

Joshua Bell with Alessio Bax

Saturday, November 4, 2017 at 8:00pm

Pre-concert Talk at 7:00pm

This is the 767th concert in Koerner Hall

Joshua Bell, violin

Alessio Bax, piano

PROGRAM

Felix Mendelssohn: Violin Sonata in F Major (1838)

- I. Allegro vivace
- II. Adagio
- III. Assai vivace

Edvard Grieg: Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major, op. 13

- I. Lento doloroso – Allegro vivace
- II. Allegro tranquillo
- III. Allegro animato

INTERMISSION

Johannes Brahms: Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Major, op. 78

- I. Vivace ma non troppo
- II. Adagio
- III. Allegro molto moderato

Additional program to be announced from the stage

Felix Mendelssohn

Born in Hamburg, Germany, February 3, 1809; died in Leipzig, Germany, November 4, 1847

Violin Sonata in F Major (1838)

Dated Berlin, 15 June 1838, this three-movement sonata from Mendelssohn's maturity never saw its way into print during the composer's lifetime. Only in 1953, under the guidance of Yehudi Menuhin, did the manuscript find a publisher. Menuhin's enthusiasm for both this sonata and, two years earlier, for the hitherto unknown D Minor Concerto for Violin and Strings (1822) is reflected in his description of the 'ideal violin writing' in both works in his preface to the score. In addition, Menuhin adds that the sonata, the last of three, "has the chivalrous romantic quality of the age that produced Schumann, the elegance and lightness of touch of the age inherited from Mozart, and in addition the perfect formal presentation which Mendelssohn himself drew from Bach." Mendelssohn himself, however, declared it a 'wretched sonata' and began to revise its opening movement. He only completed 151 measures, leaving it to Menuhin to conflate the two versions in his edition. Mendelssohn intended the score, written at a time of feverish activity as both conductor and pianist, for Ferdinand David, his concert-master in Leipzig and a distinguished soloist who was to premiere the E Minor Violin Concerto seven years later. Both violinist and pianist were virtuoso performers and this is reflected in the exhilaration of an urgently driven opening movement and a

whirlwind finale in which both instruments share musical ideas in a true duo-sonata manner. In-between, by way of contrast, Mendelssohn gives us a song-without-words like sequence of variations on a soulful, reflective theme.

Edvard Grieg

Born in Bergen, Norway, June 15, 1843; died there, September 4, 1907

Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major, op. 13 (1867)

“I am furious at not being a string player,” Grieg said to violinist and composer Johann Halvorsen, a fellow Norwegian, in 1901. He was expressing a lifelong frustration whose origins, he claimed, lay with the Leipzig Conservatory where he studied. But, like Brahms and Bruch, Grieg made up for his lack of skill on the violin by seeking the counsel and friendship of many leading European violinists of the late 19th century, most of them renowned for a virtuosity that Grieg particularly admired. They included the flamboyant Norwegian Ole Bull. This charismatic senior violinist was a passionate nationalist (Norway was tied to Sweden until 1905). He encouraged Grieg to seek a Norwegian identity in his music and introduced him to the Hardanger fiddle and to several performers on the traditional instrument, with its four melody and four or five resonating sympathetic strings. The results were immediate and profound. Sounds of the traditional Norwegian country fiddle are to be heard in the middle movement of the First Violin Sonata, which Grieg wrote the following summer. Two years later, in 1867, Grieg was to express an even stronger Norwegian identity in his G Major Second Sonata.

He wrote it in Oslo (then Kristiania) “in the euphoria of my honeymoon,” as he referred to the three summer weeks he took to write the work after his engagement to his first cousin, Nina Hagerup. Norwegian folk music and rhythms permeate the score, particularly its outer movements. A slow, darkly shaded introduction introduces a short musical motif that is to recur throughout the three movements. It is a brief descending pattern, specifically the first three notes that also open Grieg’s Piano Concerto and shine like a beacon throughout many of his works. In this most nationalist of Grieg’s chamber works, the recurring motif adds coherence and unity to one of the composer’s most successful large-scale works. As the Allegro vivace begins, the pensive minor key and improvisatory feeling give way to the lively rhythms and major key of a Norwegian springar folk dance. The new theme is built around the recurring motif and has the sound of the Hardanger fiddle in its bones. An elegiac secondary theme is built from the same motif, taking on an assertive character as the movement concludes. The slow movement is now wistful, now forward-surgingly and passionate and its music reveals an inner strength and confidence. There is a hint of the Hardanger fiddle in the coda. The finale fuses the traditional sonata structure with that of the rondo in an original structure. Its music similarly fuses folk elements with the mainstream melodic and harmonic language of the day. Like the Piano Concerto, the sonata concludes in a grand manner.

