

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 7 April 2025
1.00pm

Viktoria Mullova violin
Alasdair Beatson fortepiano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Violin Sonata No. 6 in A Op. 30 No. 1 (1801-2)
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio molto espressivo •
III. Allegretto con variazioni*

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Rondo brillant in B minor D895 (1826)
Andante - Allegro

Ludwig van Beethoven Violin Sonata No. 8 in G Op. 30 No. 3 (1801-2)
*I. Allegro assai • II. Tempo di menuetto, ma molto
moderato e grazioso • III. Allegro vivace*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Faith and hope served **Beethoven** in the early weeks of his move to Heiligenstadt in April 1802. The village, now part of suburban Vienna, was intended to be a refuge from the din of the Habsburg imperial capital, chosen following advice from the composer's doctor to find a place where his impaired hearing might recover. The countryside's restorative properties, however, failed to arrest Beethoven's hearing loss; indeed, Heiligenstadt's tranquillity caused him to focus on his deafness and become increasingly depressed by it. At the same time, the rural setting inspired Beethoven to work on the sketches for three violin sonatas that he had brought with him from Vienna, so much so that he had completed the set by the end of May.

As Beethoven crafted his new sonatas, he realised that the original finale of what was published in 1803 as the first of his three Opus 30 violin sonatas had grown out of all proportion to the work's other movements. He chose to set it aside – later recycling it as the finale of his 'Kreutzer' Sonata – and compose an ending more suited to the grace and charm of the A major sonata's opening *Allegro* and the lyricism of its exquisite slow movement. Beethoven moulds the simple raw material of the work's initial theme to build a sophisticated dialogue between the two instruments, and applies rhythmic subtleties to its lyrical, lightly syncopated second theme, which rises first in the piano before being echoed by the violin. While concise, the development section, which includes a canonic treatment of the second theme, is rich in variations of the movement's two fundamental ideas.

The *Adagio molto espressivo*, cast in rondo form with three appearances of the main theme, two episodes and an exquisite coda, speaks of the affective power of Italianate melody. There is a striking economy of means in which the music moves from the short minor-key first episode via a restatement of the rondo theme to the yearning second episode. All trace of melancholy dissolve in the movement's meditative coda, with its comforting dotted rhythms and soaring violin line. The leafy landscape around Heiligenstadt's famous hot-water spring clearly boosted Beethoven's mood, which he channelled into the jaunty melody that serves as theme for the finale's six variations. The amiable mood is darkened by the complex counterpoint that opens the fifth variation, the longest of the set, only to be restored by its rhapsodic conclusion and the utterly charming final variation.

'With the exception of Paganini, I have never heard a player like him,' wrote Frédéric Chopin of Josef Slavík. The young Bohemian violinist, he added, 'plays like a second Paganini, but a rejuvenated one, who will perhaps in time surpass the first.' An encounter with influenza ended Slavík's life at the age of 27, before he had had the chance to surpass Paganini's achievements. Yet his prowess inspired more than admiring words, prompting **Schubert** to return to composing for solo violin after a break of almost nine

years. The Rondo in B minor D895 was written in October 1826 for the 20-year-old violinist, who had arrived in Vienna some months earlier and was beginning to make his mark as a largely self-taught virtuoso.

Schubert's 'Rondeau brillant', as it was billed by its first publisher, opens with a distinctive series of formidable piano chords and rising violin scales. These interlinked ideas return later in the work's slow introduction following the appearance of a lyrical theme in the major mode. The simplicity of the subsequent 'rondo allegro' theme, a decisive answer to the two-note question posed at the end of the opening *Andante*, belies the refinements that Schubert adds to it through vigorous rhythmic accents, bold modulations and sudden shifts between the minor and major modes. The contrasts continue as the piano announces a second theme, a march-like affair accompanied by an insistent pattern of octave leaps and repeated notes in the violin, and in the recollections of the tender tune from the introduction. Schubert nudges the music into G major for the work's meaty central episode, the genial melody of which is led gradually through an arresting sequence of modulations before the rondo theme's final return. The work ends with a debonaire coda in B major, a magnificent rhetorical flourish peppered with double-stops, three-note violin chords and crowd-pleasing scales and arpeggios.

The violinist and musicologist Abram Loft portrayed the essence of Beethoven's Violin Sonata in G Op. 30 No. 3 as 'energy in free flight'. His verdict ideally describes the restless nature of the work's opening theme and the surfeit of ideas that crowd the first movement's concise exposition. A procession of cadential trills in the piano and violin spill over from the exposition into the playful development section and surface again near the close of the brief recapitulation. The *Tempo di Minuetto* grows from a long arching theme, outlined by the piano before being taken up by the violin and elaborated in the form of a conversation between both instruments. The movement includes a much shorter second theme, songlike in character, and a fleeting third theme in E flat minor. The latter, while brief, casts a long shadow over the return of the main melody and the movement's introspective close. Beethoven has fun in the finale, inviting performers to do likewise. The movement's dominant melody surely belongs to a country dance as do the 'bagpipe' drones in the piano's left hand; its two episodes, meanwhile, are closely related to the rustic rondo theme. A mid-air pause triggers the piano to launch an enticing vamp in the surprising key of E flat major, to which the violin responds with another burst of the rondo theme in G major. The duo bids farewell with the abundant good cheer of the work's dashing coda.

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