

West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021

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Coda

29. Cello Series (5)

Filmed at the Budapest Music Centre

Vashti Hunter [cello]

Zoltán Fejérvári [piano]

Janáček

Pohádka

Fauré

Cello sonata No. 2 in G minor, Op. 117

Saint-Saëns

Cello sonata No.2 Op.123

Leoš Janáček [1854-1928]***Pohádka*** [1913]

1. *Con moto*
2. *Con moto*
3. *Allegro*

The story of Tsar Berendey, his son the Tsarevich Ivan, the intrigues of Kastchey the Immortal and the wisdom of Princess Maria, Kastchey's daughter. So runs the title of Zhukovsky's fairy-tale poem on which Janáček based his first completed chamber work. Ivan has been sacrificed to Kastchey, King of the Underworld, by his father and sets out bravely to meet his Nemesis. On his way he sees thirty silver ducklings swimming on a lake, on the bank lie thirty magic dresses. Ivan takes one of them. The ducklings return to the bank and twenty-nine of them are duly transformed into beautiful maidens, while the thirtieth seeks her dress in vain. Taking pity on her he returns the dress and she is of course transformed into the Princess Maria, with whom he immediately falls in love. They undergo many trials before all ends happily.

Janáček's music describes the lovers and their falling in love. The music immediately creates a fairy-tale atmosphere with the bold Tsarevich suggested by the fanfare pizzicatos. A sweeter melody then luxuriates on the cello and the subsequent thematic dialogue could be suggesting a future union. The second movement begins with a pizzicato motto on the cello, this lively motto converses with a gentle lyrical variation that opens out into a richly romantic dialogue full of dreams. A pause brings back the motto before the dreams fade. The last movement is driven forward by its dynamic and heroic motif, before the music dissolves and the magic ends.

Francis Humphrys

Gabriel Fauré [1845-1924]

Cello Sonata No.2 in G minor Op.117 [1921]

1. *Allegro*
2. *Andante*
3. *Allegro vivo*

Fauré's achievement was to invent musical forms which attracted our hearts and senses without debasing them. He offered a homage to Beauty in which there was not only faith, but a discreet yet irresistible passion.... The delicate precision of his architecture, the concision (without dryness) of his ideas will long guide us in our moments of anxiety. [Georges Auric in *La Revue musicale* shortly after Fauré's death].

After fifteen years as Director of the Paris Conservatoire Fauré was invited to resign in 1920. Although he was undoubtedly too ill to continue, the manner in which he was ousted was despicable, more especially as the authorities tried to deprive him of his pension. Although amends were eventually made, Fauré felt rejected and ill-used by the institution to which he had given his best years. A number of his admirers, including the American cellist and composer Charles-Martin Loeffler, helped him financially in this difficult time; as an expression of thanks the Second Cello Sonata, written in 1921, was dedicated to him.

The magic of Fauré's music lies in the luminous, elusive beauty with which his melodies, harmonies and counterpoint interact. As the great pianist, Alfred Cortot, pointed out the true novelty of his scores lay in the quality of the musical texture rather than in any unusual style of writing. Fauré was also a classicist, a firm believer in the absolute necessity of an education based on the study of the classics. *In the wide reaches of the human spirit, all those who have seemed to create ideas and styles hitherto unknown have only been expressing, through the medium of their own individualities, what others have already thought and said before them.* Nonetheless, despite his classical predilections, Fauré's harmonic practice was distinctive. Without discarding the dramatic tension inherent in the ebb and flow of sonata form tonic and dominant, he often melded the standard progressions of tonality with tinges of modality, doubtless absorbed in his early studies of plainchant.

Fauré was plagued with health problems in the last twenty years of his life. The worst of these was his hearing problem, which began as an auditory distortion that would make him misperceive pitches and balances. In his later years he became almost totally deaf, partially blind and he suffered from a host of bronchial, stomach, liver and kidney ailments. But in spite of these hindrances, which would have flattened a lesser man, his creativity blossomed in his last years once he was freed of the burden of the Conservatoire. *For me, he wrote, art - and music especially - consists of raising ourselves as high as possible above that which is real.*

The Second Cello Sonata is best known for its miraculous slow movement. Discreetly and with no showy effects, Fauré makes time stand still. The opening Allegro is firmly grounded in sonata form though it seems to flow in an unbroken succession of melodies for its foundations are seamlessly constructed. The sparkling closing movement has three

principal themes, each introduced by the piano before being taken up by the cello. Unlike the other movements this movement calls upon the players' virtuosity, making for a buoyant conclusion to this masterpiece.

Francis Humphrys

Camille Saint-Saëns [1835-1921]

***Cello Sonata No.2 in F major Op.123* [1905]**

1. *Maestoso, Largemente*
- 2a. *Scherzo con variazioni. Allegro animato*
- 2b. *Variation 1: Poco meno allegro*
- 2c. *Variation 2*
- 2d. *Variation 3: Tranquille, sans lenteur*
- 2e. *Variation 4: Molto allegro*
- 2f. *Variation 5: Sempre allegro*
- 2g. *Variation 6: Molto moderato e marcato*
- 2h. *Variation 7: Poco allegretto, tranquillo*
- 2i. *Variation 8: Presto*
3. *Romanza: Poco adagio*
4. *Allegro non troppo, grazioso*

During the third quarter of the 19th Century, the French craze was for opera. Saint-Saëns was almost alone in trying to revive chamber music, which many French regarded as a German genre. He was instrumental in the founding of the Société Nationale de Musique after the 1871 Franco-Prussian War and his fame and success no doubt helped to put chamber music back into the French musical landscape. Once known as the 'French Mendelssohn,' Saint-Saëns composed music calculated to delight rather than to shock. Yet, this Cello Sonata is an ambitious and highly original work, utilising forms in unexpected ways.

The composer describes the first movement as a 'dark piece,' and there is a certain sense of emotional outburst and repression – a push and pull – the gentle cello melody and grace that gives way to a more vigorous section. And even with the return of the softer tone, there is an underlying vigour and force that returns in full force midway. Critics may have dismissed the composer as lacking passions, yet what this opening movement lacks in extravagant emotional outcry, it makes up for expressing the nuanced spectrum of emotion. The second movement may leave the unprepared listener bewildered, as it takes the form of eight variations, which comes as something of a surprise after the sonata form of the previous movement and certainly displays some out-of-the-box compositional thinking.

Saint-Saëns himself said that the third movement would bring tears to the eyes. It opens with a stunningly beautiful cello theme that sings out in the best tradition of glorious cello repertoire, of which he displayed such mastery. This is where the talents of the cellist must shine through – can they play with the precision of tone needed to bring forth the waterworks? *'The last movement will wake up anyone who's slept through the rest of the piece.'* A wonderfully wry comment from Saint-Saëns, and indeed the toccata-like gusto of the final movement would make anyone sit up. The incessant motion of the piano is overlaid by the melodic cello, and the delightful opening evolves steadily through increases in texture until both instruments enter the final climax of the piece, propelling the listener forward to the exciting conclusion.

Helen Dawson

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