

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 6 March 2023
7.30pm

Edgar Moreau cello
David Kadouch piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasiestücke Op. 73 (1849)
*Zart und mit Ausdruck • Lebhaft, leicht •
Rasch und mit Feuer*

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Cello Sonata in F Op. 6 (1880-3)
*I. Allegro con brio • II. Andante ma non troppo •
III. Finale. Allegro vivo*

Interval

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Cello Sonata in A minor Op. 36 (1882-3)
*I. Allegro agitato • II. Andante molto tranquillo •
III. Allegro molto e marcato*

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Can you remember what you spent most of your time doing when you were six years old? For all three of tonight's composers the answer is the same: music. Their exceptional gifts were spotted early, their families nurtured them well and the rest is history. **Strauss**, the most precocious, wrote his Cello Sonata aged 19. He already had three other sonatas, numerous sonatinas, piano trios and other works under his belt, all the better to hone his command of larger chamber music forms. Not only had he been composing for more than a decade; even better, he had regularly heard his music played and critiqued by professional musicians. This matchless apprenticeship shows: his sureness of touch is startlingly impressive and there is not a bar in his piece which is not exquisitely achieved. Like the musical equivalent of a magnificent Biedermeier interior (one can easily imagine this music performed in such a space), it is beautifully proportioned, warm, glowing and – in the best sense – charming. The influence of an earlier child genius, Mendelssohn, is audible throughout in the melodious fluency and the lucidity of musical play. He is most present in the playful finale with its tripping, *Midsummer Night's Dream*-ish fantasy.

Grieg wrote his Cello Sonata a year or so after Strauss. He also had three sonatas to his name, but he was twice Strauss's age by then. He would acknowledge that he had a difficult relationship with the key Germanic genres – symphony, sonata, concerto, quartet – and with sonata form itself. Instead, his catalogue is packed with songs, solo piano miniatures and theatre music which brought him such enormous fame that he spent much of his later career touring Europe as one of its greatest celebrity musicians. When he did write chamber music, the very best of it shows him impressively extending his poetic and lyrical gifts beyond the world of the miniature and on to the largest scale; arguably this sonata is the best of the best. It is the opposite of Strauss's sonata in every way. It surges with dark energy. We know that Grieg required two key qualities in its interpreters, 'a full tone and a dramatic flair', and it has a rugged, heroic quality that may result from two marches that Grieg draws on. The sonata's opening reimagines a very personal piece, his *Funeral March for Rikard Nordraak*. This heartfelt tribute to a beloved friend was also the music that Grieg wished to be played at his own funeral. The second movement, in contrast, is a very lyrical treatment of the *Homage March* from his theatrical score for Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's historical drama, *Sigurd Jorsalfar*. Finding these links, especially to the funeral march, tempts one to dig for a subtext of some kind, but in vain. In fact, the piece is very much a Grieg family affair, written for the composer's brother and regular duo partner. Like Edvard, John Grieg studied music in Leipzig as a young man, but he then returned to Bergen to take over the family business, become an important figure

in the city and father a big family to carry the Grieg name forward. Somehow, on top of all those commitments, he maintained his playing at a high level (sufficient to master this sonata), and performed regularly in public. He is often credited with inspiring Grieg's idiomatic cello writing.

Hearing these two sonatas side by side offers a chance to consider a fault line that runs throughout 19th-century European art music, and which mattered passionately to Grieg. On one side of it stands the great Austro-German tradition, and on the other, well, almost everyone else. Britain, Spain, Russia, the Nordic, Baltic and Eastern European states: wildly as these nations differed in culture, size, wealth and power, most suffered from challenges of geography, economics, patronage, under-development or lack of political independence which left native musical talents marginalised and stultified. And when the artists of those countries found their own musical voices by engaging with their national vernacular, traditional and folk arts, their distinctive new music was either belittled as picturesque, or simply disparaged in the self-appointed Home of Music, as they saw Germany. Grieg was sorely aware of it: 'German critics adopt a mistrustful and unappreciative attitude not only toward Norwegian manifestations of national characteristic – no, toward all manifestations of national identity *outside Germany*.'

It is not surprising then, that Grieg as a young musician should have been so powerfully attracted to arguably the least conventional of all the great German musicians of his age: **Schumann**. Here was a man for whom the beautifully wrought miniature was as worthy as a symphony; someone who flouted musical conventions or even invented his own genres in order to suit his poetic inspirations fully. Most of that could be said of Grieg who championed his music (speaking of a conductor he wrote 'his one fault is that he does not love Schumann'), and performed it, including (with cellist brother John) the *Fantasiestücke* we hear first tonight.

Each of these pieces is a song-like, self-contained fantasy but taken together, the triptych moves from introspective, unsettled mood (*Zart* – 'tender') to brilliance in the last (*Rasch und mit Feuer* – 'Quick and with fire'). There is a propulsive, urgent quality to all of them which Grieg surely remembered as he penned the opening of his Cello Sonata.

Incidentally, Grieg poignantly regretted that he arrived in Leipzig as a child two years after Schumann died, too late to have met him. He did meet Strauss in 1907 when he heard Strauss's opera, *Salome*, and commented: 'It is the end of everything...' 'Après Strauss le déluge'.

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