

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 15 March 2022 7.30pm

**Alban Gerhardt** cello

**Steven Osborne** piano

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**Dmitry Shostakovich** (1906-1975)

Cello Sonata in D minor Op. 40 (1934)

*I. Allegro non troppo - Largo • II. Allegro • III. Largo • IV. Allegro*

**Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 65 (1960-1)

*I. Dialogo. Allegro • II. Scherzo-Pizzicato. Allegretto •  
III. Elegia. Lento • IV. Marcia. Energico • V. Moto perpetuo. Presto*

Interval

**Henri Dutilleux** (1916-2013)

3 Strophes sur le nom de Sacher (1976-82)

*I. Un poco indeciso • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Vivace*

**Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor Op. 38 (1862-5)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Allegretto quasi menuetto • III. Allegro*

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A bittersweet, sinuous melody unspools over a gently rocking piano accompaniment, before climbing upwards and erupting into a howl of protest, melting into a yearning love song, and collapsing into a shellshocked lament. The musical language of **Shostakovich's** Cello Sonata is never stable, yet its musical techniques (there's fugue, sonata form, and even a smattering of jazz harmony) somehow combine to form a style that is utterly recognisable.

Later in 1934, the year of the sonata's composition, Dmitry Shostakovich would be targeted by Stalin's regime for the risqué subject matter and bold musical language of his opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Although the sonata predates the opera, it's difficult not to feel a sense of foreboding in the demonic waltz of the second movement and the yawning desolation of the third. But the final movement is filled with humour, suspense and drama, never quite going where you expect it to. The music contains endless surprises – perhaps a key to the enduring popularity of the piece, which was first recorded by the cellist Daniil Shafran, and later (in a slightly revised version now accepted as the standard one), by his contemporary, Mstislav Rostropovich.

In 1960, Rostropovich and Shostakovich travelled to London's Royal Festival Hall, where the Soviet cellist gave the British première of Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto. Shostakovich was in the audience that night, and sitting next to him was the Suffolk-born British composer, **Benjamin Britten**, who allegedly nudged Shostakovich in the ribs every time Rostropovich did something to delight him (apparently his enthusiasm was so great, the Soviet composer later complained that he had bruises!)

It's no surprise, then, that the British composer wrote a sonata for Rostropovich, creating a piece that puts the soloist through their paces, with harmonics, glissandi, four-string chords and intricate *pizzicati* (plucked notes). Despite the immense stature of both musicians, it's endearing to note that at the work's first play-through in 1961, Britten and Rostropovich were so nervous that, according to the cellist, they needed 'four or five very large whiskies' to calm their nerves. ('We played like pigs,' he added, 'but we were so happy.')

Shostakovich's influence on Britten is evident from the outset: from the splintered waltz of the first movement and the serenade-gone-wrong of the second (those buzzing pizzicato figures!); to the penultimate-movement march that refuses to step in time. The final movement even contains the famous 'DSCH' theme – a four-note, stepwise-descending musical 'signature' used by Dmitry Shostakovich in his own works, and which Britten quotes in tribute to his Soviet colleague. Britten would later make a reciprocal visit to Moscow, conducting the 1964 première of his Cello Symphony. Then, as in 1960, Shostakovich was in the

audience. Britten's sonata – by turns taut, ironic and passionate – is a testament to the start of several beautiful friendships.

The themes of musical code-words, friendship, and, indeed, Mstislav Rostropovich continue with *3 Strophes sur le nom de Sacher* by **Henri Dutilleux**. Paul Sacher was a conductor and advocate for contemporary music. In honour of Sacher's 70th birthday, Rostropovich commissioned 12 composers including Dutilleux to each write a short piece using the musical moniker of the conductor's name as inspiration. Constructed using a combination of French and German notation, the six letters form the musical DNA of the work (S-A-C-H-E-R translates to E flat-A-C-B-E-D in British notation).

In order to ensure maximum open-string resonance, the cellist retunes the instrument's bottom two strings, before embarking on a dizzying display of ricochet bowing, double-stopping and harmonics. Fans of the composer Béla Bartók should listen out for a quote from his *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* at the end of the first movement; a work whose première Sacher conducted in 1937.

'A landscape torn by mists and clouds, in which I can see the ruins of old churches...' With its gothic imagery and brooding skies, Edvard Grieg's appraisal of **Johannes Brahms's** first cello sonata extols its Romantic-era credentials. Composed in the 1860s, the work emerged at a time when artists and composers alike were exploring new realms of heightened emotional expression – often taking in dark, ominous landscapes. Yet for all the sonata's explosive energy and songlike lyricism, there are Classical roots at the heart of this work for cello.

Initially conceived in 1862 as a three-part work, beginning with that mournful, aria-like theme and ending with the delicate, mysterious trio, Brahms added the final movement three years later in 1865. Its mighty fugue was inspired by the 16th and 17th *Contrapunctus* from Bach's keyboard masterpiece *Art of Fugue*. The German composer's influence is audible in the austere grandeur of the movement's opening bars, although the volatile Romantic temperament is never far away.

It is dedicated to – and was composed for – Josef Gänsbacher, a keen amateur cellist who, at the work's première, reputedly complained that Brahms was playing the piano so loudly that he couldn't hear himself. ('Lucky you,' was the composer's surly response.) We'll never know whether Josef's complaint was reasonable – but the two instruments interweave and complement one another as near-equals, reflecting Brahms's instruction that the piano 'should be a partner... but it should under no circumstances assume a purely accompanying role.'

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