

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 6 March 2024
1.00pm

Alisa Weilerstein cello
Inon Barnatan piano

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 65 (1960-1)

*I. Dialogo. Allegro • II. Scherzo-Pizzicato. Allegretto • III.
Elegia. Lento • IV. Marcia. Energico • V. Moto perpetuo.
Presto*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Op. 99 (1886)

*I. Allegro vivace • II. Adagio affettuoso • III. Allegro
passionato • IV. Allegro molto*

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Despite his youthful aptitude for the viola, **Britten's** creative instincts often pulled him towards the human voice rather than string instruments, and it took a meeting with the great Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich to prompt his own Cello Sonata. In September 1960, Britten heard Rostropovich give the British première of Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto at London's Royal Festival Hall. He shared a box with Shostakovich who later confided to the cellist that 'every time Britten admired something in your playing, he would poke me in the ribs, and say, "Isn't that simply marvellous!"'.

Britten and Rostropovich met the following day. Rostropovich immediately asked him for a sonata and Britten accepted the task, with the proviso that Rostropovich agree to première it at Britten's Aldeburgh Festival the following year. That required permission from the Soviet government; once that had been secured, Britten (who had begun the sonata while on holiday in Greece, and completed it over Christmas) was able to post the finished sonata to Russia. It was, said Rostropovich, 'love at first sight' – although when he arrived in London in March 1961 to try it through with the composer, both artists were so in awe of each other that they had to down (according to Rostropovich) 'four or five' whiskies before beginning.

'I was so excited I could not even tell how we played', recalled the cellist. 'I only noticed that we came to the end of the first movement at the same time. I jumped up, hopped over the cello, and rushed to the composer to embrace him in a burst of spontaneous gratefulness'. Their friendship would last as long as Britten lived, and would be the inspiration behind three suites for unaccompanied cello, and the powerful Cello Symphony (1963). By then, Rostropovich's trust in Britten was absolute: 'Write for the cello everything that your heart tells you, no matter how difficult it is; my love for you will help me master every note, even the most impossible ones'.

They premièred the sonata together at Aldeburgh on 7 July 1961. It's been suggested that it represents a sort of musical portrait of its dedicatee: 'now high and expressive, now low and grumbling, now gay and carefree', wrote Britten. An eloquent wide-ranging *Dialogo*, and a limpid, nocturnal *Elegia* are the two movements about which the work pivots; around them dart a deadpan, shadowy *Scherzo-Pizzicato* ('the pizzicato movement will amuse you; I hope it is possible!' wrote Britten to Rostropovich), a bright, parodic *Marcia*, and finally a homage to their mutual friend Shostakovich (and his musical 'signature'

DSCH) in the form of an increasingly brilliant *Moto perpetuo*.

Brahms's second cello sonata was the product of emotion recollected in (outward) tranquillity. Brahms spent the summer of 1886 in the lakeside suburb of Hofstetten, just outside Thun in Switzerland. He'd rented simple rooms above a grocer's shop, with a view across the River Aar towards the pine-covered, snow-topped mountains beyond, and he loved it there. 'You have no conception of how comfortable and beautiful it is here in every respect', he wrote to Clara Schumann. 'Delightful lodgings, lovely walks and rides, good taverns, pleasant people...'

Brahms was a fierce critic of his own work but that summer in Thun, chamber music just seemed to flow out of him. He wrote his second violin sonata, much of his third piano trio and completed this second cello sonata in a matter of weeks. Its movement headings (Brahms was never usually given to florid descriptions) tell their own story: *affettuoso* (tender or affecting); *passionato* (enough said). It's no coincidence that the 53-year-old bachelor was in the throes of another hopeless infatuation, this time with the mezzo-soprano Hermine Spies.

But he had a very different dedicatee in mind: Robert Hausmann, the magnificent Saxon cellist of Joseph Joachim's famous string quartet, who was known for the virility and virtuosity of his playing, and who would première the sonata in Vienna on 14 November 1886. (Hugo Wolf, who was present in his capacity as a critic, dismissed it out of hand as '*tohuwabohu*' – from the Hebrew for 'formless and void'; chaos instead of music). Gone is the reserve of the E minor First Cello Sonata, completed more than two decades earlier in 1865 for an amateur cellist, and so uncertain of its ground that Brahms had actually entitled it 'Sonata for piano and cello'. The Second Sonata is a sweeping work in four symphonic movements, the first of which leaps into life in heroic style, with cello writing that ranges from a thunderous bass register to high, soaring melodies.

It glows with colour, too; whether the piano's dramatic tremolando, or the striding *pizzicato* that opens the ardently romantic *Adagio affettuoso*. And then he discharges the tension in a songful, playful rondo finale, in which it doesn't take very much imagination to hear the glitter of an Alpine stream in the rippling piano writing. Brahms's journey with the cello sonata might have begun beneath overcast skies, but it ends in afternoon sunlight.

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