



Maxim Vengerov

Monday 16 April 2018 7.30pm, Hall

Brahms Violin Sonata No 1 in G major

Brahms Violin Sonata No 2 in A major

interval 20 minutes

Brahms Scherzo in C minor

(from the 'F-A-E' Sonata)

Brahms Violin Sonata No 3 in D minor

Maxim Vengerov violin

Polina Osetinskaya piano

Part of Barbican Presents 2017–18

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Welcome

Tonight we welcome back to the Barbican Hall one of the greatest violinists of the present day: Maxim Vengerov. He is renowned particularly for his luscious sound, courtesy of his 1727 Stradivari, and that will undoubtedly be put to fine use in his traversal of the Brahms sonatas, for which he is joined by Russian pianist Polina Osetinskaya.

Brahms was all too aware of the shadow of Beethoven, whose legacy simultaneously inspired and daunted him. He waited

until he was in his forties before writing his First Violin Sonata, so mighty was Beethoven's achievement in the genre. He had by this point already got the Violin Concerto under his belt and his ease with the instrument is everywhere apparent.

Maxim and Polina also perform the so-called 'F-A-E' Scherzo, part of a multi-composer sonata that was designed for the legendary violinist and close friend friend of Brahms, Joseph Joachim.

I hope you enjoy the concert.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

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Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

Violin Sonata No 1 in G major, Op 78 (1878–9)

1 Vivace ma non troppo

2 Adagio

3 Allegro molto moderato

‘Have you any idea how hard it is, with such a giant marching behind you?’ So Brahms famously retorted when a friend rashly asked why it was taking him so long to compose his First Symphony. The giant in question was Beethoven, and he cast an equally long shadow over other areas of Brahms’s creative output. The three string quartets that survive (Brahms claimed to have destroyed 20!) show the composer struggling – not always successfully, some have argued – to create a kind of quartet texture and sound that was both personally authentic and at the same time sufficiently unlike that of the great Beethoven quartets.

But when it came to writing for solo violin, another field in which Beethoven had excelled, here Brahms scored nothing but direct hits. True, he waited until 1878, when he was well into his forties, before attempting his own Violin Concerto, and he made much use of his friend, the internationally adored virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim, during the composition process – Joachim made extensive improvements to the solo part, and even suggested a substantial re-composition of one passage, which Brahms humbly accepted. The concerto is conceived on an ambitious Beethovenian scale and is likewise symphonic in conception, but at no stage does it sound either indebted to or inhibited by Beethoven.

Not only was the experience of composing the concerto a personal triumph for Brahms, it seems to have opened up the soul of the violin to him in new ways. In the same year that he composed the Violin Concerto, he began the first of his three violin sonatas – some of the best-loved and most frequently played of his chamber works. Indeed, some listeners who

find the orchestral Brahms difficult to digest find it much easier to love these tender, intimate and more obviously Romantic outpourings of instrumental song. When Brahms’s close friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg heard the Second she remarked that ‘the whole sonata is a caress’. She could have said the same about the First, and about at least parts of the Third.

When he began his own Sonata No 1 Brahms may have had at the back of his mind Beethoven’s last violin sonata, the prevailingly gentle, pastoral Op 96, also in G major, but if anything what he creates in the sonata’s first movement is even more beautiful. Nowhere in the violin sonatas of Beethoven, or for that matter of Mozart, is there anything like the sustained *cantabile* writing for violin that Brahms creates here. At the same time, this is not a sonata for the violin. Brahms reverts to the traditional Classical-era practice of calling all three of these works ‘Sonatas for Piano and Violin’. One of the things that makes the First Sonata’s opening movement so exquisite is the sense of close personal dialogue between the two instruments. Nothing is more fatal to this music than egocentric ‘star’ violin playing. At the beginning it is clearly the violinist that sings, the pianist that accompanies in simple regular chords. But soon the piano begins to intertwine sensuously with the violin, until eventually, in a sudden hush, it takes the violin’s singing phrases and the violin accepts the role of accompanist without a hint of protest. This kind of affectionate role reversal goes on throughout the first movement; combined with such winning melodic material it is irresistible.

A lonelier kind of song prevails in the central Adagio. At its heart, the first movement’s germinal rhythm, Da–de–Da, is transformed

into what sounds very much like a minor-key funeral march, leading to an anguished climax, but the soothing initial melody returns, now with more liquid accompaniment, leading to a tranquil, if wistful close. In the finale, Brahms follows the example of Schubert in planting a little ‘clue’ as to the music’s possible meaning in the form of a quotation from one of his songs. In *Regenlied* (‘Rain-song’) the melancholy

image of falling, trickling rain evokes nostalgic images of childhood and youth, and now in the First Violin Sonata the same mood delicately pervades this finale, leading – unusually for Brahms – to a literal return of the second movement’s opening theme. Eventually though, melancholic yearning is dispelled like rain clouds before the advancing sun, and the end returns to the first movement’s tender serenity.

