

ENSEMBLE 360

Friday 10 September
1.00pm & 7.00pm
Upper Chapel, Sheffield

CLAUDIA AJMONE-MARSAN violin
TIM HORTON piano

BARTÓK Violin Rhapsody No.1
BACH Violin Sonata in G BWV 1021
BEETHOVEN Violin Sonata in G Op.30 No.3
JANÁČEK Violin Sonata

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945)

Violin Rhapsody No.1

Lassú. Moderato / Friss. Allegretto moderato

In 1928, Bartók wrote two Rhapsodies for violin and piano (later orchestrated) and dedicated each of them to violinist friends: the first to Joseph Szigeti and the second to Zoltán Szekély. The first performance of the Rhapsody No.1 was given in London at the BBC Arts Theatre Club on 4 March 1929, played by Szekély with Bartók himself at the piano. It's fascinating to read some of the critical reaction from the time. Ferruccio Bonavia asked in Musical Times: 'Is there nothing to be said for the poor man who seeks to express a personal mood or impression without the help of a folk-tune?' Bartók's answer to that would be clear: for him, the use of folk material as an inspiration almost amounted to an ethical duty, and it was certainly the well from which he drew for much of his finest music, even though it was reimagined through his creative imagination. There are six folk melodies in the Rhapsody No.1, five from Romania and one from Hungary, and it is cast in two movements. These were not chosen at whim: all of the themes chosen were originally played on the violin and as source material Bartók drew on his own field recordings as well as written transcriptions. The overall form of the Rhapsody (a slow movement followed by a faster one) also reflects its roots in folk music: the structure mirrors the verbunkos, a type of Hungarian dance which often uses syncopated or off-beat accompaniments which Bartók also draws on to drive his melodic ideas.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Violin Sonata in G, BWV 1021

Adagio / Vivace / Largo / Presto

Bach's G major sonata for violin with continuo survives in a manuscript which is mostly in the hand

of his second wife, Anna Magdalena, but which also includes unusually detailed figured bass (indicating the harmonies to be added by the continuo player) almost certainly in Bach's own handwriting. It is likely that this was how Bach originally conceived the work – but two other pieces (a trio sonata and another violin sonata) make use of exactly the same bass line. It's uncertain who composed these pieces, though it may have been one of Bach's sons or another pupil. Questions also remain about who composed the bass line on which all three pieces are based. Was it Bach himself, or did he borrow it as the basis of the sonata?

The work opens with a leisurely Adagio, notable for the effortless lyricism with which the melody unfolds over a walking bass. The Vivace that follows is a quick triple-time movement, in which the bass line often answers phrases first heard in the violin part. The Largo is in E minor (it is the only movement not in the home key), its mood one of expressive melancholy, the violin line taking lyrical flight over a steady and implacable bass. The finale begins in a rather fugue-like style, the theme heard first in the bass before being imitated by the violin. This vigorous movement brings the sonata to an exhilarating conclusion.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Sonata for Violin and Piano in G, Op.30 No.3

Allegro assai / Tempo di Minuetto, ma molto moderato e grazioso / Allegro vivace

Beethoven's three Sonatas for Violin and Piano Op.30 were composed at Heiligenstadt in the spring of 1802 and dedicated to Tsar Alexander I, a man widely admired in Vienna following his accession to the Russian throne. (He was a great deal less well regarded by some of his subjects and massacred some 25,000 rebels in the Caucasus). When Alexander visited Vienna, Beethoven was keen to cultivate the Tsar, and asked permission to dedicate

the three Op.30 sonatas to him. He received a diamond ring as a sign of the Tsar's appreciation, but the promised fee was only paid 12 years later (with a handsome bonus) when the Tsar was back in the city for the Congress of Vienna. Professionally, 1802 was a successful year for Beethoven, with publishers queuing up to issue his works, but in October, a few months after completing these sonatas, Beethoven faced up to the reality of his hearing loss. He wrote the Heiligenstadt Testament, an unsent letter explaining his predicament to his brothers – one of the most moving documents relating to the life of any composer.

This Sonata is the most exuberant of the set and its outer movements are notable for their rhythmic drive. In the first movement, Beethoven makes the most of the dramatic contrasts between the bustling opening idea, with its upward flourish, and a more lyrical second theme. The Tempo di Minuetto is lissom, flowing and ingenious: the piano introduces the main theme, but the accompaniment on the violin is an inspired counter-melody. The finale is a brilliant moto perpetuo, based primarily on the theme played by the piano at the start which propels the music to an exciting close.

LEOŠ JANÁČEK (1854–1928)

Sonata for Violin and Piano

Con moto / Ballada / Allegretto / Adagio

Janáček started composing the Violin Sonata in about 1914 and its first version was finished by October 1915, at which point he put it to one side. Between 1915 and publication in March 1922, the work was very extensively revised (the first movement was completely recomposed and the original finale was discarded entirely). The premiere was given in Brno on 24 April 1922, at a concert of the Moravian Composers' Club when it was performed by František Kudláček (violin) and Jaroslav Kvapil (piano). It soon travelled further afield and was given at the Salzburg Contemporary Music Festival in August 1923.

According to Janáček himself, the Violin Sonata was the most successful work in his London concert on 6 May 1926, given at the Wigmore Hall and played by Adila Fachiri and Fanny Davies.

Janáček was a passionate lover of all things Russian and part of his inspiration for the sonata came from the advances made by Russian troops at the start of World War I: Janáček later wrote that 'the gleam of sharp steel ... was clanging in my troubled mind' at the time. His biographer Jaroslav Vogel wrote of the 'Russian atmosphere that pervades the work', noting its close motivic connections to the opera *Kát'a Kabanová*. The final result has a compelling structural coherence and tension as well as being highly expressive. As Hans Hollander later wrote, 'in the Violin Sonata, the glowingly emotional, rhapsodical chamber music style of the composer's middle period appears in full flower.'

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ENSEMBLE 360

Ensemble 360 has gained an enviable reputation across the UK not only for the quality and integrity of its playing, but also for its ability to communicate the music to a range of different audiences. Formed in 2005, 11 musicians of international standing came together to take up residency in Sheffield with Music in the Round, establishing a versatile group of five string players, five wind players and a pianist. The musicians believe that concerts should be informal, friendly and relaxed occasions, and perform 'in the round' wherever possible.

Outside Ensemble 360 many of the musicians have highly successful careers, performing with groups including the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, English National Opera, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Camerata Bern, Manchester Camerata and Nash Ensemble.

MUSIC IN THE ROUND

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