

Maxim Vengerov & Simon Trpčeski

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 105 minutes including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Violin Sonata No 21 in E minor

1. Allegro
2. Tempo di Menuetto

Sergei Prokofiev Sonata No 1 in F minor

1. Andante assai
2. Allegro brusco
3. Andante
4. Allegrissimo – Andante assai, come prima

César Franck Violin Sonata

1. Allegretto ben moderato
2. Allegro
3. Ben moderato: Recitativo-Fantasia
4. Allegretto poco mosso

Maurice Ravel *Tzigane*

There's a clear thread in tonight's programme, according to Maxim Vengerov. Ariane Todes speaks to him to find out more.

'These works were all written by people who were inspired by the violin. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart played the violin; Sergey Prokofiev wrote for David Oistrakh, one of the greatest violinists of the 20th century; César Franck wrote for Eugène Ysaÿe, regarded as 'King of the Violin' in his time; and Maurice Ravel was inspired by Jelly d'Arányi. The whole programme is about the love of the violin felt by four of the greatest composers of different epochs.'

It would be wrong to call it a violin recital, though, especially with a collaborator such as Simon Trpčeski, as Vengerov explains: 'In the great violin sonatas, the piano always leads, because it provides the harmonic and rhythmic foundations. That's how the violin finds its freedom, submitting itself to this magnificent instrument, which has so many colours and facets. As a violinist you have to understand the harmonies and have at least one ear in your partner's score, matching their colouring. Simon and I have been friends for a long time, and he is a wonderful musical soul – in his own league. It's always exciting to collaborate with a soloist who also plays chamber music, so it's exciting to see where he will lead me!'

The Mozart Sonata in E minor that opens the programme certainly has a specific harmonic colour. Vengerov says: 'This is Mozart's only violin and piano sonata to be written in a minor key, which is probably because it was written in 1778, the year Mozart's mother died. The key indicates the mood that Mozart was in at that time.' In playing it, he also gets clues from elsewhere in Mozart's repertoire: 'Any instrumental work of Mozart has to be played with a sense of operatic imagination – music without words that nevertheless always has a message.'

Mozart (1756–1791) and Prokofiev (1891–1953) might not seem obvious companions, but Vengerov sees a link: 'They are completely different in style and epoch, but they share a cosmic purity.' Both composers have also been underestimated, Vengerov argues: 'Mozart is always valued at a surface level. People think of the lovely tunes and the lightness, but beyond that, there is great depth. Prokofiev is as difficult as Mozart, but in violin competitions, I've often watched students who think that if they choose Shostakovich or Prokofiev, they can't go wrong – they just have to play dramatically, loud and fast, and they'll win. Prokofiev is more subtle than that. If you want to go really deep with Prokofiev and Mozart, it takes years of maturity.'

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Vengerov is uniquely qualified to speak of Prokofiev, as the composer's metaphorical musical grandchild – he was mentored by the legendary cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who studied closely with Prokofiev. What stories does he remember? 'Rostropovich always said that Prokofiev was a man of great contrasts. On one hand, he possessed an incredible discipline, waking up at six o'clock in the morning and dressing in an elegant suit like a businessman or accountant. At the same time, he was totally free and unattached to this world.'

These contrasts run through the music, Vengerov explains: 'If I had to describe Prokofiev in two words, I would use "time" and "timeless". There's always the sense of time that you can't change, but also of time that goes on forever, an infinite universe that we can't comprehend. In every piece there is a pulse, but also fantasy that goes beyond that: rigidity and freedom; hot and cold; love and hatred. This sonata, especially, possesses all these feelings, finely balanced between the two instruments.'

The sonata was written for David Oistrakh (1908–1974), who performed it first in 1946, and played two movements at Prokofiev's funeral in 1953. Vengerov describes the work: 'It's one of his most dramatic pieces, filled with different colours. There's a passage at the end of the last moment that Prokofiev described as the wind in the graveyards – the most chilling colouring that the violin can produce. It shows his imagination and is one of the greatest sonatas ever written for violin and piano.'

The Violin Sonata of César Franck (1822–1890) is one of his best-known works, written for the wedding of Eugène Ysaÿe (1858–1931), master of the Franco-Belgian school of violin playing. Vengerov says: 'The Franck rhymes very well with the colours of Prokofiev. Ysaÿe possessed an amazing sound and a way of colouring the instrument, which we can hear in his recordings. The Franck is like a painting, full of images.'

Legend has it that by the time it came to perform the piece at its public premiere in 1886, the lights in the venue had gone out, and Ysaÿe and his pianist Marie-Léontine Bordes-Pène had to perform it in virtual darkness. There will be light in the Barbican Hall, but you might see Vengerov shut his eyes. He explains: 'I go inside for the first and third movements, into different dimensions. Our eyes are not the strongest receptor of our body – our auditory experiences are far stronger. If anything, our eyes distract us from really listening and can be misleading.'

The programme ends with Ravel's *Tzigane* (a French word for a generic gypsy style), dedicated to the Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arányi (1893–1966). Vengerov says: 'The *Tzigane* is the cherry on the cake. Every time I play it, I discover something new. Ravel's music is as difficult as Mozart because it's so transparent. There's a borderline and if you overstep that line, it becomes vulgar. It can easily be misinterpreted and played too rhapsodically. You can't just play it like you want, though. It has a structure – it's a serious work.'

Vengerov says he is happy to be back at the Barbican Hall, where he has performed many times over the years: 'The Barbican has a special atmosphere – there have been so many great concerts, not just for me with great conductors including Rostropovich, Boulez, Davis, but during its whole history. So many wonderful musicians have played and recorded here. It has a special aura and I am definitely affected by that.'

He is also pleased to present a violin and piano programme: 'The recital has always been one of my favourite ways to express music. Sharing a couple of hours of intimacy with an audience, there's no hurry. I can talk to my audiences in different ways, in different styles, with different colours – there's so much to say!'

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Performers

Maxim Vengerov violin

Simon Trpčeski piano

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