Johannes Brahms

Violin Sonata No 2 in A major, Op 100 (1886)

1 *Allegro amabile*

2 *Andante tranquillo – Vivace*

3 *Allegretto grazioso (quasi Andante)*

Brahms wrote his Second Violin Sonata in the summer of 1886 in a flower-bedecked chalet beside the Swiss resort of Lake Thun – inspiration for so many German Romantic writers, and famously the place where the restless Heinrich von Kleist had found temporary idyllic peace. While there is nothing specifically ‘alpine’ about this sonata, either in tone or in scale, the spirit of the place does seem to have had a profound effect on Brahms’s spirit. The Second is the sunniest of the three violin sonatas, and the most connected with the private world of his Lieder. As Brahms himself admitted, two songs in particular ‘go with the sonata’: *Wie Melodien* (‘Like Melodies’) and *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* (‘My sleep grows ever softer’), both of which were sung for Brahms by the soprano Hermine Spies when she visited him at Thun that summer. Did Hermine’s singing awaken something in this strangely enigmatic composer – so susceptible to women, yet apparently incapable of forming any kind of enduring amorous relationships with them? The first movement’s second theme is closely related to *Wie Melodien*, while the finale’s opening phrase, deep down on the violin’s grainy G string, recalls the climactic ‘Come, O come soon’ from *Immer leiser* ... Clearly, love – at least of an idealised kind – was very much on Brahms’s mind.

He wasn’t the first composer to attempt a fusion of slow movement and scherzo, but the Second Violin Sonata’s central movement achieves this triple-decker sandwich effect with unusual skill. He found the example of Beethoven’s elemental, thrillingly rhythmic scherzos an especially hard act to follow and was always looking for different ways to incorporate alternative scherzo- or minuet-like dance music. Here an ardent *Andante tranquillo* alternates with a spooky, fleeting *Vivace* in a way that recalls the ghostly ‘Fürchtenmachen’ (‘Frightening’) from *Kinderszenen* (‘Scenes from Childhood’) by his youthful mentor and, all too briefly, father-figure Robert Schumann. The last tiny return of the *Vivace* (almost an afterthought) is a reminder that Brahms can also be delightfully playful – he is never less the ‘beer and beard’ Brahms of legend than in music like this.

After this comes the *Allegretto grazioso* finale: easygoing at first and in the end, but allowing a momentary vista of glamorous Romantic turbulence in its minor-key second theme.

Programme notes © Stephen Johnson

interval 20 minutes

Johannes Brahms

Scherzo in C minor (1853) (from the 'F–A–E' Sonata)

Violin Sonata No 3 in D minor, Op 108 (1886–8)

1 Allegro

2 Adagio

3 Un poco presto e con sentimento

4 Presto agitato

Rather like architecture designed by committee, communal pieces of composition rarely work: though the idea might seem appealing, the differing styles and standards of the composers involved tend to mean a fractured reception at best – just think of the multi-authored *Diabelli Variations*. But when, in 1853, Schumann proposed a sonata for the violinist Joseph Joachim, his co-conspirators, Brahms and Albert Dietrich, were enthusiastic. Dietrich was a composition pupil of Schumann, and was entrusted with the first movement; Schumann provided an intermezzo and finale; Brahms got the scherzo. The idea was that Joachim would be left to guess the author of each movement, but it can't have been much of a challenge, given the differing styles of the three.

The piece was given unity by the use of three notes F–A–E (based on Joachim's motto *Frei aber einsam* – Free but lonely). However, the style of Brahms's scherzo would have been a complete giveaway – as the late Malcolm MacDonald observed in his biography of the composer: 'No-one but Brahms was writing scherzos with that kind of rhythmic drive.' And it's that dramatic immediacy which has endeared it to violinists over the decades.

Programme note © Harriet Smith

Like the Second Violin Sonata, the Third was begun during that 1886 summer holiday at Lake Thun, though it wasn't completed until two years later. It provides a useful caution against reading musical works as direct records of their composer's state of mind at the time they were composed. This is a very different work from the summery, Alpine-fresh, love-song-without-words Second Sonata. It is longer, with four movements instead of three, and melodically it is much more long-limbed than its precursor. The opening melody is one of those Brahms tunes that seems to go on and on unfolding, coming not so much to rest as to a point of momentary repose before the next flight begins. It is also much darker in tone. The hints of nursery ghost stories in the Second Sonata's central *Andante–Vivace* deepen Romantically in the first movement – if ever there was a musical encapsulation of one of the painter Caspar David Friedrich's twilight, haunted landscapes in music, this is it. Especially effective is the long passage at the heart of the movement. In place of the dramatic ferment typical of the development section in Classical sonata form, we have a mysterious, nervous meditation over a long-sustained regularly pulsing bass note on the piano, above which the violin and the pianist's right hand intertwine eerily.

