work had its première in November of the following year. The first movement is the most expressive of the stressful times in which the Sonata was written. By the finale, however, much of the tension has been dissipated by the contemplative *Andante*. When the themes of the first movement start to reappear in altered form towards the end they no longer carry the same threat.

The gap in years between **Saint-Saëns's** First and Second Piano Trios is not as great as that between Fauré's First and Second Violin Sonatas – 28 years as opposed to more than 40. However, musical fashion had changed profoundly, whereas Saint-Saëns had not. By 1892, when he composed Op. 92, much of what he had once advocated as an outsider had become the mainstream. Once he had championed Wagner and Liszt as capable of freeing French music from rigid convention. Now, with the scene dominated by the Wagner-worshipping César Franck and his devotees, he was railing against a lack of Classical discipline.

Perhaps wisely, he was spending less time in Paris and expanding his horizons. So, in the spring of 1892 he settled for a while in Algeria, where he knuckled down to work on the Second Trio. 'I am beavering away quietly at a trio which I am confident will drive to despair all those unlucky enough to hear it,' he joked in a letter. 'I shall need all summer to perpetrate this atrocity – one must be allowed a little fun, after all'.

The resulting work is on a grand scale: five movements, no less. Innovative and experimental in its own way, it's nonetheless a statement of defiance in the face of (as Saint-Saëns saw it) the woozy formlessness of the Liszt-

and-Wagner-worshippers. Melodic contours and structures are clearly defined, and technical ingenuity is proudly displayed (the second movement has five beats to the bar and fiendish syncopations). That said, there is a wide emotional range – avoiding being wet didn't lead Saint-Saëns into being dry.

Belgian-born, **Eugène Ysaÿe** challenged orthodoxy in violin playing and teaching to become lauded throughout Europe for his technique and his ability to make the instrument sing. Fauré was among his many friends; they played together in recital and corresponded frequently. Ysaÿe composed more than 50 pieces including a set of six sonatas for unaccompanied violin, written in 1923; each is dedicated to a prominent violinist of the time.

The Third Sonata pays homage to the Romanian musician (and former Fauré composition pupil) George Enescu, like Ysaÿe a conductor, composer and teacher as well as a virtuoso fiddler. The only one of the six to be in a single, continuous movement, it clearly references Bach, but partly emulates a regular feature of Enescu's compositional style in rhapsodically alternating fast and slow sections.

'I shall die as elusive a person as I have always been', wrote Gabriel Fauré to his wife in 1921, the year tonight's final work was published. A dreamer since his childhood, having spent long periods separated from his parents, he remained something of an enigma to many colleagues and acquaintances. His music, too, left some of them puzzled (especially outside France, although Elgar was one of his many admirers in Britain). Maybe this was because he was so fond of ambiguity. A typical instance in the viola theme at the beginning of the Second Piano Quintet: the implied metre is 4/4, but the movement is actually in triple time. The beguiling opening unfolds like a flower, presenting a panoply of themes in an atmosphere of sustained rapture.

As was often his method, Fauré wrote the middle movements of this work before the outer ones. The scherzo, placed second, is a scampering, skimming, nocturnal affair, alive with fireflies if not fairies. And rapid pattering continues in the piano writing of the slow movement, though it falls still to make way for a separately defined new subject. Throughout the rest of the Quintet there is a seamless flow of continually developing melody and harmony.

The rumbling beginning of the finale hints at *fugato* and a sense of constructive purpose, but the mood is fleeting and we are soon skipping or floating along in further reverie. Although considerable tension builds up as we approach the end, it is nothing that cannot be dispelled by a melting modulation. As a whole, the Quintet is a perfect distillation of this 'elusive' composer's art.

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