

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 30 March 2025
7.30pm

Gautier Capuçon cello
Frank Braley piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Cello Sonata in F Op. 5 No. 1 (1796)

I. Adagio sostenuto - Allegro • II. Allegro vivace

Cello Sonata in C Op. 102 No. 1 (1815)

I. Andante • II. Allegro vivace •

III. Adagio – Tempo d'andante • IV. Allegro vivace

Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 5 No. 2 (1796)

I. Adagio sostenuto ed espressivo •

II. Allegro molto più tosto presto • III. Rondo. Allegro

Interval

Cello Sonata in A Op. 69 No. 3 (1808)

I. Allegro, ma non tanto • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto •

III. Adagio Cantabile • IV. Allegro vivace

Cello Sonata in D Op. 102 No. 2 (1815)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio con molto sentiment
d'affetto • III. Allegro – Allegro fugato*



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Beethoven's five cello sonatas are not just a collection of profound, spirited works. They also offer a fascinating insight into the development of an extraordinary musical mind, spanning the length of the composer's life.

Dating from 1796, the Sonata in F begins sparsely, slowly, with an arpeggiated, rising phrase played in unison by both instruments. A more lyrical melody opens up in the cello part, followed by an angular, see-sawing theme, and we veer briefly into a grandiose and quasi-improvisatory cadenza. In the *Allegro*, the piano leads with a cheerful, songlike melody, which the cello then takes up, and which returns, embellished and altered, throughout the movement. The final movement begins with a simple, dance-like theme, but flashes of virtuosity are never far away, with cascading arpeggios and a sense of gleeful energy propelling the work – via a brief oasis of calm – to its bustling and lively conclusion.

This work, from Beethoven's 'early' period, was the very first cello sonata with a fully through-composed (as opposed to *basso continuo*) piano part. The two Opus 5 sonatas we hear in the first half of today's concert were first performed at the Berlin court of Friedrich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia. The players were Beethoven himself and one of two French-brother court cellists (either Jean-Pierre or Jean-Louis Duport). The King, himself a keen amateur cellist, was thrilled, presenting Beethoven with a golden snuff-box as a token of his estimation.

By the time Beethoven wrote his Opus 102 sonatas in 1815, his deafness had become profound, and he had largely withdrawn from society. He first performed this work at the summer residence of the Countess Marie Erdödy, with the cellist Joseph Linke. The Sonata's music reflects the composer's sense of uncompromising purpose, with increased formal experimentation, and an economy and intensity to the writing.

It was originally titled 'free sonata', no doubt because of its unusual format: the ethereal, quasi-pastoral opening phrase, with its stepwise descent and rising fifth, is the seed from which the entire Sonata grows. This tender introduction is abruptly interrupted by the jagged theme of the *Allegro*. The serene opening theme returns in a questioning, poised *Adagio* where time almost stops, before Beethoven surprises us again with an upbeat *Allegro vivace*. Listen out for Beethoven's trademark quiet-loud ending – one of his favourite musical 'jokes'.

Travelling back in time again to 1796, the Cello Sonata in G minor is dramatic and brooding, from its dark and thunderous opening chord to the mournful,

aria-like cello theme which rises out of the shadows. The lilting, minor-key *Allegro* movement that follows it is both pensive and volatile, with powerful ascending bass lines in the left hand of the piano part. A torrent of triplets whirls us to another, unexpected interlude of calm, before Beethoven conjures a boldly dramatic finish. The *Rondo. Allegro* provides light relief, situating us in the sunlit key of C major before embarking on a giddy, humour-filled journey, in which we can almost hear the composer laughing with delight at his own creation.

The only 'middle period' Sonata is perhaps the most famous and beloved of the five. It was dedicated to the Baron von Gleichenstein, another aristocratic cellist who acted as Beethoven's patron. It was completed in 1808, and exudes the confidence of a composer at the height of his powers – even through his deafness, by this point, had resulted in Beethoven's retirement from the stage as a virtuoso performer. The composer's evolution is shown again, in the fact that this Sonata was the first in which the cello and piano are established as equal partners, as opposed to a piano part with *cello obbligato* (a term which suggests an indispensable but ancillary role, more akin to a counter melody).

The cello begins unaccompanied, answered by a flourish in the piano, before the two set out on a dynamic adventure together. The swashbuckling *Allegro* gallops through minor and major key passages, with syncopated triplet rhythms and rippling trills keeping the momentum going. The serene *Adagio cantabile* is followed by a warm-hearted *Allegro vivace* that races along, combining lyrical melodies and rapid-fire runs to bring the Sonata to an insistent, yet upbeat close.

The final sonata in the series is the only one of the five to take the conventional form: three movements, in fast-slow-fast tempi. In the bold opening statement, four semi-quavers leap up an octave; then repeat, with an even bigger interval of a tenth. This sense of defiance, of upward-leaping energy, suffuses the entire movement, which abounds with startling contrasts and crashes in the piano. There is a spiritual atmosphere to the opening of the second movement, and we glimpse a brief ray of light in the central section before we return to the hymn-like opening, and are dragged into the shadowy depths of the keyboard as an anguished cello line extends high above. The final movement begins with a complex and thrilling fugue, and the Sonata's final moments are jubilant and celebratory, echoing the 'darkness to light' trajectory of many of Beethoven's works.

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