Johannes Brahms

Born in Hamburg, Germany, May 7, 1833; died in Vienna, Austria, April 3, 1897

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Major, op. 78 (1878-9)

When she received the manuscript score of this newly-completed sonata in 1879, Robert Schumann’s widow, Clara Wieck, at once recognized its special significance. She recognized a key melody from two songs in Brahms’s earlier *Regenlieder*, op. 59. The melody in these *Rain Songs* had consoled her a few years earlier over the death of her daughter Julie, the growing insanity of another son Ludwig, and still more tragedy with the incurable tuberculosis of her gifted youngest son, Felix, Brahms’s godson. “It would bring me great joy if I could create some little thing in his memory,” Brahms wrote. This sonata, one of his gentlest, most lyrical creations, was that little thing. The music follows a similar emotional progression to that of the songs, both of which speak of a nostalgic but futile endeavour to recapture the lost innocence of youth. The melody makes far more than a token appearance in the sonata; it is its very lifeblood. Its most literal appearance is at the beginning of the third movement, where the violin takes over the

vocal line and the piano is essentially the same as in the song. A prominent feature of the melody is its opening rhythmic pattern – a long-short-long figure on the same note. This becomes a feature of the piano accompaniment too and, ultimately, it grows into a unifying motto of the entire sonata, from the very beginning to the finale. It culminates in an intimate overlapping of the motif between the two instruments as a feeling of reconciliation permeates the score. This “Raindrop” Sonata, as it is sometimes known, is the first of Brahms’s published violin sonatas, written in the peaceful setting of the village of Pörschach in the Austrian Alps.

- Program notes © 2017 Keith Horner

Joshua Bell

Violin

With a career spanning more than 30 years as a soloist, chamber musician, recording artist, and conductor, Joshua Bell is one of the most celebrated violinists of his era. An exclusive Sony Classical artist, he has recorded more than 40 CDs garnering Grammy, Mercury, Gramophone, and Echo Klassik awards, and is a recipient of the Avery Fisher Prize. Named the Music Director of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields in 2011, he is the only person to hold this post since Sir Neville Marriner formed the orchestra in 1958.

Fall 2017 dates include the New York Philharmonic’s celebration of Leonard Bernstein’s centennial.

Alessio Bax joins Bell in recital at nine North American cities and then Bell performs with the Vienna Symphony, the Monte Carlo Philharmonic, and with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields at London’s Wigmore Hall. In spring 2018, Bell continues with the Academy in tours of the United Kingdom, United States, and Asia. With pianist Sam Haywood, he performs 10 recitals in Europe and America, and on February 7, 2018, reunites with collaborator pianist Jeremy Denk for a recital broadcast live from Carnegie Hall. Further season highlights include dates with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Danish National Symphony, and an all-Beethoven play/direct program with the Orchestre National de Lyon.

In August 2017, Sony Classical released *Joshua Bell – The Classical Collection*, a 14-CD set of albums of classical repertoire, which displays Bell’s unique breadth, versatility, and breathtaking virtuosity.

A dedicated arts advocate, Bell is involved with Education Through Music and Turnaround Arts. He performs on the 1713 Huberman Stradivarius violin.

Alessio Bax

Piano

With his lyrical playing, insightful interpretations, and dazzling facility, Alessio Bax is “among the most remarkable young pianists now before the public” (*Gramophone*). First Prize winner at the Leeds and Hamamatsu International Piano Competitions and a 2009 Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient, he has appeared as a soloist with more than 100 orchestras, including the London and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras, Houston and Cincinnati Symphonies, NHK Symphony in Japan, St. Petersburg Philharmonic with Yuri Temirkanov, and the City of Birmingham Symphony with Sir Simon Rattle.

After inaugurating a new three-year appointment as Artistic Director of Tuscany’s Incontri in Terra di Siena festival in summer 2017, Bax launches Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s 2017-18 season in company with his wife and fellow pianist, Lucille Chung. He continues a full season, highlighted by a pair of high-profile US duo recital tours with violinist Joshua Bell and flutist Emmanuel Pahud, respectively; UK solo recitals at London’s Wigmore Hall and the Leeds Festival; collaborations with US orchestras from the Minnesota Orchestra to the North Carolina Philharmonic, on concertos by Gershwin, Grieg, Rachmaninov, Saint-Saëns, and Schumann; and Signum Classics’ release of his recording of Beethoven’s “Emperor” concerto with the Southbank Sinfonia, paired with rarely heard solo works by the master composer. Bax’s celebrated discography for Signum Classics includes works by

Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, Rachmaninov, and Stravinsky, as well as a Russian album and a lullaby collection (*Lullabies For Mila* is dedicated to his daughter, Mila) – all of which have been singled out for distinction by the most discerning critics.

Alessio Bax made his Royal Conservatory debut on March 25, 2012, and Joshua Bell is making his Conservatory debut tonight.