

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Raphael Wallfisch: Composers in Exile

Sunday 18 January 2026, 3pm | Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bartók Rhapsody No.1 arr. for cello & piano	10'
Weinberg Sonata No.1 for solo cello, Op.72	12'
Bosmans Cello Sonata in A minor	24'
<i>Interval</i>	
Laks Cello Sonata	16'
Martinů Cello Sonata No.2	20'

Performers

Raphael Wallfisch *cello*
Simon Callaghan *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

Rhapsody No.1 arr. for cello & piano

Among the many shattering upheavals caused by the Nazis' rise to power in 1930s Germany – and the subsequent cataclysms of World War Two – the impacts on the world of music were profound. Some composers and performers found their activities curtailed, their music banned, while others suffered far graver fates in the Nazi death camps. Many musicians – whether in direct danger, or simply appalled by the atrocities unfolding around them – chose exile, fleeing their birth countries for sometimes imagined musical havens further west or east. Of those who stayed, many were subjected to internal exile and musical silence amid a new and brutal system.

The theme of exile is a deeply personal one for tonight's cellist, Raphael Wallfisch: his mother, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, survived Auschwitz, where she was a cellist in the Women's Orchestra. She moved permanently to the UK in 1946, where she swiftly established herself (and a Wallfisch musical dynasty that includes her composer grandson Benjamin alongside her

cellist son Raphael) as a central figure in the postwar nation's music. She turned 100 in July 2025, and her story was told in the documentary *The Last Musician of Auschwitz*, released in January last year.

Tonight's first composer, Béla Bartók, chose exile as his home country of Hungary grew closer to the Nazi ideology he so vehemently opposed. He had been outspoken in his denunciation of fascism following the Nazis' rise to power in 1933, forbidding performances of his music in Germany, and even cutting off contact with his Viennese publisher Universal Edition after the Nazi annexation of Austria. His native Hungary would eventually sign up to Germany, Italy and Japan's Tripartite Pact in November 1940, but even before that capitulation, Bartók felt his presence in the country becoming increasingly precarious. He would eventually flee for the US in the autumn of 1940. While he had been a respected figure of national importance in his homeland, in the US Bartók began as a virtual nobody, only slowly rebuilding his career in the final five years of his life.

In many ways, the Rhapsody No.1 that opens tonight's concert represents the very spirit of his native Hungary that Bartók was forced to leave behind. He wrote the piece in 1928, originally for violin and piano, making tonight's version for cello and piano the following year. Its folk-influenced form mirrors that of the country's popular *verbunkos*, a showy dance style intended to demonstrate the joys of army life to potential new recruits. After a slow-moving but nonetheless passionate opening section, its faster conclusion is effectively a succession of Hungarian dance tunes that grows unstoppably more exuberant and delirious as the piece unfolds.

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–96)

Sonata No.1 for solo cello, Op.72

- 1 *Adagio*
- 2 *Allegretto*
- 3 *Allegro*

Mieczysław Weinberg was forced to flee his native Poland following the Nazi invasion in September 1939, taking refuge not in the US or Western Europe, but in the Soviet Union, where he

would remain until his death in 1996. It was only in 1966 that he would discover that the family he left behind had been murdered in Trawniki concentration camp, near Lublin. Nonetheless, Weinberg remained victim of prejudice and persecution in his new homeland because of his Jewish faith: following his arrest and internment in 1953, he was only released due to pleading by his close friend Dmitri Shostakovich.

Weinberg was a remarkably prolific composer – his output includes 22 symphonies, 17 string quartets, 19 instrumental sonatas and seven operas, much of which are only now being rediscovered. The first of his four sonatas for solo cello comes from 1960, and was directly inspired by the playing of legendary cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who premiered the piece in December that year at the Moscow Conservatoire. After a slow, sometimes Shostakovich-like opening movement, the cello mutes its sound for the dance-like second movement, before a fiery finale of whirling figurations and sometimes overt aggression.

