

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 25 March 2022 7.30pm

Joshua Bell violin

Shai Wosner piano



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

**Franz Schubert** (1797-1828)

Violin Sonata (Sonatina) in D D384 (1816)

*I. Allegro molto • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivace*

**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

Violin Sonata No. 7 in C minor Op. 30 No. 2 (1801-2)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio cantabile •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegro*

Interval

**Ernest Bloch** (1880-1959)

Baal Shem (1923)

*I. Vidui • II. Nigun • III. Simchas Torah*

**Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G (1923-7)

*I. Allegretto • II. Blues. Moderato • III. Perpetuum mobile. Allegro*

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Anyone who has visited **Schubert's** birthplace will know that the house is far from grand. Born next to the kitchen fire, Schubert had a modest childhood. And yet there must have been a prevailing sense of what the Viennese call *Gemütlichkeit* (broadly speaking, 'warmth and good cheer') within the family fold. Returning home from his boarding school in the centre of town, the young composer often played the viola in the family string quartet, with his father taking the cello part and his brothers Ignaz and Ferdinand performing on the violin.

Schubert was closest to Ferdinand, a relatively skilled violinist, given the quality of the works written for him. They include a triptych of 'sonatinas' - a publisher's title from 1836, rather than the composer's original designation of 'sonatas for piano, with violin accompaniment'. All three were created during the bumper year of 1816, which also saw the composition of 110 Lieder, two symphonies and a Mass, as well as various other ambitious works. We hear the first of the three sonatinas, in D major D384, the only one to have three rather than four movements.

It opens with a searching unison theme that is passed freely between the two instrumentalists, with a delightful imitative 'echo' and a spry second subject. Throughout, there is an unmistakably Mozartian vein to the music, which continues in the *Andante*, though its juxtaposition of major and minor is pure Schubert. More playful is the *Finale*, as the harmonic palette moves further from its model, revealing both the wit and wisdom of the 19-year-old composer.

A couple of miles north of Schubert's birthplace is the village of Heiligenstadt. It was here that **Beethoven** was sent by his doctor in the spring of 1802, in the hope of regaining strength and resting his failing hearing. At first, the vernal sunshine seemed to work and Beethoven composed with alacrity, but it did not quell more profound, existential concerns, which resulted in the writing of the *Heiligenstadt Testament* that autumn.

A hint of the mood of that extraordinary confession is to be found in one of the first compositions penned at Beethoven's retreat: the second of his three Op. 30 sonatas for violin and piano. It is couched in C minor, a highly personal choice of key, though perhaps evoking fate rather less here than it does in other works from Beethoven's output. Nonetheless, there is real ambition, witnessed in the wide tonal range of the first of the sonata's four movements, with a development in which Beethoven charts nine different keys, before resuming the turning decorations of its first subject and the marching rhythms of the second.

The slow movement, in A flat major - Beethoven's favoured companion to C minor - is an aching hymn-cum-aria, where chromatic tinges to the harmonies and a rapt sense of introspection mark a significant change from the composer's Classical predecessors. As if to emphasise the gap, the ensuing *Scherzo* hops along in *galant* style, in turn preparing for a *Finale* which seeks to

bind the whole together. Resuming the first two movements' enthusiasm for harmonic surprises and tonal excursions, this discursive *Allegro* eventually brings the two players together in a whirling presto.

Born in Geneva in 1880, where he undertook early studies on the violin and in composition, **Ernest Bloch** eventually settled with his wife and three children in New York in 1916. By that time, he was already well-established in Europe, not least due to the successful première of his opera *Macbeth* in Paris in 1910, though audiences on the other side of the Atlantic responded better to music that celebrated Bloch's Jewish heritage, including his *3 Jewish Poems* (1913) and *Schelomo* (1915-6). Authentic material may be rare in these and later compositions, though Bloch frequently evokes rhetorical facets of the Hebrew language, as well as various liturgical tropes.

*Baal Shem*, from 1923, was the Western European Jewish composer's response to a Hassidic Sabbath service he had attended on the Lower East Side in 1918. Fittingly, the first of its three movements is a wordless prayer of contrition, as recited on a deathbed. Indeed, Bloch dedicated the work to his recently departed mother. As in the central improvisation, where the music suggests a search for transcendence, Bloch draws on Eastern Ashkenazi methods and modes. The finale, *Simchas Torah*, recalls the festivities at the end of Sukkot each autumn, when the scrolls of the Torah are carried through the synagogue in a joyous procession of dancing and singing.

**Ravel's** Violin Sonata No. 2 in G dates from the same period, when the Basque-born composer was likewise mourning the loss of his mother. It is a work conceived as a self-imposed challenge, arising from Ravel's hunch that there was something incompatible about the violin and the piano. Perhaps that is why his *Allegretto* begins in a restive fashion, with the pianist niggling at motifs, before the violin enters with a more generous gesture.

The second movement immediately suggests the popular music of the 1920s. When Gershwin met Ravel in New York in 1928, the former Tin Pan Alley plugger asked if he could study with the Frenchman. 'Why would you want to be a second-rate Ravel', he responded, 'when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?' Larky though the response was, it suggested real affection for jazz and the blues, as revealed in Ravel's two piano concertos and the middle movement of this sonata (completed the previous year). The music even seems to pay homage to 'Fascinatin' Rhythm' from Gershwin's 1926 *Lady, Be Good*. And the allusion recurs in the finale, initially conceived as a mirror to the somewhat thwarted lyricism of the *Allegretto*, but becoming a more extrovert showdown for both players.

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