

Sunday 14th February 2021 at 7.30pm

Live from The Coach House

Sonata for Cello and Piano in E minor op.38

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

1. *Allegro non troppo*
2. *Allegretto quasi Menuetto*
3. *Allegro*

Alice Neary *cello*, Robin Green *piano*

It was Robert Schumann who first declared his pupil, Johannes Brahms, to be 'Beethoven's true successor'. The young Brahms was greatly influenced by his analysis of earlier compositions, particularly those of Beethoven and Bach, and his own romantic style developed within baroque and classical frameworks. And Brahms certainly looked backwards in his first cello sonata in E minor, to forms of yesteryear - in the elegant second movement minuet and in the last movement, with its fugue subject quoting from Bach's *Art of Fugue (Contrapunctus 13)*.

It is interesting that Brahms chose to write for the cello in this the first of his seven duo sonatas (two cello, three violin, two clarinet/viola). Perhaps this was to be expected – he was an accomplished cellist in his youth, so would have felt confident in writing for the instrument. It also seems that the dark, elegiac sound of the cello resonated perfectly with his musical imagination, and he makes the most of those qualities right from the start of the sonata. The piano, as of course in all the duo sonatas, plays a central role with wonderful dialogue between the instruments, the cello often providing a bass line for the piano's melodies, and it is indeed in some of the countersubjects that the most beautiful music can be found.

Brahms composed the first two movements of the E minor sonata in 1862. From the mysterious, slightly hesitant opening, the first movement (in sonata form) builds up to a powerful second theme; but even at this climactic moment the sense of yearning and longing is not left behind completely. It is the moment when he turns to the major key for the codetta (at the end of the exposition) that we can all too briefly feel at peace, the rocking accompaniment providing a reassuring predictability. The power of the second subject is used to even greater effect in the development before we return to the opening material, the piano now allowed a beautiful counterpoint accompaniment. Brahms saves the best till last in this lengthy first movement, extending the peaceful major music into one of the most beautiful codas I know, all the more deserved after the turmoil we have suffered before.

From this full-blown romanticism, the second movement, *Allegretto quasi Menuetto*, transports us back in time to a world of powdered wigs, more Mozart than Beethoven. However Mozart certainly would not have written music anything like that of the trio - a romantic song, doubling cello and piano - whose rippling accompaniment seems more akin to Schumann.

In 1862, Brahms was also working on the String Quintet in F minor (which developed into the piano quintet) and his first symphony. These projects and some professional disappointments (he was not offered his hoped-for position of conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic), seem to have distracted him from the cello sonata, and it wasn't until 1865 that he revisited the work, completing it with a heroic fugue in sonata form. As already mentioned, the fugue subject shows striking similarities to Bach's *Art of Fugue*, but the structure of the movement surely owes more to his studies of Beethoven, and specifically the last cello sonata of Beethoven –

another monumental fugue. The striking octave leap that begins the fugal theme is used to dramatic effect, heralding each fugal entry with great intensity. The following triplets give the music a motoric power which builds with relentless energy until Brahms offers us a beautiful digression, a second theme, marked *tranquillo*, giving respite from that persistent vigour. But the energetic motor is never far away, and eventually it becomes unstoppable, bringing the work to a dramatic conclusion.

© Alice Neary

Interval - Laura Tunbridge in conversation with David Adams

Violin Sonata in A major op.47, Kreutzer

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

1. *Adagio sostenuto – Presto*
2. *Andante con variazioni*
3. *Presto*

David Adams violin, Robin Green piano

Beethoven's Violin Sonata in A major op.47 was written in Vienna in 1803. It was the result of a special, if brief, friendship between the composer and the virtuoso violinist George Bridgetower. Bridgetower's story is of course much less familiar than Beethoven's, but is not without interest! The son of Friedrich Bridgetower from the West Indies (but who sometimes claimed to be an African prince) and Maria Anna Ursula Schmidt from Germany, Friedrich was personal page to Prince Esterhazy, Joseph Haydn's employer. George spent his early years at Esterhazy before making a very successful debut in Paris at the age of nine. His father immediately took him over to England, where they were also a great success, making their home in London. However Friedrich turned out to be a bit of a rascal and was exiled from England when George was 11, the Prince of Wales becoming George's official guardian. Haydn came to London soon afterwards and, by the time Bridgetower was given permission to visit his mother in Dresden in 1803, he was a very successful, established and well connected musician. As well as visiting his mother, he also gave concerts in Dresden which were greeted with great enthusiasm and he was consequently offered an opportunity to visit Vienna as well. While in Vienna he met Beethoven, and by all accounts they got on like a house on fire.

The sonata was obviously inspired by Bridgetower's virtuosity, and Beethoven's original dedication, in keeping with the cheeky and close to edge humour with which he often teased his closest friends, reads "Sonata mulattica composta per il mulatto Brischdauer [Bridgetower], gran pazzo e compositore mulattico" (Mulatto Sonata composed for the mulatto Brischdauer, great madman and mulatto composer). Musically it is composed on an altogether different scale from any of Beethoven's other violin sonatas, with the first movement alone almost as long as the whole of the previous sonata. The dialogue between the two instruments is pretty much equal, and Beethoven's eventual dedication for its publication acknowledges this very clearly - "Sonata for piano and violin obbligato written in a concertante style, similar to a concerto".