Henriëtte Bosmans (1895–1952)

Cello Sonata in A minor

1 *Allegro maestoso*

2 *Un poco allegretto*

3 *Adagio*

4 *Allegro molto e con fuoco*

Born in Amsterdam, Henriëtte Bosmans came from a deeply musical family: her father, Henri Bosmans, was principal cellist in the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, but died when his daughter was just eight months old. Though Henriëtte established herself early in life as a sought-after pianist and composer, following the Nazi takeover of the Netherlands she was forbidden from performing in public because of her Jewish mother, pianist Sara Benedicts. Refusing to sign up to the Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer – the Nazi-run organisation that controlled Dutch cultural life – Bosmans instead withdrew from public activities, focusing instead on composition, and gaining national recognition for her principled stand after the war.

Bosmans wrote her substantial A minor Cello Sonata in 1919, for Belgian musician Marix Loevensohn, who had followed her father as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra's principal cellist. Ironically, the Sonata received early criticism for being too Germanic, at a time when more fashionable Dutch composers were looking for inspiration to French composers, particularly Debussy and Ravel. There's no denying the piece's rich, deep Romanticism, clearly evident in the tragic cello theme of its opening movement, set against pounding piano accompaniment. Though more lyrical, the second movement retains a sense of restlessness, and the enigmatic slow third movement leads directly into the explosive finale, with a dramatic return from the Sonata's opening music that ensures a shatteringly powerful conclusion.

Simon Laks (1901–83)

Cello Sonata

1 *Allegro moderato ma deciso*

2 *Andante un poco grave*

3 *Presto*

Like tonight's second composer, Szymon (or, as he later spelt it, Simon) Laks was born in Warsaw, quickly carving out a successful career as a pianist and composer, before moving to Vienna and Paris to pursue his musical ambitions. Indeed, he thoroughly immersed himself in the French capital's vibrant,

often radical music scene in the 1930s. Following the city's fall to the Nazis in June 1940, however, Laks was detained as a Jew, first at the internment camp at Pithiviers, near Orleans, before being transferred to Auschwitz in July 1942. Like Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Laks found a role in the camp's orchestra. He went on to run it, but he was unwavering in his belief that the camp's music served not to inspire and console detainees, but to torture them. 'In no case did I ever meet a prisoner who found courage in our music, whose life our music helped save,' he later reflected. After a transfer to Dachau in October 1944, Laks was freed when that camp was liberated by US forces in April 1945. He lived the rest of his life in Paris, where his witty, jazzy, crisp and optimistic music belied the darkness of the middle period of his life.

Laks wrote his sole Cello Sonata amid the blithe hedonism of his Parisian life in 1932, and it clearly displays a deep affection for the music of Ravel and Poulenc, and for the US jazz and blues that were so deeply in fashion at the time. Dissonance and jazzy nostalgia jostle for attention in the surging, energetic opening movement, and the second movement doffs its cap reverentially to the blues, with a languorous cello melody that slides around on top of a strummed piano accompaniment. Laks' sparkling finale sets the cellist swapping nimbly between plucking and bowing the instrument's strings, all the while negotiating tricky rhythmic interplay with the piano.

Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959)

Cello Sonata No.2

1 *Allegro*

2 *Largo*

3 *Allegro commodo*

Like Bartók, Bohuslav Martinů may be a more familiar figure than the lesser-known musicians we've just encountered. And like Laks, Martinů left his homeland – in this case Czechoslovakia – for the bright lights and musical radicalism of Paris. It was from the French capital that he witnessed the Munich Agreement cede substantial Czech territory to Nazi Germany in 1938, and it was from there that he was also forced to flee following Nazi invasion, first to the south of France, then further on to the United States.

Also like Bartók, Martinů at first struggled to work amid his unfamiliar surroundings, though striking up a close friendship with a fellow Czech migrant, cellist Frank Rybka, proved crucial to the composer's continuing creativity. He wrote his Second Cello Sonata for Rybka in 1941, and admitted struggling to complete the piece in his new environment. Its gruff, nervy opening movement seems to reflect that sense of effort, and Martinů's darker emotions and homesickness may come overtly to the surface in the Sonata's intense, sometimes despairing second movement. Its whirling, breathlessly athletic finale, however, arguably reaches a mood of acceptance and even joy, transfiguring a succession of Czech folk melodies for a disorientating but exhilarating new life in the US.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2026

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