

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 5 October 2021 7.30pm

Alina Ibragimova violin
Cédric Tiberghien piano

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Myths Op. 30 (1915)

The Fountain of Arethusa • Narcissus • Dryads and Pan

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Violin Sonata (1942-3, rev. 1949)

I. Allegro con fuoco • II. Intermezzo • III. Presto tragico

Interval

Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)

Poème élégiaque Op. 12 (1893)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G (1923-7)

I. Allegretto • II. Blues. Moderato • III. Perpetuum mobile. Allegro

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When, early in 1915, **Szymanowski** wrote his *Myths* – a gift for his boyhood friend, the violinist Paul (Pawel) Kochanski – he chose two classical myths of transformation, and one of Dionysiac abandon. The water-nymph Arethusa is pursued by the lustful Alpheus; crying to the goddess Diana for help, she is transformed into a crystal-clear spring. The youth Narcissus spurns the nymph Echo and, enraptured by his own reflection, is reborn as a flower. And through a sunlit forest, the god Pan dances like a zephyr, driving the wood-nymphs to a frenzy before vanishing to the echo of his own reed-pipes.

It's an astonishing feat of musical imagination; a decisive break with the sonata tradition of melody and accompaniment, and Szymanowski knew it: 'In *Myths*, Pawelek and myself have created a new style, a new mode of expression in violin playing', he wrote. Glittering piano and stratospheric violin together represent both the waters of Arethusa's fountain and the living soul that inhabits them; violin song and piano reflection evoke both Narcissus's languor and Echo's pain, and gleaming violin harmonics become the eerie, primal call of Pan's pipes. There's no 'violin and piano' here; the two instruments create one ravishing texture – a near-perfect fusion of form, emotion and colour in which the music's inner life and its surface beauty are inseparable.

String music wasn't really **Poulenc's** *métier*, and the traditions of Romantic chamber music left him worse than cold. 'The prima donna violin over an arpeggiated piano makes me vomit,' he told one friend. 'Nothing is further from human breath than the bow stroke'. Happily, French music offered an alternative model: Claude Debussy's three sonatas, inspired by the grace and fantasy of the French Baroque. Poulenc's string sonatas follow Debussy; they're clear-cut, melodious and resist easy sentimentality. And like Debussy, he wrote them in wartime. Poulenc's violin sonata dates from 1943 and he conceived it as a tribute to the then-banned poet Federico García Lorca, who'd been murdered by Spanish fascists in 1936.

This was an idea as far as could be imagined from the *belle-époque* Parisian salon-sonatas that Poulenc so disliked – which is not to say that Poulenc's habitual polish and wit is completely absent from the impassioned opening *Allegro con fuoco* (marked *très violent*) and the headlong, *tragico* final movement. The heart of the sonata, though, is the brooding *Intermezzo*, with its haunted echoes of guitar sounds: what Poulenc called a 'melancholy improvisation' on Lorca's line *La guitarra, / hace llorar a los sueños* (The guitar makes dreams cry). The completed work was dedicated to Lorca's memory, and premièred in Paris by Ginette Neveu in June 1943.

Eugène Ysaÿe's gifts as a violinist were so prodigious that it was easy (and romantic) to believe that this artisan's son from

Liège was effectively self-taught. It wasn't strictly true; but as a composer, he genuinely did find his own creative path. The rhapsodic, single-movement *poème* was ideally suited to Ysaÿe's imaginative temperament. 'It is not constrained by the restrictions imposed by the hallowed form of the concerto'; he explained:

It can be dramatic and lyrical; it is essentially romantic and impressionistic... it weeps and sings, it is shadow and light; it is free and needs only its title to guide the composer.

That's as good a description as any of the brooding, impassioned *Poème élégiaque*, completed in 1893 and later orchestrated in 1903. Dedicated to Fauré, it made its profoundest impact on Ernest Chausson, who dedicated his own *Poème* for violin (1896) to Ysaÿe, and even referred to it, in their correspondence, as '*mon-ton poème*' – 'my-your *poème*'.

In 1897, **Maurice Ravel** abandoned his first violin sonata – a student work – after just one movement. His G major Sonata of 1927 nearly met a similar fate. Manuel Rosenthal, visiting him in 1926, reported seeing pages of the sonata's finale burning in the fireplace. But it was ravishing, Rosenthal protested. 'Yes', replied Ravel. 'but it didn't fit'. Ravel maintained that the form of his Sonata dictated its content. 'In 1924, when I undertook the Sonata, I had already determined its rather unusual form, the manner of writing, and even the character of the themes before "inspiration" had begun to prompt any one of the themes', he told an interviewer in 1928. 'And I don't think that I chose the easiest way'.

Yet the idea of a violin sonata might have been germinating as far back as the First World War, when Ravel befriended the violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange. He dedicated the finished Sonata to her, although ill health had ended her playing career in 1924, and the première was given (on 30th May 1927) by George Enescu. The movement that excited the most comment, initially at least, was the central *Blues*. 'You Americans take jazz too lightly,' Ravel told a US journalist in 1928; in this extraordinary movement, with its sultry slides and banjo-like *pizzicato*, he'd paid jazz the compliment of making it his own. And yet the two outer movements are just as personal. Jourdan-Morhange felt that in the opening *Allegretto*, Ravel had treated the violin almost like a woodwind instrument. And if the final *Perpetuum mobile* is a virtuoso showpiece in the great tradition, it's also a discharge of the *Blues's* pent-up emotional energy; handled – because this is Ravel, after all – with effortless control.

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