

EVENT ONE

Friday 13 September 2024 1.00pm – 2:00pm
Unitarian Chapel, St Saviourgate, York



CELLO AND PIANO RECITAL

Tim Lowe (Cello)

Andrew Brownell (Piano)

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979)

Trois Pièces for Cello and Piano (1914)

Music is a furious, total passion. I don't much want to talk about all this because it's personal, but the fact is that music is never out of my head. I hear notes, I always hear notes, I am always thinking of notes. It isn't a special skill, it's a fact.
(Nadia Boulanger)

Nadia Boulanger is frequently recognised as one of the most important twentieth century composition teachers, notably her work at the *Conservatoire Americain* in Fontainbleu where her students included Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, and Elliot Carter. Her other musical activities included conducting and editing, and she made the earliest recording of music by Monteverdi. She gave up composing in her own right in the 1920s, claiming that she only wrote 'useless' music. The *Trois Pièces* written in 1914 do not support this harsh self-criticism.

Nadia Boulanger was born into an intensely musical family. Her father Ernest was a composer and singing teacher, her mother was a singer and her sister Lili was also a celebrated composer. Although she claims to have hated music as a very young child, Nadia attended classes at the Paris Conservatoire at the age of seven, officially entering at the age of nine. By the time she was sixteen, she had obtained every possible first prize in her studies except the prestigious *Prix de Rome*, the highest composition prize for students at the Conservatoire. She probably should have won in 1908 but was awarded second prize. Allegations of sexism were made by her friends but typically she herself refused to ascribe her failure to win to discrimination. Perhaps this controversy paved the way for her sister Lili who in 1913 became the first woman to win the *Prix de Rome*.

Nadia believed that Lili was a genius, describing her as the 'first important woman composer in history'. Lili's mercurial short tone-poem *D'un matin de printemps*, composed shortly before her tragically early death at the age of only

24 in 1918 is a musical gem. (played by the Sinfonia of London conducted by John Wilson at the BBC Prom on 6th August 2023). Nadia knew all the works composed by her sister and devoted herself to promoting her music.

It was not long after Lili's death at the tender age of 24 from a weakened immune system, leading to intestinal tuberculosis, that Nadia abandoned composition. Nadia was a firm believer in the existence of musical genius and of 'masterpieces'. In an interview she gave later in life, she explained her decision: 'When I decided to abandon composition, it was because I knew that I would never be a great genius. My music could perhaps have been played, but music played because it is by a good friend doesn't interest me at all.' Nadia lived until 1979, devoted to teaching and perhaps, so far as her own compositions are concerned, in the emotional shadow of her sister.

This self-effacing view of her own music is hard to reconcile in the face of her best work including the *Trois Pièces*. Whether they can be counted as works of 'genius' is not really the point because they are beautifully crafted and imaginative pieces, certainly worthy of their place in the cello's core repertoire.

They were written in 1914, and published by Heugel a year later. The first movement, in E-flat minor, is dreamy and distant, with a beautiful cello melody over a harmonically static, gently rocking piano accompaniment. Despite a passionate central section, it returns to its opening mood before apparently floating into mid-air. The second piece, in A minor, has the simplicity of a folk song, an impression strengthened by the fact it is in the Aeolian mode. The third piece in C-sharp minor, by contrast, is lively and energetic. It is reminiscent of Poulenc and compares to Lili's writing for the cello. It is the most balanced between the two instruments of the set, and features a central section in 5/4 before returning to the opening material and ending with a flourish.

Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

Sonata for 'Cello and Piano (1915)

*Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto), Sérénade: Modérément animé –
Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux*

As the storm clouds of war gathered over Europe in 1914 Debussy was seriously ill with cancer. Despite this he continued to compose steadily until the outbreak of hostilities but he was so shocked by the barbarities of war that he felt there was no point in composing any longer. Instead he spent his time making an edition of Chopin's music to replace the German ones. But in the middle of 1915 his creative impulse returned, feeling it was his duty to bring beauty into the midst of savagery. He soon finished *En Blanc et Noir* for two pianos and the brilliant 12 *Études* for piano, and his 'cello sonata. The 'cello work was originally intended as the first in a series of six sonatas for different combinations of

instruments, 'Six Sonates pour Divers Instruments Composées par C. Debussy, Musicien Française'. However, the composer only lived to complete half the set; the 'cello sonata, the violin sonata and the sonata for flute, viola and harp.

