



Tuesday 25 July 2023, 7.30pm – 9.20pm
St Mary's Church, Petworth

Laura van der Heijden (cello) & Jâms Coleman (piano)

PROGRAMME NOTES

Sonata in D minor for Cello and Piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

1 Prologue: Lent

2 Sérénade, Modérément animé

3 Finale, Animé

Debussy's Cello Sonata was written during a summer stay in Pourville, Normandy in 1915. Isolated from the war raging in Flanders, and against a background of deteriorating health, the work was one of several belonging to a productive year that saw the completion of his piano duet *En blanc et noir* and a set of *Études* for solo piano. Taking no longer than twelve minutes to play, the Cello Sonata is one of Debussy's most enigmatic and elusive works. Within its three linked movements he evokes the spirit of the *Commedia dell'arte*, initially intending to call the work *Pierrot fâché avec la lune* (Pierrot shakes his fist at the moon). Something of this theatricality exists in the central 'Sérénade', marked to be played *fantasque et léger* (whimsically and lightly) and notable for its ghostly *pizzicato* suggestive of the plucking of a harp or guitar. The opening Prologue inhabits a searching, restless eloquence in the manner of a soliloquy, and embraces a dramatic central interlude. High spirits are evident in the capricious 'Finale', although the unbuttoned mood is absent in the contrasting episodes, one of which is marked *molto rubato con morbidezza*.

Cello Sonata in E Minor Op.35

Dora Pejačević (1885-1923)

1 Allegro moderato

2 Scherzo – allegro

3 Adagio sostenuto

4 Allegro comodo

Born in Budapest in 1885 to a Croatian-Hungarian count, Dora Pejačević was mainly self-taught, but gained a formal musical education in Dresden and Munich where she settled permanently from 1921. Largely forgotten outside Hungary until recently, her fifty plus compositions mostly comprise songs and piano music. During her lifetime she enjoyed considerable success, and her more expansive works, including much fine chamber music and a piano concerto, were performed throughout central Europe. Her Symphony in F sharp minor was taken up by the conductor Arthur Nikisch who performed it regularly in Leipzig.

Her assimilation of the late romantic style is readily apparent in her only Cello Sonata in E minor from 1913. Cast in four-movements, the first occupies an expansive lyricism redolent of Brahms. The 'Scherzo' develops from a short dancing figure, its rhythmic impetus enclosing an extended central Trio built on a yearning cantabile melody. Asymmetric rhythmic patterns in 5/4 time inhabit the meditative 'Adagio sostenuto', while a more relaxed manner, at times jaunty, informs the concluding 'Allegro comodo', its sense of triumph in the closing bars unequivocal.

Reflets (Reflections)

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

Lili Boulanger's untimely death at the age of twenty-four robbed France of an exceptionally gifted composer who wrote music of immense visionary power. Her contributions to song, chamber, choral and orchestral music combine a technical assurance with an expressive manner redolent of Fauré and Debussy. That these works were written whilst she was suffering from the ravages of Crohn's disease make her achievements truly remarkable. In 1913 she attracted international attention by winning the coveted Prix de Rome, and it is from two years earlier that her impressionistic *Reflets* belongs. Originally a song to words by Maurice Maeterlinck, this watery evocation beautifully captures the poet's nocturnal dream through flowing lines and shifting harmonies.

Beau Soir

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

As a student at the Paris Conservatoire in the early 1880s, Debussy earned pocket money by accompanying the soprano Madame Vasnier who inspired his first song compositions. Of these, *Beau Soir*, to words by Paul Bourget, captures the languor of a summer's evening and observations on life's transience.

Sonata for cello and piano in G minor Op. 19

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

1 Lento – Allegro moderato 2 Allegro scherzando 3 Andante 4 Allegro mosso

Like many other 19th century Russian composers, Rachmaninov's chamber music formed only a modest part of his overall output. However, at over thirty minutes his Op.19 Sonata is anything but modest and is regarded as one of his most ambitious instrumental works. It was completed in the summer of 1901 in the months leading up to the premiere of the 2nd Piano Concerto. As if he was still thinking of the keyboard as the solo instrument, the piano undoubtedly dominates; a feature underlined by the work's original title - Sonata for Piano and Cello.

The work opens with a slow introduction, quasi-declamatory and withdrawn in character, presenting a rising figure that generates melodic material for the entire movement. A more animated lyrical first theme gathers intensity before giving way to a wistful secondary idea with earlier reminiscences. After much rhapsodic argument, a cadenza-like passage leads to a climax and the movement concludes with a coda, its final bars strikingly reminiscent of the corresponding passage from his 2nd Piano Concerto.

The 'Allegro Scherzando' is built on two contrasting ideas; a nervous darting figure and a yearning theme, so typical of Rachmaninov. In the elegiac and deeply expressive 'Andante' the cellist takes centre-stage, and attempts to create high spirits for the concluding 'Allegro mosso' never quite materialise, nor is its brooding melancholy banished. In a falling phrase over a repeated G the cello recollects the opening rising semitone (from the first movement) before a brief closing passage makes one final triumphant gesture.

David Truslove, 2023

This event is kindly sponsored by Kate, Andrew, Julia & Charlotte Brown, Rodney Downes, David Godfrey and John & Belinda Horley