


**EDINBURGH
INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL**

THE STORY OF THE VIOLIN

—

Nicola Benedetti Violin

17 Aug 12pm & 2.30pm

OLD COLLEGE QUAD

The performance lasts approx. 1hr with no interval.

Supported by

Claire and Mark Urquhart

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PROGRAMME NOTES

The story of the violin is, truth be told, a long, complex and obscure one, the instrument's origins somewhat lost in the mists of time. Bowed stringed instruments have been played for centuries in many cultures across the world, from the Chinese erhu to the Indian sarangi, the Indonesian rebab and the Arabian rabab. It was this last instrument that travelled to medieval Spain and France (via the Byzantine lyra) to become the modern violin's most direct ancestor. The form and design we know today were set down in northern Italy in the mid 1500s, by early makers including Andrea Amati and Gasparo da Salò, instruments by both of whom are still in use today. The violin was later perfected by 17th- and 18th-century Italian makers including Antonio Stradivari and the Guarneri family (most famously Giuseppe Guarneri 'del Gesù'), and making soon spread to modern-day Austria and Germany.

Though it's most often an ensemble instrument, the musical possibilities of a solo violin playing alone have attracted composers throughout the instrument's history, often as a means of demonstrating its player's remarkable technical abilities in music of dazzling virtuosity and breathtaking complexity.

Heinrich Biber, composer of today's first piece, was working at the Salzburg court at the end of the 17th century, and established himself as one of the violin's earliest virtuoso players and composers. His Passacaglia in G minor forms the final movement of his immense set of *Rosary* or *Mystery Sonatas*, 15 works dating from around 1676 that depict moments from the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary, often requiring outlandish tunings for the instrument's four strings (and, in one, even asking for strings to be physically crossed over each other in a literal representation of the Cross). The Passacaglia, however, is the Sonatas' sober, visionary conclusion, using a standard violin tuning. It employs a repeating bass pattern of four descending notes, heard no fewer than 65 times throughout the course of the brief piece, on top of which Biber conjures complex textures and spectacular invention involving several contrasting voices.

Bach's Chaconne – more properly the concluding Chaconne in D minor from his Second Partita, one of the composer's six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin – is quite simply one of the monuments of Western classical music. Yehudi Menuhin called it 'the greatest structure for solo violin that exists', while for Joshua Bell it's 'not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history'. Again using

a repeating bassline, the Chaconne is a set of free variations that begins darkly in the minor, brightens in a middle section in the major, and then returns to the minor for its serious close. Alongside its remarkable invention, there's an undeniable sense, too, of Bach peering past the limitations of his solo instrument to music of immense profundity and transcendental vision: it's recently been speculated that he may have written the Chaconne as a memorial to his first wife, Maria Barbara, who died unexpectedly in 1720 while Bach was travelling.

We jump forward a century to the 24 Caprices written between 1802 and 1817 by Niccolò Paganini, a superstar of his day, and still considered one of the greatest virtuoso violinists to have ever lived, who demonstrated such superhuman feats of technical agility that he was widely rumoured to have been in league with the devil. (The violin has long been thought to have devilish connections, in fact, links that are further explored in the Faustian fable of Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, which forms Nicola Benedetti's next performances at the International Festival, on 21 August.) Paganini's Caprices are essentially a set of 24 exercises exploring different aspects of advanced violin technique, and aiming to demonstrate a player's exceptional technical skills. The first, nicknamed 'The Arpeggio', focuses on harmonies played across the instrument's four

strings, while the final Caprice is the set's most famous, comprising a set of ever more flamboyant variations on an unforgettable opening theme (which has itself inspired new sets of variations from countless other composers, including Rachmaninov, Brahms, Liszt, Lutoslawski and even Andrew Lloyd Webber).

About a century later again, Belgian composer and violin virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe consciously set out to update Bach's monumental Sonatas and Partitas with contemporary playing techniques and means of expression in his Six Sonatas for solo violin of 1923, each one dedicated to one of his contemporaries. No 5 was written for his compatriot Mathieu Crickboom, one of Ysaÿe's favourite pupils, and is cast across two pastoral movements. The first depicts a resplendent dawn (complete with buzzing insects and a gentle breeze), and the second is a romping rustic dance with uneven rhythms and perhaps even the sound of laughter.

David Kettle

David Kettle is a music and arts writer based in Edinburgh, who contributes regularly to the *Scotsman* and the *Daily Telegraph*. He has also written for publications including *BBC Music Magazine*, *The Times*, *The Strad* and *Classical Music*, and for organisations including the BBC Proms, Glyndebourne and Scottish Opera.

NICOLA BENEDETTI

Nicola Benedetti is one of the most sought-after violinists of her generation. Her ability to captivate audiences and her wide appeal as an advocate for classical music has made her one of the most influential artists of today.

In 2021/22, Benedetti opens the Barbican Centre's season and collaborates with ensembles including the London Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra and Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. In April 2021 she gave the world premiere of Mark Simpson's Violin Concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra and Gianandrea Noseda, receiving critical acclaim. Other season highlights include a European tour with cellist Leonard Elschenbroich and pianist Alexei Grynyuk, artists with whom she has been performing in a trio since 2008, and tours to Spain with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Asia with the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

Winner of the Grammy award for best classical instrumental solo in 2020, as well as best female artist at both 2012 and 2013 Classical BRIT Awards,

Benedetti records exclusively for Decca (Universal Music). Her latest recording of Elgar's Violin Concerto entered at No 1 in the UK's Official Classical Album Chart. Other recent recordings include her Grammy award-winning album of music written especially for her by jazz musician Wynton Marsalis: Violin Concerto in D and *Fiddle Dance Suite for Solo Violin*.

Benedetti was appointed a CBE in 2019 and awarded the Queen's Medal for Music in 2017 and an MBE in 2013. In addition, she holds the positions of Vice President (National Children's Orchestras), Big Sister (Sistema Scotland) and Patron (National Youth Orchestras of Scotland's Junior Orchestra, Music in Secondary Schools Trust and Junior Conservatoire at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Benedetti plays the 'Gariel' Stradivari violin of 1717, courtesy of Jonathan Moulds.

AUDIENCE SURVEY

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