

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 9 June 2024  
7.30pm

James Ehnes violin  
Marc-André Hamelin piano

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

The Fount of Arethusa from *Myths* Op. 30 (1915)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Op. 13 (1875-6)

*I. Allegro molto • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivo •  
IV. Allegro quasi presto*

*Interval*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Violin Sonata No. 9 in A Op. 47 'Kreutzer' (1802-3)

*I. Adagio sostenuto - Presto • II. Andante con variazioni •  
III. Finale. Presto*



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In the years immediately before the First World War, **Karol Szymanowski** embarked on a series of travels outside his native Poland. They were to prove highly significant to him, both personally and artistically. At that time Polish music remained heavily constrained by the Austro-Germanic tradition. Although Szymanowski had claimed to be pioneering a musical equivalent of the breakaway 'Young Poland' movement that had transformed the visual arts, his compositions had remained in thrall to Wagner, Richard Strauss and Max Reger.

But visits to the Mediterranean region widened his horizons in many ways. He became fascinated by the ancient civilisations of the Romans, Greeks and Persians. He studied aspects of Islamic culture. And in North Africa he found it possible to be more open about his homosexuality, a significant matter for a composer who regarded eroticism and artistic creativity to be intrinsically linked. The final liberation came with his discovery of the then-avant-garde music of Stravinsky.

Back in Poland, Szymanowski composed *Myths* in the first half of 1915. They were written both for and with the violinist Paweł Kochański (1887-1934). Together, Szymanowski and Kochański created 'a new style, a new form of expression in violin playing' – or so the composer claimed in a letter to the violinist's wife, who was the dedicatee of *Myths*. In the first of them, *The Fount of Arethusa*, rippling piano writing and the soaring violin line portray the waters of the spring into which the nymph Arethusa was turned by the god Artemis. As the music progresses the instruments prove increasingly capable of adopting each others' timbres.

With his First Violin Sonata, **Gabriel Fauré** made an auspicious debut as a composer of chamber music. After its 1877 première, the work was praised by Fauré's teacher and mentor Camille Saint-Saëns: 'Above it all floats something magical', he declared in a review for the *Journal de musique*. And Fauré's own pupil, the composer Florent Schmitt, hailed the first performance as 'a red-letter day for the history of chamber music'.

Publishers were less enthusiastic. Their caution stemmed from the very qualities that had delighted the composer's peers – the Sonata set out on a new path, something that sounded more quintessentially French than the prevailing Germanic musical style. Eventually Fauré had to settle for a one-off fee, with the publisher receiving all the performance royalties. It was a bad deal for him and a good one for them, since the work has remained one of the composer's most frequently played pieces.

The new French accent that Fauré's music had acquired came via a combination of not particularly French influences. Saint-Saëns had introduced him to the chromatically exploratory compositions of Wagner and

Liszt as well as the rhapsodic fantasy of Schumann. To this Fauré added a fondness for music based on the modal scales found in early church music. Blended together, these elements produced a personal language capable of drifting in and out of a dreamlike state, and not rooted to firm bass lines or tonic-dominant harmony. The gateway to Impressionism had been opened. Witness the sonata-rondo finale, in which the avoidance of an affirmative major key until the very end sets the seal on a work that confides secrets rather than making public statements.

The violinist for whom **Beethoven** wrote his ninth Violin Sonata, and with whom he gave the first performance, lived in London, died at home in Peckham and is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery. But that violinist is not Rodolphe Kreutzer, the eventual recipient of the dedication. It is George Bridgetower.

Bridgetower (1778-1860) was the son of a Black man (probably West Indian by birth, but proud of his African heritage) who served at the court of the Esterházy family, Haydn's long-term patrons. His mother was a German woman, also likely to have been in service to the nobility. George came to London in early childhood and was performing as a violin soloist by the time he was ten. He met Beethoven in 1802 on a European tour, the two musicians establishing an immediate warm friendship.

Beethoven quickly set to work on a new sonata for them to play together. Since Bridgetower's time in Vienna was limited, Beethoven grafted on a finale he had once intended for an earlier sonata (Op. 30 No. 1). The original dedication was to Bridgetower, who performed the Sonata with Beethoven on 24 May 1803; the violinist had to read some of his part over the pianist's shoulder, because the composer had not had time to write it out on a separate sheet. Yet a short while afterwards the friends became enemies after a drunken quarrel: apparently Bridgetower made an insulting remark about a woman Beethoven venerated. For publication Beethoven re-dedicated the piece to Rodolphe Kreutzer, Paris's premier violinist. There is no record of Kreutzer ever having played it.

It seems likely that the decision to repurpose the already-composed finale was made early on, since the newly-written movements prepare the way for it most effectively. The bulk of the first movement is fiercely in A minor (Beethoven gave the Sonata no overall key designation), though the slow introduction begins in the major. The *Adagio* weaves a series of variations on a theme in F major, which is a key centre visited in the development section of the tarantella *Finale*. The whole is a big-boned work lasting over 40 minutes in performance – Beethoven himself compared it to a concerto.

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