Sadly Beethoven and Bridgetower's friendship was so short-lived and ended so badly that his main source of inspiration for this masterpiece was left out of this final dedication. He went on to dedicate the piece to the violinist Rudolphe Kreutzer, probably the most famous violinist of the time. He never performed the work.

The first performance of this amazing sonata was in Vienna on May 24th 1803 at a benefit concert for Bridgetower. Beethoven generously gave his services and the première of the sonata for this concert, clearly showing respect and enthusiasm for his new friend's talents. Unfortunately he didn't quite get the music ready in time; the original concert date was May 22nd so it had already been put back two days and Beethoven had to wake up his copyist, Ferdinand Ries, at 4.30am on the day of the concert to write out the violin part. He only managed the first movement as the concert was at 8 in the morning! Bridgetower had to read the 2nd movement over Beethoven's shoulder, but this did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of Beethoven, who at one stage jumped up to exclaim "Once more, my dear fellow" after Bridgetower had copied one of Beethoven's piano cadenzas on the violin. The audience also loved it, demanding an encore of the second movement.

Only a month or so later the two friends fell out, apparently having had an argument in a bar over Bridgetower's ungentlemanly treatment of a waitress. It seems a shame that a friendship with such a wonderful work of art at its heart should have fallen apart over something so unbecoming. Or maybe it's encouraging to us mortals that these great artists should also have had their human imperfections!

© David Adams

ALICE NEARY *cello*



Alice enjoys a varied performing career as a chamber musician and as Principal Cellist of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Familiar to listeners of Radio 3, festival performances include BBC Proms chamber series, Malboro (USA), Bath International, Santa Fe (USA) and Lofoten. Her discography includes the Mendelssohn cello sonatas and concertos by Howells, Patterson and Tovey.

Alice was a member of the Gould Piano Trio from 2001-2018 - career highlights included the complete piano trios of Beethoven, Schubert and Dvořák at the Wigmore Hall, the commissioning of new works from Sir James MacMillan and Mark Simpson, regular tours of USA and over 25 CD releases. She collaborates with pianists Viv McLean, Benjamin Frith and Daniel Tong and has appeared as guest cellist with the Nash Ensemble, Ensemble 360 and the Endellion, Elias and Heath quartets. Regular visits to Wye Valley Festival and International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove provide ongoing inspiration.

Alice studied with Ralph Kirshbaum at the RNCM and, as a Fulbright Scholar, with Timothy Eddy at Stonybrook, USA. Alice teaches at Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, where she was awarded a Fellowship in 2015. She and her husband, David Adams founded the Penarth Chamber Music Festival in 2014. Alice plays a cello by Alessandro Gagliano of 1710.

DAVID ADAMS *violin*



David is leader of the Orchestra of Welsh National Opera and also the violinist of the London Bridge Trio. Alongside these commitments he teaches at the RWCMD and is co-Artistic Director of the Penarth Chamber Music Festival with his wife, cellist Alice Neary. In his role at WNO David has performed several concertos with the orchestra and enjoys directing concerts from the violin. He has appeared as guest leader with most of the orchestras in the UK.

As a chamber musician David is equally at home on violin and viola and makes regular guest appearances, recordings and broadcasts with the Nash Ensemble, Endellion String Quartet, Gould Piano Trio and Hebrides Ensemble. He has recorded the complete Brahms Piano Quartets with the Gould Piano Trio and the Beethoven String Quintets with the Endellion String Quartet. He regularly attends the International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove.

David belongs to a musical family - his father, John Adams, was Principal Viola of the Halle Orchestra. After being encouraged and guided by his father, his principal teachers included Daniel Phillips, Zvi Zeitlin, Malcolm Layfield and Misha Amory (viola).

ROBIN GREEN *piano*

"A light touch and an engaging tone" (The Strad magazine),



Robin Green enjoys a busy career as a soloist, chamber musician and conductor. Robin's CD, *Dialog mit Mozart* released on the Gramola label, was *Editor's Choice* in the Strad Magazine. His recording, *Games Chorales and Fantasie*, released on the Claves label was reviewed by Gramophone: "Green...an intelligent and sensitive musician with a genuine flair for imaginative programming."

Robin regularly performs in festivals in the UK and abroad. Recent highlights include the Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the Interlaken Classics Festival, Davos Young Artists Festival, the International Musicians Seminar 'Open Chamber Music' Festival at Prussia Cove, the Pharos Trust, Penarth Chamber Music Festival and the Festival de Radio France et Montpellier.

Chamber music forms a central part of Robin's life as a musician. Former recipient of the Leverhulme Chamber music fellowship at the Royal College of Music, Robin was the first prize winner of the Royal Overseas League Chamber Music Competition, the Concours Nicati in Switzerland and runner up prize winner at the International Schubert duo competition. He is currently a member of the Odysseus Piano Trio and has collaborated with Gordan Nikolitch, Valeryi Sokolov, Bogdan Bozovic, Christoph Richter, Christian Elliott, Catherine Manson and Alice Neary amongst others.

Robin is a Piano Professor at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. He lives in Cardiff with his wife and two children.

LAURA TUNBRIDGE



Laura Tunbridge is a Professor of Music at the University of Oxford. She writes mostly about chamber music and song, and regularly speaks on BBC Radio 3 and 4. Her books include *Schumann's Late Style*, *The Song Cycle*, and *Singing in the Age of Anxiety*, as well as *Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces*, which was awarded Best Composer Biography of 2020 by Presto Classical.

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