

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 7 March 2025
7.30pm

Gary Hoffman cello
David Selig piano

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Elégie Op. 24 (1880)

Cello Sonata No. 2 in G minor Op. 117 (1921)
I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivo

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Nocturne et scherzo (1882)

Cello Sonata (1915)
I. Prologue • II. Sérénade • III. Finale

Interval

Benjamin Godard (1849-1895)

Cello Sonata in D minor Op. 104
*I. Moderato • II. Adagio non troppo •
III. Vivace ma non troppo*



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The sound of the cello – sometimes melancholy, sometimes exuberant, always expressive – ideally matches the idiom of **Gabriel Fauré**, and he wrote for the instrument throughout his long career. *The Elégie* was first performed in 1880 in the house of Fauré's teacher, Camille Saint-Saëns, and was probably intended as the slow movement of a sonata that never materialised; so beautifully tailored is the *Elégie* to the cello, however, that it has always remained among Fauré's most popular works. In 1901, Edouard Colonne commissioned a version with orchestra, whose première Fauré conducted with Pablo Casals as soloist.

Fauré's Second Cello Sonata is part of an extraordinary sequence of late chamber works whose style is both deceptively simple and utterly distinctive. Its central Andante is derived from the *Chant funéraire* that Fauré composed for the Les Invalides ceremony marking the centenary of Napoleon's death. He surrounded this lament with outer movements whose liveliness belies his deafness and failing health. Vincent d'Indy told Fauré after the première in 1922 that 'I'm still under the spell of your beautiful Cello Sonata ... The Andante is a masterpiece of sensitivity and expression ... the finale, so perky and delightful ... How lucky you are to stay young like that!'

Like these Fauré works, the **Debussy** pieces heard tonight span their composer's career. The 'Nocturne et Scherzo' was originally presented as a violin piece in May 1882, when the 19 year-old composer made his public debut at a Paris *soirée* accompanying Maurice Thieberg. That manuscript has disappeared, but the following month Debussy made a version for cello, which was rediscovered in the 1970s and given its first 21st-century performance by Mstislav Rostropovich. The title is somewhat misleading, since the work is a brief single movement, whose 'nocturnal' central episode is enclosed by scherzo material on either side.

Once Debussy reached maturity, he ostentatiously shunned the 'official' forms he associated with the Austro-German tradition: he never composed a symphony; his only string quartet is an early work owing little to classical models; and until his mid-50s he showed no inclination to compose a sonata for any instrument. His publisher Jacques Durand must therefore have been surprised when Debussy told him in 1914 of his intention to write six sonatas for different instrumental groups. He only completed the first three: this Cello Sonata, the sonata for flute, viola and harp that followed hard on its heels, and the violin sonata that was almost his last piece. A note found among Debussy's papers after his death revealed the intriguing ensembles planned for the uncomposed sonatas: oboe, French horn and harpsichord for the fourth; trumpet, clarinet, bassoon and piano for the fifth; while the final sonata would have united all the instruments from the set, 'with the gracious assistance of the double bass'. The works Debussy completed owe less to classical 'sonata form' than to the Baroque sonata – in particular, those of Rameau and Couperin. Even the antiquarian typography of the Cello Sonata's title page, which announces it as '*La Première*' of the '*Six Sonates Pour Divers Instruments*' by

Claude Debussy, musicien français', reveals the composer's self-identification with these Baroque compatriots.

It is an astonishingly concise work: its three movements last barely more than 10 minutes, but encompass diverse sonorities and numerous themes, many never repeated, let alone 'developed' (a term that was anathema to Debussy). The Prologue's declamatory opening rapidly gives way to a poignant melody, then a restless *ostinato*; the piano provides the main interest as the tempo accelerates, before the cello reasserts itself with a cadenza-like solo. The melody returns, the piano adding an F sharp at the last moment to end the movement in a provisional-sounding major key.

The movement that follows is dominated by *pizzicato* from the cello; a quicksilver scherzo and a plaintive *flautendo* passage add to the variety of this strange 'Sérénade'. It leads without interruption into the 'Finale', whose bustling theme alternates with passages of feather-light string-crossing and a melody whose marking, *con morbidezza*, lays bare the melancholy beneath the music's ironic surface. Shortly before the end the sonata's opening is briefly recalled, returning this elusive piece to its starting-point with characteristic elegance.

Like Debussy's sonata, the Cello Sonata that **Benjamin Godard** composed in 1887 begins with a melody whose home key of D minor is strongly inflected by consistently flattened sevenths, lending the music a nostalgic, almost folk-like character. This is where the similarities end, however: while Debussy's music is compressed, Godard's is expansive; and while the enigmatic, fractured construction of Debussy's sonata looks forward to the 20th Century, the traditional shape of Godard's recalls Mendelssohn and Schumann. But absence of innovation by no means implies lack of distinction: Godard's Cello Sonata shows a sympathy for stringed instruments nurtured during a childhood career as a violinist precocious enough to be compared to Mozart, and a lyrical gift that saw Godard complete five operas and numerous songs before his death from consumption at just 45.

La vivandière, an opera about the Revolution which Godard was completing when he died, was hugely successful at its Opéra-Comique première a few weeks later, thanks to its appealing incorporation of folksongs and military music. The Cello Sonata displays many of the qualities that made the opera so popular: the first movement features sudden changes of mood, chromatic transitions full of drama, and a 'quasi récitative' for unaccompanied cello; the finale follows music redolent of the battlefield with a passionate melody of the sort that a tenor hero might sing. Godard's music was largely neglected during the 20th Century, its idiom out of kilter with the acerbic style of Stravinsky and his followers, but recent recordings and performances such as tonight's have brought its old-fashioned virtues to the attention of new listeners. © Michael Downes 2025
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