

NYS: 23 Feb 2024

Riya Hamie (cello) & Berniya Hamie (piano)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) Sonata for cello and piano (1915)

Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto

Sérénade: Modérément animé

Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux

Given the popularity and influence of his 1893 string quartet, it is surprising that Debussy wrote so very little chamber music. A second quartet and a violin sonata were started around that time but not completed, and then almost no chamber music for 20 or so years. By 1914 things did not look good. A recent diagnosis of colorectal cancer together with depression at the outbreak of war had stopped him composing. But hearing a Septet with trumpet by Saint-Saëns stimulated an ambitious project: six sonatas each for a different combination of instruments. inspired by French baroque composers including Couperin. Tonight's cello sonata was the first to be completed (1915) followed by one for flute, viola & harp (1916) and one for violin & piano (1917); but three others were not finished before his death in March 1918: oboe, horn & harpsichord; clarinet, bassoon, trumpet & piano; and the sixth 'combining the previously used instruments'. The novel combination of oboe, horn & harpsichord subsequently inspired the *Sonata da Caccia* by 20-year-old Couperin fan Thomas Adès.

The cello sonata was written in a few weeks in July 1915 at the Normandy seaside town of Pourville, just west of Dieppe. It is a relatively short work (c. 10m) but, as so often with Debussy, draws a dazzling variety of sounds from the two instruments; it is technically demanding for both players. Structurally the work refers to classical French styles – Couperin was a favourite of Debussy – with just three movements, and without the clear exposition, development, recapitulation of the German tradition. The principal theme is heard as a lyrical, descending line in the cello (*illustrated*).



The mood changes dramatically for the episodically quirky *Sérénade* with lots of pizzicato from the cello. It leads without a break into the *Finale* which combines elements of the two preceding movements. For instance, the next illustrated passage is perhaps a crazy



tumbling version of the opening principal theme, but analysing Debussy is beyond my pay grade! Just enjoy it.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata in F minor Op. 57 'Appassionata' (1804-6)

Allegro assai

Andante con moto

Allegro ma non troppo - Presto

The *Appassionata* sonata is one of many masterpieces that Beethoven wrote in the early 1800s, along with the *Waldstein* sonata, the *Eroica*, 4th, 5th and 6th symphonies, *Fidelio*,

the *Razumovsky* Op 59 Quartets and the *Kreutzer* violin sonata, amongst others. The powerful emotions expressed in the music emanate from a turbulent time for Beethoven: increasing deafness, emotional attachment to Josephine von Brunsvik and disillusion with his erstwhile hero Napoleon.

But, more prosaically, the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* sonatas also reflect the fact that Beethoven in 1803 had a new piano – an Erard with a more powerful sound and an extended upward compass. Grove's Dictionary notes: "the *Appassionata* Sonata is ... a work of the greatest extremes – as witness the fortissimo chord handfuls that shatter the brooding quiet of the very first page. This and other equally violent effects were hardly thinkable on the Walter fortepiano owned by Beethoven before 1803."

Not only dynamic extremes but also a relentless rhythmic vigour drive this movement. Beethoven's early sketches of the first movement were in common time (4/4: 4 crotchets to the bar), rather than the more complex

12/8 (4 dotted crotchets to the bar). Denis Matthews' BBC Music Guide points out the rhythmic implications of this change. First, in the opening



beat's long plus short notes (*illustrated*) Beethoven opts for the crisp, but notationally complex tied semiquaver plus semiquaver rather than the more straightforward but more sluggish crotchet plus quaver. The ensuing spiky rhythm is pervasive and drives the movement. The second rhythmic feature is the recurring, sinister triplet figure in the base (which sits naturally in 12/8) (*illustrated*).



The theme of the second movement's variations could scarcely be melodically simpler: two repeated 4-bar phrases each having only two different pitches. The base line though is rhythmically interesting with a crisp double dot contrasting with more sluggish singles. The variations become rhythmically faster, each doubling in the speed of the accompanying figures before collapsing into the return of the initial theme. The link to the finale is justly famous: two consecutive diminished seventh chords, the first *pianissimo*, the second an octave higher and *fortissimo*, and we are off on stormy seas, fast but *non troppo* so that there are enough revs left for the final *Presto* to work its cathartic magic.

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) 'Bei Männern' Variations for cello & piano WoO 46 (1801)

These seven variations, on Pamina and Papageno's famous duet "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen" (*illustrated*) from Act I



of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, were written a few years before the *Appassionata*. They are dedicated to Count Johann Georg von Browne, a general in the Russian army then living in Vienna. He subscribed to Beethoven's Op 1 piano trios and, must have been highly regarded by the composer who described him as the 'first Maecenas of his Muse'. He and his wife were also the dedicatees of the Op 9 string trios and the Op 10 and the three Op 22 piano sonatas. But according to an employee he was not without failings: "one of the strangest of men, full of excellent talents and beautiful qualities of heart and spirit on the one hand but, on the other, full of weakness and depravity". The variations reflect none of the General's alleged failings, nor indeed the extremes of the future *Appassionata*. But they do bring out many of the beautiful qualities of the cello.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Cello Sonata no.2 in F major Op.99 (1886)

Allegro vivace

Adagio affettuoso

Allegro passionato

Allegro molto

Although Brahms' virtuosity as a pianist is well known, he also played the cello. Indeed the young Brahms was already playing technically taxing cello concertos when his teacher disappeared, taking with him the cello that Brahms' somewhat impoverished parents had bought him. Although that unfortunate incident curtailed his cello playing, his love of the instrument shines through in his compositions: not only two wonderful Sonatas, and the Concerto for cello and violin but also to-die-for cello parts in his extensive chamber music. Brahms the writer of glorious melodies and the cello are natural bedfellows. Cellists do however suffer as a result of Brahms' notorious susceptibility to criticism since he transformed his 2-cello Quintet (inspired by Schubert's) into the well-known Piano Quintet leaving no trace.

His first cello sonata was started in 1862 and the last movement added three years later. It marked his arrival as a mature composer in the classical tradition. Tonight's second sonata was much later, 1886, a year after the 4th Symphony and contemporary with his Second Violin Sonata and Third Piano Trio. The sonata was written on holiday during the summer in Switzerland. Thanks to the spectacular financial success of his *German Requiem* (1868), Brahms had been able to lead a nicely organised life which included composing during the summer in congenial surroundings. Although written 20-odd years after the first cello sonata, tonight's slow movement may be derived from a now-lost movement of the earlier sonata because of various thematic links with its first movement.

Following the first performance of the sonata by Robert Hausmann, opinions were mixed. The critic Eduard Hanslick, a great supporter of Brahms, wrote:

"In the Cello Sonata, passion rules, fiery to the point of vehemence, now defiantly challenging, now painfully lamenting...How boldly the first Allegro theme begins, how stormily the Allegro flows! It is true that the passion subsides into quiet mourning in the Adagio and fades away, reconciled, in the finale. But the beating pulse of the earlier sections still reverberates, and pathos remains the determining psychological characteristic of the whole."

On the other hand the composer Hugo Wolf, a Wagner fan prone to depression, opined: *"What is music, today, what is harmony, what is melody, what is rhythm, what is form, if this tohuwabohu [total chaos] is seriously accepted as music? If, however, Herr Dr Johannes Brahms is set on mystifying his worshippers with this newest work, if he is out to have some fun with their brainless veneration, then that is something else again, and we admire in Herr Brahms the greatest charlatan of this century and of all centuries to come."*

What do you think? I hope the Hamies sway your vote towards Hanslick!

Programme notes by Chris Darwin