

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Randall Goosby & Zhu Wang: Bologne & Schubert

Sunday 11 May 2025, 4pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bologne (Chevalier de Saint-Georges) Violin Sonata No.3
in G minor, Op.1a 10'

Fauré Violin Sonata No.1 in A, Op.13 25'

Interval

Chausson Poème, Op.25 16'

Schubert Rondo brillant in B minor, D.895 15'

Performers

Randall Goosby *violin*

Zhu Wang *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes including an interval.

Joseph Bologne (1745–99)

Violin Sonata No.3 in G minor, Op.1a

I Allegro

II Rondo gracioso

Joseph Bologne, who is also known by his title as an officer of Louis XV of France's guard, Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges, was the son of a French plantation owner and one of the slaves who worked on his plantation on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe.

As a Black man and an illegitimate son, Bologne literally fought his way to success at a time of great prejudice. Having moved to Paris at the age of eight, he gained a reputation as the finest fencer in France, said to have lost just one match in his career.

There were further strings to Bologne's bow. He was a respected violinist, keyboardist, conductor and composer. Still, he was forced to endure the humiliation of musicians refusing to work with him because of the colour of his skin. In the 1770s,

Bologne applied for the vacant position of music director at the Paris Opera, but withdrew his application after three of the company's leading singers wrote letters of objection on the grounds of race.

Evidence suggests Bologne was a first-rate conductor. Many of the orchestras he directed were transformed into superlative ensembles under his leadership, among them Le Cercle de l'Harmonie. His violin playing was outstanding and he found his voice as a composer early on, influenced primarily by his teacher François-Joseph Gossec and by Joseph Haydn, whose six *Paris Symphonies* Bologne conducted in 1786 in the presence of Marie Antoinette.

Bologne's three violin sonatas labelled Opus 1a date from 1770, though weren't published until 1781. Each is formed of two concise movements. The Third Sonata is the only example in a minor key – though it doesn't stay there for long, despite the tempestuous feeling of much of the opening movement.

The second movement takes the form of a graceful (*gracioso*) three-step dance. The music's figurations and sequencing patterns sound conventionally Classical, but the sense of equality between piano and violin was unusual for the time – the best example, perhaps, is found in the way the two instruments imitate and answer one another in the opening movement.

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)

Violin Sonata No.1 in A, Op.13

I Allegro molto

II Andante

III Allegro vivo

IV Allegro quasi presto

Gabriel Fauré was born exactly a century after Joseph Bologne, into a France still entrenched in tradition but starting to awaken to new creative trends. The effects of that would be felt mostly by the generation after Fauré, though in a sense he paved the way for them by radically overhauling the country's music education as director of the Paris Conservatoire.

Fauré deserves a reputation beyond that for writing understated, precise, elegant music that is most exciting when sidling into half-expected keys (though whatever Fauré's music is, it remains, like a Parisian street, ever-elegant). The first of the composer's violin sonatas is a case in point. Fauré's senior Camille Saint-Saëns observed that 'in this sonata you can find everything to tempt a gourmet: new forms, excellent modulations [key changes], unusual tone colours, and the use of unexpected rhythms,' adding that 'a magic floats above everything.'

The Sonata was first performed in January 1877 by the violinist Marie Tayau, with the composer at the piano. But it was dedicated to the violinist and composer Paul Viardot, son of the singer Pauline, for whom Fauré wrote a number of songs, and brother of Marianne, to whom the composer was briefly engaged.

Like Bologne, Fauré treats piano and violin as equal partners – perhaps because he knew he would play the piano part himself. Indeed, the first movement opens with 22 bars of rippling solo piano music. But even after the entry of the violin, the coursing passions are always poised and controlled.

The Andante (moderately slow) with nine beats to the bar, recalls a barcarolle – a Venetian gondolier's song. It is followed by a scampering fast movement that has been described as a 'French hoedown', seasoned with delectable accents and shifts in key and metre. The final movement underlines the accuracy of Saint-Saëns' description, as Fauré's elegantly sublimated sound-world is buffeted, rocked and momentarily illuminated as if by blazing passing flares.

Ernest Chausson (1855–99)

Poème, Op.25

Ernest Chausson's existence bordered on the idyllic, which is absolutely audible in his music. Family wealth meant Chausson could hone his musical perfectionism while under no obligation to be prolific. A case in point is the composer's *Poème*. Chausson even laboured long and hard over the title, which he gradually distilled from *Le chant de l'amour triomphant: poème symphonique pour violon et orchestre* to *Poème pour violon et orchestre* and eventually just *Poème*.

The first of those names – The Song of Triumphant Love – comes from a short story by Ivan Turgenev, a work discovered by Chausson late in his career, when his nonchalant style was becoming more melancholic and lined with the slightest angst, probably as a result of his discovery of symbolist poetry and Russian literature. In keeping with Turgenev's work, the *Poème* has a fair amount of hedonism and passion, too.

Though it was conceived as a symphonic poem (and originally for violin and orchestra), *Poème* doesn't trace the narrative of Turgenev's story. That would have missed the point: Chausson's musical expression, rather, is delightfully free. The composer Claude Debussy described it as 'pure in its

inspiration, dispensing with anything descriptive, anything anecdotal'. In the quietly rhapsodic violin line and the piano's shifting harmonic underlay, Chausson excels himself. But for all his unusual harmonic glances and free-spirited flight, the painstaking craft and sensibility with which he's more readily associated is ever present.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Rondo brillant in B minor, D.895

Don't be deceived by the title – partly because it isn't Schubert's anyway. The word 'Rondo' suggests music light in character, and this B minor Rondo is certainly not that.

As for 'brilliant', that was added by Schubert's publisher after composition. The word suggests virtuosity for its own sake, or at least for the sake of display. Again, way off the mark – though listening to the piece, you might just appreciate where the marketing department was coming from. In as far as Schubert was capable of writing anything extroverted, unbridled and exhibitionistic, this is it.

Besides, it must have been hard to give a title to such an unusually structured piece: a single movement work for violin with quasi-orchestral piano, launching with four minutes of tension between the two instruments before they lunge into a propulsive, joyous conversation in which the piano tries to rein in the violin's poetic tendencies with fatherly constraint. The whole is lavishly detailed but also highly contrasted; skittish and strenuous; by turns furious and still – all of it eddied by Schubert's tendency to play incessant games with his choice of keys and how he accesses them.

The piece was written in 1826 for Josef Slavik, the violinist Chopin described as 'a second Paganini' and who gave the first performance in early 1827. Undoubtedly Slavik's playing influenced the piece. But so, perhaps, did Schubert's own String Quartet in G major – recently finished by the composer when he came to write this score, and whose lyrical urge and dramatic scope make their mark. Some have even gone so far as to compare the Rondo with the Quartet's complex final movement – music in which questions are answered and threads brought together.

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