

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 6 May 2022 7.30pm

Christian Tetzlaff violin

CLASSIC *f*M

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720)

I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande • IV. Gigue • V. Chaconne

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

Preludio e Presto Op. 52 (1927-8)

I. Preludio. Con fantasia • II. Presto

Interval

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Sonata for solo violin BB124 (1944)

*I. Tempo di ciaccona • II. Fuga. Risoluto, non troppo vivace •
III. Melodia. Adagio • IV. Presto*

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Christian writers have often compared the spiritual life to a journey, an active process in search of divine perfection and union with God. Metaphors of ascent or of progress were deeply ingrained in **Bach's** Lutheran worldview; his comprehensive musical training and command of counterpoint, meanwhile, helped him gain what one of his friends described as an 'insight into the depth of the wisdom of the world'. Music 'has been mandated by God's spirit', noted Bach in his copy of the Bible. The composer's pursuit of perfection in music was ultimately driven not by vanity or the prospect of earthly reward; rather, it rose from a deep conviction that music could come close, perhaps closer than any other art form, to revealing insights into the mystery of God's creation.

While there's no evidence to suggest Bach's three sonatas and three partitas for solo violin were intended for church use, they possess a focus and intensity as strong as any present in the composer's sacred works. This music is about going beyond: beyond the ordinary, beyond the accepted limits of fiddle technique, beyond expectations of what the violin can say or do. The Partita in D minor, like its companion pieces, stands on models supplied by such earlier composers as Biber and Westhoff and by contemporary violin wizards, Johann Georg Pisendel chief among them, but excels them all.

By all accounts Bach was an able violinist but not necessarily able enough to deal with the fiendish technical demands of his Second Partita in D minor. He may have begun work on the piece and its five companions during the nine years he served the dukes of Weimar (1708-17), when he was often required to play the violin; their principal manuscript source, however, dates from 1720, while he was Chapel Master to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen. The D minor Partita consists of the four movements common to the keyboard suite – the *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and *Gigue* – with the addition of a final *Chaconne* of monumental proportions and difficulty. The latter comprises a set of progressively more elaborate melodic variations underpinned by a short, impassioned chord sequence repeated 64 times. The soloist must produce not just one but several melodic lines at once, pushing the instrument's limits to create complex polyphony.

Bach was among **Nielsen's** great gods of music. Long before securing his reputation as Denmark's most important composer, Nielsen made his way as a rank-and-file violinist in the orchestra of Copenhagen's Royal Theatre. It appears likely that he first discovered Bach's solo violin sonatas and partitas either in the arrangements with piano accompaniments made by Mendelssohn and Schumann or as keyboard transcriptions. In 1922 Nielsen began work on a new solo piece for his son-in-law, the Hungarian violinist Emil Telmányi, the majestic *Prelude, Theme and Variations* Op. 48, directly inspired by the *Chaconne* from Bach's Second Partita.

Nielsen's next and final work for solo violin began life in December 1927 as a few bars penned for a newspaper's 60th-

birthday tribute to the Danish composer and violinist Fini Henriques. Telmányi, who later invented a bow that made it easier to play the polyphony in Bach's solo sonatas and partitas, persuaded Nielsen to develop his little prelude into a full-scale work. He offered advice on technical matters and gave the first performance of the *Preludio e Presto* Op. 52 in Copenhagen the following April; some years later he also performed it here at Wigmore Hall.

Politiken, the paper that originally carried the embryo of the *Preludio e Presto*, declared that Nielsen had created 'New music that lives ... with an "oops-a-daisy".' The work's opening evokes the composer's memories of Henriques's playing of a Bach prelude and establishes the ground for a fantasy piece flavoured with double-stops, glissandos and acrobatic shifts between pizzicato and bowed figures. A specially designed mute, brought into play by the soloist's left hand while simultaneously bowing on an open string, further contributes to the movement's kaleidoscopic variety of textures and timbres. Nielsen's *Presto* finale unleashes the swagger of a country dance, flecked with bright harmonics and interrupted by a freewheeling cadenza that melts into melancholy before the dance returns for a wild dash to the finish.

Bartók's four-movement Sonata for solo violin, created in 1944 for Yehudi Menuhin, was written while its composer was undergoing pioneering treatment for leukaemia. It rises from a chord that evokes the opening of the famous *Chaconne* from Bach's Partita in D minor; the allusion is soon replaced by a succession of fragmentary melodies, many of them shot through with intervals characteristic of Hungarian folk music. Bartók corralled his thematic ideas into a loose yet definite sonata form, complete with exposition, development and recapitulation. The movement's *Tempo di ciaccona* marking refers no doubt to the rhythm of its first subject, deliberately modelled after that of Bach's *Chaconne*.

Shades of Bach surface again in the second and third movements, informed by Bartók's careful preparatory study of the German composer's Sonata in G minor BWV1001. Bartók, like Bach in his G minor Sonata, sets the violinist the task of performing (or at least implying) a four-voice fugue in the work's second movement, albeit far from strict in nature and intertwined with contrasting episodes, and presents its haunting slow movement, again like Bach, in B flat. The *Melodia*, based on material from the first movement, includes a muted central section hallmarked by the spectral trills and soaring harmonics of Bartók's so-called 'night music' style. The finale, peppered at first with optional microtones, finds relief from its initially relentless rhythmic thrust in two contrasting sections informed by folk music influences, the first built from a pentatonic scale, the second forged from a lyrical diatonic melody that grows wilder as the movement hastens to its conclusion.

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