

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 4 November 2024
7.30pm

Steven Isserlis cello
Joshua Bell violin
Irène Duval violin
Jeremy Denk piano
Connie Shih piano

Quatuor Agate

Adrien Jurkovic violin
Thomas Descamps violin
Raphaël Pagnon viola
Simon Iachemet cello

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in D minor Op. 109 (1917)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Finale. Allegro comodo

George Enescu 1881-1955)

Violin Sonata No. 2 Op. 6 (1899)

I. Assez mouvementé • II. Tranquillement • III. Vif

Interval

Gabriel Fauré

Piano Trio in D minor Op. 120 (1922-3)

*I. Allegro, ma non troppo • II. Andantino •
III. Allegro vivo*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

String Quartet in F (1902-3)

*I. Allegro moderato, très doux • II. Assez vif, très
rythmé • III. Très lent • IV. Vif et agité*



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In 1917, the First World War was still raging, and **Gabriel Fauré's** son, Philippe, was fighting for his country. Happily, he would return home safely when hostilities ceased, but these were anxious times. Meanwhile, immediately after completing his Second Violin Sonata, Fauré set to work on his First Cello Sonata (he had been meaning to write one for nearly 40 years). The two works have much in common: each follows a restless first movement with an introspective andante that resolves most of the tensions, before a finale of quiet optimism.

Fauré's deafness meant that he was increasingly relying on his 'inner ear'. As with Beethoven, similarly afflicted in his later years, contemporaries were apt to attribute any perceived strangeness in the music to resultant miscalculation. In the biography of his father that Philippe published three years after the composer's death, the First Cello Sonata was cited as an example: Philippe considered that the cello part lay too low. However, in the case of this and the other late works, the criticisms haven't stuck with performers or the public.

Rather like Brahms, Fauré would often try out musical ideas in different guises before deciding which sort of work they were best suited to. Thus the first subject of the first movement is adapted from an unpublished symphony of 1884 – another similarity with the Op. 108 Violin Sonata, which draws from the same source.

Fauré had an impressive roster of composition students, including Maurice Ravel, Nadia Boulanger and Florent Schmitt. As Fauré's great admirer Aaron Copland pointed out, a measure of his success as a teacher is that he helped students find their own voice rather than expecting them to imitate his. For the Romanian-born **George Enescu**, study with Fauré in Paris led him away from early works that rather rigidly adhered to Austro-German convention, and towards a more free and personal style.

The Second Violin Sonata of 1899 was written when Enescu was 17 and still a student of the master. In this case Fauré's influence is clearly discernible as a point on the way towards the future composer of *Romanian Rhapsodies*, but the work still springs from the soul of its creator. Enescu said, 'I felt myself evolving rapidly, I was becoming myself... From that moment I felt able to walk on my own legs, even if not yet to run very fast'. The opening melody had come to him on a walk when he was 14. 'I carried it inside me for three years; then, at the age of seventeen, I wrote my Second Violin Sonata in the space of a fortnight'.

In 1920, Fauré retired from the Paris Conservatoire. On his appointment as director in 1905 he had set about reforming its stuffy old ways with such zeal that he had been dubbed 'Robespierre'. So volatile were the aesthetics of the new century that by the time of his retirement 15 years later he was regarded by some as an

outdated figure, left behind by the modernists; though actually he would outlive Debussy by several years.

Having left his Conservatoire duties he intended to spend more time on composition, but it was late in the day. Now in his mid-70s he complained of constant fatigue, and he was approaching complete deafness. There was undoubtedly immense sadness clouding these closing years, but the works Fauré completed contain no evidence of tiredness or disillusionment.

The Piano Trio is his penultimate published composition, the E minor Quartet being the final one. The Trio was written between September 1922 and March 1923. When he began sketching it, Fauré had in mind a clarinet for the top line, with the violin as an alternative, but he soon settled for the traditional piano trio instrumentation.

There are many quintessentially Fauré moments: Steven Isserlis cites the return to F major at the end of the slow movement as 'one of the most ecstatic moments in music'. The finale – built entirely on three-bar phrases – finds the piano in a more playful mood than the strings, who are eventually persuaded that there is no need to be too earnest, even in D minor.

In 1902, when **Ravel** began work on his only string quartet, he was in danger of becoming a perpetual student at the Paris Conservatoire. He had already been, in effect, expelled twice during his 14 years there, because the rules demanded the winning of at least one prize within every three-year period. After his second expulsion he managed to regain admittance to Gabriel Fauré's composition class as an observer rather than a participant, thanks in part to Fauré's intervention.

There is some evidence that the Quartet was originally intended to be a joint venture, with three other students from Fauré's class writing the movements to succeed Ravel's first movement. However, Ravel completed the work himself and presented the work to his teacher (to whom it is dedicated) on its completion in 1903, only to be told it was unsatisfactory – Fauré considered the finale to be freakishly short, though he admitted, 'I could be wrong'.

The Quartet failed to win either the Conservatoire's composition prize or the Prix de Rome, and Ravel was expelled for the third and final time in 1905. He was 30 that year, so the academics may have been doing him a favour. As it turned out, his career was given a boost by publicity generated by the fiercely divided reaction to the première, which occurred on 5 March 1904. One commentator hailed the composer as 'one of the masters of tomorrow', while Debussy is reported to have advised Ravel not to change a note of the Quartet.

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