The 'cello sonata shows little direct influence of the war although the opening of the Slow movement ('Serenade') is serious and tragic in mood. The sonata is infused with progressive, twentieth century harmonic language which often ventures into exotic modes and the dreamy, time-altering magic of the pentatonic and whole tone scales. Yet under the surface lies a nostalgic classicism. We sense the spirit of French Baroque composers such as François Couperin or Jean-Philippe Rameau, whose music is filled with an infectious grace and elegance. In a letter to Jacques Durand, Debussy wrote, "I like [the 'Cello Sonata's] proportions and form, which are almost classical in the best sense of the word." The writing for the 'cello is throughout original and resourceful with extended passages of pizzicato, 'saltando' bowing (a short bouncing bow stroke), ponticello (bowing on or near the bridge) and harmonics. But these effects are never used for self-conscious display but are integral to Debussy's sound world of gaiety, sensitivity and irony.

In the first movement ornamental turns seem to recall the keyboard music of the French Baroque composers. There is a sense of quiet lament in the piano's beautifully direct opening statement. With the 'cello's entrance, a soulful conversation unfolds between the two instruments which fades into dreamy serenity in the transcendent final moments.

The second movement introduces a distinct new voice with the 'cello's pizzicato in dialogue with the piano's bass notes. The personas that emerge in this music seem simultaneously comic and mysterious, buffoonish and mercurial with an occasional hint of menace. In the final bars an ethereal bell emerges in the piano.

The final movement begins without pause. The descending four-note bass line which opens this movement could have been taken from a Baroque ostinato line. A thrillingly wild and unpredictable ride follows, bringing this brief Sonata to an exhilarating close.

Gabriel Fauré (1845 – 1924)

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

Allegro - Andante - Allegro vivo

Fauré's simple way of life and belated official recognition after years of financial insecurity concealed a great musical personality. The young Fauré was sent by his parents to train as a church organist and choirmaster at a specialist music school. During his long life he held many posts in Parisian churches taking

over from Saint-Saëns as choirmaster at the L'église de la Madeleine in 1877 and remaining there until 1896. He came Director of the Paris Conservatoire in 1905 (age 60) and stayed there until deafness forced him to resign in 1920.

His music is refined and lyrical embodying the aristocratic qualities of the French tradition. This is revealed in his songs, which he wrote throughout his life, and his piano music, which is mostly confined to short, shadowy, impressionistic pieces with titles such as nocturne, *barcarolle* and *prelude*. Perhaps his popular early work is shaped by a rather facile charm but in his later period Fauré created some of the most beautiful and intense chamber music in the repertoire. His musical ethic became more mystical and serious, much more so than his reputation might suggest.

“To imagine is to express the wish for everything that surpasses reality. Music exists to elevate us as high as possible above that which is. I bear within myself a sure desire for that which does not exist.”

The second cello sonata dates from 1921 the year after he resigned from the Conservatoire. He was 76 and after this sonata he wrote only a handful of works. For anyone less spiritually centred than Fauré these final years would have been a time of frustration as his physical body failed – he was a heavy smoker and totally deaf. He worked on the cello sonata in a small guest house in Aix-les-Theremes during the summer but suffered a near fatal collapse of his bodily system and for a while he thought he was dying. Back in Paris he recovered sufficiently to finish the sonata, living for another three years. Due to his deafness he never heard his powerful stage work *Penelope* or any of his late chamber music, sharing with Beethoven a composer's worst fate. But with both men their spirit soared above it all and with Fauré what grips one immediately about this cello sonata, given the state of his health, is its youthfulness and exuberance. Apart from this sense of gusto the most striking feature of the piece is the central *Andante*, which is a transcription of the *Chant funéraire* (1921) for military band that Fauré wrote on commission from the state to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Napoleon's death.

Towards the end a theme in *A Flat* transforms the sombre mood to one of peaceful dreaminess; Fauré, sharing with Beethoven in his total deafness, found within their silent world music welling up from within the depths of their souls; moments of transcendence for us to share.