After the heartfelt *Adagio* – the most seamless instrumental Lied in all these three sonatas – comes a kind of nocturnal intermezzo, marked

'Un poco presto e con sentimento'. There's just a hint of Schumann's 'fantastical' tone here, and yet it's all beautifully mannered. One can imagine Elgar in particular relishing music like this.

So far, mystery and Romantic suggestiveness have prevailed; demonic elements have remained in the shadows. But now they explode in the furious minor-key Presto agitato – Brahms's typical restraining 'un poco' ('a little') is thrown to the winds. If he had delighted in avoiding the slightest hint of a grand Beethovenian summation in the finales of the first two sonatas, here he faces up

to the challenge. While the control never wavers, neither does the energy relent. The driving triplets of the opening theme power through so much of this movement, almost like the obsessive tarantella rhythms of the finale of Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet. As in the Schubert, the dark minor mode ultimately prevails, with both violin and piano sounding like true virtuosos for the first time in these sonatas. It isn't known whether Brahms considered performing the three violin sonatas as a cycle in concert, but if he did, he could hardly have contrived a more rousing finale.

Programme note © Stephen Johnson

About the performers

Benjamin Ealovega



Maxim Vengerov

Maxim Vengerov violin

Universally hailed as one of the world's finest violinists, Grammy award-winner Maxim Vengerov also enjoys international acclaim as a conductor and is one of the most in-demand soloists.

He was born in 1974 and began his career as a solo violinist at the age of 5, won the Wieniawski and Carl Flesch international competitions at ages 10 and 15 respectively, studied with Galina Turchaninova and Zakhar Bron, made his first recording at the age of 10, and went on to record extensively for high-profile labels including Melodiya, Teldec and EMI, earning among others, Grammy and Gramophone Artist of the Year awards.

In 2007 he followed in the footsteps of his mentor, the late Mstislav Rostropovich, and turned his attention to conducting and in 2010 was appointed the first Chief Conductor of the Gstaad Festival Orchestra. In June 2014 he graduated with a Diploma of Excellence from the Moscow Institute of Ippolitov-Ivanov, where he had studied with Yuri

Simonov, and he then enrolled in a further two-year programme of opera conducting.

Last season he returned to Australia to open the season of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and conducted the season finale of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, with which he was also Artist-in-Residence. Further guest conducting engagements included the RTÉ Orchestra Dublin, Munich Philharmonic and Melbourne Symphony orchestras.

Highlights this season include returns to Carnegie Hall with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and the premiere of Qigang Chen's new violin concerto, *La joie de la souffrance*, at the Beijing Music Festival. He also gives recitals in Europe, China and the USA.

He opens the 2018/19 season of the Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala under Riccardo Chailly, as well as holding residencies with the Monte Carlo Philharmonic Orchestra and at the Philharmonie in Paris.

Teaching and nurturing young talent is a particular passion and he has held various teaching positions around the world. He is currently Ambassador and visiting Professor of the International Menuhin Music Academy in Switzerland (IMMA) and in September 2016 became the Polonsky Visiting Professor of Violin at the Royal College of Music.

In 1997 he became the first classical musician to be appointed International Goodwill Ambassador by UNICEF.

Maxim Vengerov plays the ex-Kreutzer Stradivari of 1727.



Polina Osetinskaya

Polina Osetinskaya piano

Polina Osetinskaya first came to attention as a child prodigy, before making her name as a mature artist.

She began performing at the age of 5, giving her first concert at the age of 6 at the Great Hall of the Vilnius Conservatoire. A year later she entered the Central School of Music of the Moscow Conservatoire. Together with her father, who became her manager, she undertook frequent tours throughout the former USSR to packed halls and standing ovations. At the age of 13 she switched paths and went to study music at the Leningrad (now St Petersburg) Conservatoire under Marina Wolf.

She subsequently studied at the Moscow Conservatoire under Vera Gornostayeva and, while still a student, began to tour once more. She has appeared with the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra of Weimar National Opera, the Academic Symphony Orchestra of the St Petersburg Philharmonic, State Academic Svetlanov Symphony Orchestra, Moscow Virtuosi and the New Russia Orchestra, among others.

Her onstage partners have included the conductors Saulius Sondeckis, Vassily Sinaisky, Andrey Boreyko, Gerd Albrecht, Yan Pascal Tortelier and Thomas Sanderling. Festival appearances include the Wallonie Festival in Brussels, the Mainly Mozart Festival, Frédéric Chopin Festival in Miami and, in Russia, the Stars of the White Nights and the December Nights festivals.

She has received Russia's Triumph award and her 2008 autobiography *Farewell, Sadness*, became a bestseller.

She has a particular interest in creating unorthodox solo programmes which juxtapose works by contemporary composers with standard works. She has frequently performed pieces by Valentin Silvestrov, Leonid Desyatnikov, Vladimir Martynov, Georgs Pelēcis and Pavel Karmanov.

Polina Osetinskaya has recorded for a wide range of record labels.