

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 4 December 2022
7.30pm

Leonidas Kavakos violin
Yuja Wang piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Op. 78 (1878-9)
*I. Vivace ma non troppo • II. Adagio •
III. Allegro molto moderato*

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

Violin Sonata (1914-5, rev. 1916-22)
I. Con moto • II. Ballada • III. Allegretto • IV. Adagio

Interval

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*



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The two most significant relationships in Brahms's adult life were with Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim, and both musicians played a part in Brahms's Op. 78. By the time it was published, in 1879, he was 46, in vigorous middle age – and now committed to bewhiskered, bachelor self-containment in the impressive beard that had marked the end of youth for a handsome young man. Behind him, at last, were his first two symphonies (1876 and 1877), in which he had risen triumphantly to the challenge of Beethoven, and in 1878 he worked on a further large-scale work, his Violin Concerto – also indebted to Beethoven, but more so to the violin virtuoso Joachim, whose advice, technical and aesthetic, over the solo part was indispensable. The former tyro young lion of the Piano Concerto No. 1 had the musical establishment at his feet, significant and threatening enough to be vilified in print by Richard Wagner.

Tucked into the beginning of that decade, in 1872, were a group of eight songs (Op. 59) that included settings of two poems by Brahms's friend Klaus Groth, 'Regenlied' and 'Nachklang' ('Rain Song' and 'Echo'), both soaked with rain imagery and both sharing the same tune that the now-widowed Clara Schumann referred to as 'my melody'. This is the theme that Brahms reworked into the rondo finale of this Violin Sonata six years later, implying layers of reference and memory to do with childhood, his unrequited passion for Clara, loss and resignation – a potent mix familiar to Brahms devotees – extending the two songs' range into an intensely personal and lyrical song without words.

Brahms's tempo direction for the Sonata's first movement is something of an oxymoron and wide open to interpretation – *Vivace ma non troppo* ('Lively, but don't overdo it') – and is further blurred by the lilting 6/4 time signature that gives Brahms a great deal of rhythmic leeway – he was a master at dissolving the tyranny of barlines. The slower you hum the violin's unforgettable opening melody, the more lovely and lyrical it sounds, deflecting attention away from the movement's taut construction, which in turn confounds sonata-form certainties. You are not surprised when things seem to return to the opening for the conventional repeat, but then the main tune, now in the piano, ventures into shifting harmonic territory that continues to destabilise the return of the main theme, a moment loaded with all manner of significance. That theme may not be the 'Regenlied' of the third movement but it is in a similar vein. And it has the all-important tum-ti-tum dotted figure that pervades all three movements, in the shadowy funereal tread of the *Adagio* and overtly at the start of the finale, while the piano's chorale that opens the *Adagio* is transfigured in the finale to return the music to G major. The means are very sophisticated, and are completely at the service of one of Brahms's loveliest, most immediate works.

There are also two significant relationships peering over Leoš Janáček's shoulder in his Violin Sonata – Kamila Stösslová, the young married woman Janáček met in 1917 (he was 63; she was 26), whom he fell for in a torrent of unconsummated passion; and the operatic role of Kát'a Kabanová that Stösslová inspired. Given that other works reflecting his passion, such as the later second string quartet, flew from his pen, the Violin Sonata is unusual in that it took about seven or eight years to arrive at the form finally published in 1922, after many revisions – music was

discarded or rewritten, movements re-ordered, removed or published separately. The process started around 1914 and continued throughout the First World War, but the published version sounds impulsive and improvisatory. It is also very much in the style of the opera *Kát'a Kabanová* (1921) in its terseness and extremes of emotion. Janáček knew how to give the shortest melodic tag maximum time-filling impact and he deploys that skill to overwhelming effect in the Violin Sonata. The first movement is full of his signature obsessive repetitions and juxtapositions, with cimbalom-like tremolandi from the piano underpinning the violin's declamatory melodic strivings. The *Ballada* second movement is a lullaby that strains against its restful agenda. In the scherzo-like third movement the piano picks out, as it were with one finger, a banal, naïve tune that leaks into trills and other wilder distortions from both players. The fourth movement opens with a rising figure from the piano accompanied by jittery interjections from the violin, which then opens into one of Janáček's sweetest, cryptic melodies, one that you can easily hear poor Kát'a or innocent Jenůfa singing, and the Violin Sonata ends in an ambiguous sense of loss, perhaps the composer's own bafflement over what consumes him and similar in effect to his song-cycle *The Diary of One who Disappeared*.

By 1851, Robert Schumann had been in post as Düsseldorf's director of music for over a year. What had started off well for him and his wife Clara turned sour – he was difficult to deal with, and, crucially, he was a hopeless conductor in charge of the city's choir and orchestra. Whether or not he concentrated on composition as a means of self-therapy, the fact remains that this Düsseldorf period saw a surge of works, mostly chamber and symphonic music, on a par with his 'year of song' in 1840 – including two Violin Sonatas and the G minor Piano Trio. The first Violin Sonata was a dark, relatively compact work, which he completed within a week. Towards the end of 1851 came the Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor, likewise swiftly composed but a much more expansive work in four movements, the first and the fourth both in sonata form, which has the effect of stoking the work's overall temperature and breadth.

The writing is virtuosic and large-scale, but the violin part rarely goes north of the treble staff for overt display. The work opens with a rhapsodic, Zigeuner-style flourish for the violin and then moves onto two big brooding melodies, the section marked to be repeated, following sonata-form convention. The passionate fluency escalates in a powerful development, capped by a highly romanticised return of the opening. The mercurial scherzo and the slow movement's variations are linked by a reference to a traditional chorale tune, which is alluded to rather than stated in the violin's *pianissimo* pizzicato accompanied by the piano's equally remote role, marked to be played 'mit Verschiebung' (where two strings are struck rather than three), before the variations gather in substance and harmonic scope. The finale's turbulence is mollified by the second theme's relative lyricism, before the music steers towards a confident close in D major. Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim gave the official first performance in 1853; in 1854 Schumann attempted suicide and spent his last two years in an asylum.

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