



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Steven Isserlis, Cello and Connie Shih, Piano

February 27, 2024 – 7:30 p.m.

Disciples Christian Church

Cello Sonata, Op. 40

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: St. Petersburg, 1906

Died: Moscow, 1975

Composed: 1934

Shostakovich wrote most of his chamber music for his friends and for himself (he was a prodigiously gifted pianist).

Communicating with others—both with fellow performers and with the audience—was first and foremost on his mind. And classical forms, simple rhythmic patterns from various folk-music idioms and other devices that had become anathema to many of his more radical contemporaries, were exactly what he needed in order to say what he had to say. He played subtle games with these conventional devices, setting up expectations in the listener only to thwart them and do the unexpected, knowing that an attentive and sympathetic listener would understand.

Shostakovich dedicated his Cello Sonata to his friend Viktor Kubatsky, with whom he played the work on tour in many cities of the Soviet Union. In writing a new piece in a traditional form, the composer

was well aware of the tensions between the classical genre and the modern times in which the piece was written. As a result, this great sonata is, at the same time, a sometimes wry and sometimes nostalgic commentary on the genre itself.

The second theme in the effusively lyrical first movement could almost be sung to the words of a 19th-century *romans* (Russian parlor song). But the appearances are maintained only up to a point: we wait in vain for the recapitulation, and when it finally comes, the opening theme is played at half its original tempo with a “frozen” accompaniment and there the movement ends. What is this if not a painful admission that sonata form (and the world) is no longer what it used to be?

Yet life has to go on, and a bright moment arrives with the scherzo *à la valse*, a sparkling movement that anticipates the second movement of Shostakovich’s Fifth

Symphony. And similarly to what happens there, merriment is only a short step away from gloom: a dark Largo follows with an expressive melody subjected to many chromatic key shifts and finally exploding in a *fortissimo* climax, only to fall back into the muted sadness of the beginning.

The final word belongs to a light-hearted dance movement in rondo form. As

a final surprise, the piano part, which until now has been of only moderate technical difficulty, erupts in a frenzied cascade of sixteenth-note runs, before it resumes its accompanying role as the cello brings back the deceptively simple rondo theme, “as if nothing had happened.”

Cello Sonata, Op. 71

Dmitri Kabalevsky

Born: St. Petersburg, 1904

Died: Moscow, 1987

Composed: 1962

Two years older than Shostakovich, Dmitri Kabalevsky was another key figure in the musical life of the Soviet Union. A prominent pedagogue and public figure who cultivated an excellent relationship with the political leadership, he largely avoided the problems with the powers-that-be that his contemporaries sometimes had to face. He was championed abroad by the likes of Arturo Toscanini and Vladimir Horowitz, and his music is performed internationally with great success to this day.

Kabalevsky wrote his Cello Sonata for Mstislav Rostropovich, who inspired a whole new literature of works for cello during his long career. Kabalevsky’s sonata is an ambitious 30-minute composition in three movements that completes a singular journey from a quiet and somber opening through many agitated and dramatic episodes to a final return to the opening music.

The first movement is the most complex of the three, with numerous tempo

changes and character contrasts. After an intense development, a beautifully lyrical second theme emerges that will also close the movement, its recapitulation prepared by an intensely emotional recitative for the unaccompanied cello.

Rostropovich reportedly described the second movement as “the waltz that never was”: a dance-like theme is introduced after a somewhat hesitant introduction, but the waltz never quite gets off the ground. There is an eerie middle section that begins quietly but reaches a *fortissimo* climax before the imaginary waltz returns.

The last movement is an energetic *perpetuum mobile* that includes a lyrical second theme and an extensive middle section in a much slower tempo. The perpetual motion later returns, but the sonata ends slowly, with a recall of the first movement’s quiet and somber theme.

Ballade in A minor

Julius Isserlis

Born: Kishinyov, Russian Empire [now Chişinău, Moldova], 1888

Died: London, 1968

Steven Isserlis's grandfather Julius was a pianist and composer who had studied with Sergei Taneyev, the eminent Russian composer. (Taneyev, Tchaikovsky's favorite pupil, also taught the young Sergei Rachmaninoff.)

Julius Isserlis's compositional output consists mostly of piano music in the tradition of Chopin. The present Ballade--his only work for a string instrument--is also

indebted to Chopin's piano ballades in its formal structure: like the Polish master, Isserlis builds up considerable momentum after a quiet opening. The main theme, in an asymmetrical 5/4 meter, returns in the middle of the piece and also at the end, after a brief cello cadenza. The work was dedicated to Pablo Casals, but it is not known if the great Catalan cellist ever performed it.

Sonata in G minor, Op. 19 **Sergei Rachmaninoff**

Born: Semyonovo, Russia, 1873

Died: Beverly Hills, CA, 1943

Composed: 1901

Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata shows the 28-year-old composer in full command of his creative powers. Written the same year as the Second Piano Concerto, it contains some echoes of that ever-popular work. The sonata was written for cellist Anatoly Brandukov, who had already been the dedicatee of two early cello pieces by Rachmaninoff.

The four-movement work opens with a dreamy slow introduction that segues into an "Allegro" dominated by a pair of sweeping melodies in which both instruments are made to sing in an almost operatic way. The entire movement displays an uncommon level of emotional intensity. The second movement is an "Allegro scherzando," but there is something darkly

ominous about the character of the music. This mysteriously menacing quality is only temporarily relieved by the lyrical melodies introduced by way of contrast. An intimate nocturne follows as the third movement—a "love duet" of sorts between the piano and the cello. For the most part soft and introspective, this delicate "Andante" has only a few more emphatic moments.

Rachmaninoff saved his most dynamic and energetic music for the fourth-movement "Allegro mosso," where the tonality changes from g minor to G Major. He also saved one his most memorable melodies for this grand closing statement, in which tender passages alternate effectively with moments of great dramatic power.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.