WIGMORE HALL

Friday 6 December 2024
7.30pm

Gary Hoffman cello
David Selig piano

François Couperin (1668-1733)

Prelude from *Concert No. 5 from Les goûts-réunis arranged by Paul Bazelaire*

Sicilienne from *Concert No. 7 from Les goûts-réunis arranged by Paul Bazelaire*

From *Concert No. 10 from Les goûts-réunis arranged by Paul Bazelaire*
La tromba • Plainte

Air de Diable from *Concert No. 6 from Les goûts-réunis arranged by Paul Bazelaire*

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Sonata for cello and piano (1940-8, rev. 1953)
I. Allegro – Tempo di marcia • II. Cavatine • III. Ballabile • IV. Finale

Interval

Léon Boëllmann (1862-1897)

Cello Sonata in A minor Op. 40
Maestoso- Allegro con fuoco • Andante • Allegro molto - Poco animato

François Couperin, known even to his contemporaries as 'le Grand', was born into one of the most distinguished musical families in Paris. In 1690 he obtained a *privilège du roi* – a royal licence – to publish his music. Knowing his countrymen's taste for foreign novelties, he passed off his first attempt at an instrumental sonata in the Italian style ('the first of its kind to be composed in France' as he later proudly described it) as the work of a fictional Italian composer whose name was an anagram of 'Couperin'.

That playful wit, allied to a keen sense of musical fashion and an openness to new ideas, stood him in good stead in the era of Louis XIV. The titles of his many anthologies of keyboard and chamber music proclaimed his cosmopolitan tastes. 'I declare in all good faith that I am more pleased with what moves me, than what astonishes me', he wrote, and he published *Les goûts-réunis* – a set of ten instrumental concerts, or suites - in 1724.

Couperin's light-footed, emotionally-charged fantasy inspired generations of composers (and not only in France: Ravel, Richard Strauss and Thomas Adès have all created personal responses to his music). The Sedan-born cellist Paul Bazelaire – professor of cello at the Paris Conservatoire, where his pupils included Pierre Fournier – selected five pieces from *Les goûts-réunis* in 1924 and adapted them for solo cello with the accompaniment of string quartet or (as here) piano. Couperin's simple, elliptical titles give all the description necessary: the dancing fanfares of *La tromba*, the wistful sweetness of *Plainte* and the saucy swagger of the final *Air de Diable* all have their own clearly-defined flavour, over which Bazelaire sprinkles the lightest pinch of virtuoso spice.

String music wasn't really Poulenc's *métier*, and the conventions of romantic chamber music left him cold: in fact, worse than cold. 'The prima donna violin over an arpeggio piano makes me vomit' he told one friend. 'Nothing is further from human breath than the bow stroke'. He described his single, unsuccessful attempt at a string quartet as 'the disgrace of my life'. Poulenc's string sonatas follow, instead, the example of Couperin and Rameau; they're clear-cut, melodious and bursting with what he called 'youthful vitality'.

Poulenc sketched his Cello Sonata in 1940, but he completed it in 1948, with a joint dedication to Pierre Fournier and Poulenc's close friend Marthe Bosredon. He described its creation to the musicologist Claude Rostand: 'Sketched in '40, when I started [the ballet] *Animaux modèles*, it is closely related. I had abandoned my sketches, when in '48 the admiration and affection I had for Pierre Fournier made me finish this work'.

Animaux modèles was a playful zoological ballet inspired by the fables of *La Fontaine*. So his cello sonata (he actually reversed the title, in 18th-century style: "Sonata for Piano and Cello") is a four-part suite of concise, elegantly-constructed miniatures, each with a descriptive title - *Tempo di Marcia*, *Cavatine*, *Ballabile* ('dance-like'), and *Finale* – that may or may not imply more than a first glance suggests. Certainly, looking back from the impassioned melancholy outbursts that open and close the darting Finale, to the brusque toytown march that launches the first movement, there's a sense of having travelled further, and through rather darker regions, than one perhaps realised at the time. 'Do not analyse my music. Love it!' joked the composer. But he confessed, in all sincerity, to being 'quite fond' of his only Cello Sonata.

When the French composer and organist Léon Boëllmann died of lung disease in October 1897, the news made headlines on both sides of the Channel. An obituary in the *Musical Times* in London summed up the consensus, as well as giving a brief sketch of Boëllmann's cruelly short life: 'A composer of much promise, who had already obtained a not inconsiderable share of success, Léon Boëllmann, died suddenly in Paris, on the 11th ult., at the age of 35. He was an Alsatian by birth and studied at the Ecole Niedermeyer, in Paris, where he was a pupil more especially of M. Gigout, the well-known organist. Having early obtained a reputation as an organist and composer of talent, M. Boëllmann was appointed to the important organistship of the Church of St. Vincent de Paul, in the French capital, where his performances invariably attracted numerous auditors.

'The early death of so thorough a musician is to be deplored' added Cobbett's *Cyclopedia* a generation later, and if it's true that Boëllmann was best known in his lifetime as a virtuoso organist in the great Franco-Belgian tradition of César Franck, he was also recognised for many years as one of the pre-eminent young French composers. His only symphony was widely performed, and his *Variations Symphoniques* for cello and orchestra were played at the Proms on twelve occasions between 1900 and the Second World War, after which he seems to have been forgotten by everyone except organists.

Boëllmann's cello sonata was published in 1897, and it may have been his last completed work. It was dedicated to Jules Delsart, the cellist who adapted Franck's Violin Sonata for the cello, and it shares some of the same restless, expansive lyricism. The cello leads off with a grand declamation, before sweeping into a headlong first movement that struggles (and dreams) its way through to an optimistic A major. The central intermezzo begins in melancholy quiet, with the cello sighing sadly against a softly strumming piano; by the end of the movement, the roles have been reversed and the cello, *pizzicato*, is accompanying the keyboard. The *finale* opens in an air of uncertainty (but also of possibility). Glancing back over the whole sonata, and building to a series of ever more tempestuous climaxes, it ends in heroic defiance.