

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 8 November 2021 1.00pm

Aleksey Semenenko violin

Artem Belogurov piano



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

André Previn (1929-2019)

Sonata No. 2 for violin and piano (2011)

I. Joyous • II. Desolate - Fast, like shadows - Subito molto meno mosso • III. Brilliant, quasi cadenza

Tony Schemmer (b.1946)

Sandor's Ballad from *Sonata for violin and piano* (1981)

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

2 Pieces for violin and piano (1926)

Nocturne • Ukulele Serenade

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Porgy and Bess Suite (1947) *transcribed by Jascha Heifetz*

My Man's Gone Now • Tempo di blues • Bess, you is my woman now • Summertime • A woman is a sometime thing • It Ain't Necessarily So

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America's self-built image as 'a city upon a hill', champion of virtue and liberty, has been severely shaken in recent years. Yet the nation's deep-rooted resilience suggests that its ideals will survive its present divisions and recriminations. Those dynamic qualities of American optimism, adaptability and inventiveness that shaped the nation have also brought distinctive flavours to its music, as have the countless musicians born overseas or to first-generation migrants who found safe haven in America. Each of the works in this evening's programme has roots in the old and new worlds, in cultural traditions and forms of musical expression brought to America from Europe and in fresh traditions created on American soil. Together they connect with the openness, the blend of popular and 'serious' styles, and the big-hearted spirit that makes American music American.

The present richness of London's musical life owes a debt to **André Previn**. He broke with conservative conventions to connect directly with the millions who tuned in to *André Previn's Music Night*, a fixture of British television throughout the 1970s, and introduced classical music to many for the first time – or for the first time that mattered. Born in Berlin, the son of a music-loving lawyer of Russian-Jewish ancestry, Andreas Ludwig Priwin's remarkable fluency as a pianist was already far advanced by the time he and his family escaped Nazi Germany. The Priwins left home in 1938 for Paris before finally settling in California. While at school in Beverly Hills, young André began working for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's music department; he subsequently won four Academy Awards for his soundtrack arrangements for musical films, *My Fair Lady* and *Porgy and Bess* among them, and also made his name as a jazz pianist.

Previn's credentials as a classical musician grew from his formative studies in composition with Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Ernst Toch and others and lessons from the veteran French conductor, Pierre Monteux. His output as a composer, in addition to two operas and concertos for violin, guitar, piano, harp and cello, includes a substantial body of chamber music. Sonata No. 2 for violin and piano, in fact preceded by an unpublished third violin sonata apparently rejected by Previn, was written for and first performed in 2013 by the composer's ex-wife and close friend Anne-Sophie Mutter. The work's eclectic musical language, tailored to suit the expression of the contrasting moods of its three movements, draws its diverse accents and influences from a striking variety of sources. The first movement, *Joyous*, contains echoes of Brahms, the Romantic lyricism of Chausson and the rhythmic precision of Poulenc. Previn's slow movement, despite its eerie opening and arresting chordal outbursts, proves to be more wistful than 'desolate'; indeed, its meandering piano interludes and expansive violin melodies, often played with mute and without vibrato, are far from emotionally barren. The finale, *Brilliant, quasi cadenza*, tempers its satirical take on the narcissism of solo display with melodies of irresistible charm and elegance, often redolent of Prokofiev.

Tony Schemmer makes no secret of his music's debt to others. The Boston-based composer, a native of New York City, studied composition

and music theory at Yale College and jazz theory at Boston's Berklee School of Music. 'Think of my music as a cocktail,' he notes. 'Here is the recipe: three parts Richard Strauss; two parts Prokofiev (if running low on the Prokofiev, substitute Bartók); one part Oscar Peterson; add a dash of Victor Borge. Shake until frothy.' His jazz-infused Sonata for violin and piano, originally conceived in 1981 with oboe as the main protagonist, was recast and first performed in 2011 by Emil Altschuler and Artem Belogurov. The work's second movement, *Sandor's Ballad*, takes its lead from the blues to create a lullaby in 5/4 time for the composer's new-born son. Its prevailing swing feel, shifts from major to minor, melodic slides and bell-like piano chords intensify the music's tender nature.

Aaron Copland's *2 Pieces* for violin and piano dates from 1926 and was first performed that year in Paris by the Polish-born American violinist Samuel Dushkin with the composer at the keyboard. Copland had recently studied with Nadia Boulanger in the French capital, one of many young Americans drawn to the city by its artistic avant-garde and low cost of living. The two pieces, written for an all-American programme devised by Boulanger, open with a slow *Nocturne*, the harmonies and feeling of which reflect Copland's ongoing study of blues music. *Ukulele Serenade* projects a brighter, breezier jazz-inspired style, tinged with quarter tones, crafty dissonances and pizzicato passages that suggest the sound of the ukulele.

Making music, more often for pleasure than profit, was part of life for the extended families of Copland and **Gershwin** long before their parents emigrated from Russia to the United States. Growing up in New York's Lower East Side, young George Gershwin and his siblings moved home as often as their father started a new business, which his older brother Ira reckoned to be 28 times between the late 1890s and 1916. Music entered the household in the early 1910s when the family acquired an upright piano, intended for Ira but commandeered by the precociously talented George. The boy revealed a natural gift for writing melodies, which led to his first job as a Tin Pan Alley 'song-plugger' and stellar career as composer of Broadway musicals. A visit to Paris in the summer of 1928, during which he met Ravel, Poulenc, Prokofiev and Berg, broadened Gershwin's musical outlook and set the ground for a series of ambitious compositions, the opera *Porgy and Bess* chief among them.

Although *Porgy and Bess* received mixed reviews following its 1935 Broadway première, songs such as the lullaby 'Summertime', Sportin' Life's secular sermon 'It ain't necessarily so' and the heart-breaking 'My man's gone now' became instant hits. The Russian-born violinist Jascha Heifetz was a great admirer of Gershwin's music and invited him to write a concert work. While Gershwin's early death confounded the commission, Heifetz was determined to add the composer to his instrument's solo repertoire and did so to mark the 10th anniversary of his passing with a virtuosic transcription of half a dozen numbers from *Porgy and Bess* for violin and piano.

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