

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 10 March 2025
1.00pm

Steven Isserlis cello
Connie Shih piano

Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904-1987)

Cello Sonata in B flat Op. 71 (1962)
*I. Andante molto sostenuto • II. Allegretto
con moto • III. Allegro molto*

Julius Isserlis (1888-1968)

Ballade in A minor for cello and piano

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 119 (1949)
*I. Andante grave • II. Moderato •
III. Allegro, ma non troppo*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Please note that the running order of this programme has changed since these notes were written.

Composers have often written with particular performers in mind, and this is certainly true when it comes to the Russian cello repertoire. It is a tradition that goes back to Karl Davydov (1838-89), whom Tchaikovsky called 'the tsar of cellists', although it was to the German-born Wilhelm Fitzenhagen (1848-90) that we owe the *Variations on a Rococo Theme* (1877). One of Fitzenhagen's pupils at the Moscow Conservatory was Anatoly Brandukov (1858-1930), to whom Tchaikovsky dedicated his *Pezzo capriccioso* in 1887. Then, in 1902, Brandukov served as best man at Rachmaninov's wedding, and his Cello Sonata honours their personal and creative friendship. One of Brandukov's students at the Moscow Conservatory was Viktor Kubatsky, for whom Shostakovich wrote his Cello Sonata in 1934.

A decade later, Mstislav Rostropovich graduated from that same institution, and over the next half century or so, his playing would inspire countless new works by both Soviet and foreign composers. One of these was **Prokofiev's** Cello Sonata in C, Op. 119. Written in 1949, it dates from relatively late in the composer's life. Two years earlier, Rostropovich had earned Prokofiev's gratitude by reviving the ill-fated cello concerto (1933-38). Then, in 1949, he premièred the second cello concerto of Prokofiev's close friend, Myaskovsky. It was a tense time in Soviet music: at the Congress of Soviet Composers in 1948, Prokofiev – together with Khachaturian, Myaskovsky, and Shostakovich – had been viciously denounced for 'formalism' and many of their compositions were banned. Eschewing the kind of daring and complexity that had once been characteristic of Prokofiev's compositional style, the opening-hearted music of the cello sonata seems to have been a sincere attempt to respond to official criticism. Its home key of C major – which it shares with Prokofiev's Fifth and Ninth Piano Sonatas (1923 and 1947), Third Piano Concerto (1971-21), and Fourth Symphony (1929-30) – is radiant and sunny, and its melodies abound in infectious lyricism, as well as moments of impish good humour. The Sonata was premièred in Moscow on 1 March 1950 (with Sviatoslav Richter at the piano), having been assiduously vetted by the various artistic committees that approved works for publication and performance. Yet for all its apparent conformism to the spirit of Socialist Realism, Prokofiev's Sonata is ultimately far removed from Soviet ideology. Instead, it breathes the freedom of artistic friendship and a hope for the fairer judgement of posterity.

The life of **Julius Isserlis** was also profoundly marked by history and politics. He was born in 1888 in the town of Kishinev (or Chişinău), now the capital of an independent Moldova, but then a lively, cosmopolitan city on the southwest border of the Russian Empire. Kishinev had one of the largest Jewish populations in Central Europe – around 43% by 1900 – amongst which

was the Isserlis family. Young Julius showed great musical promise and at the age of nine, he went to study at the conservatory in Kyiv. A year later, he moved again, this time to Moscow, where his teachers included Vasily Safonov and Sergei Taneyev. After his graduation, he undertook further studies in Paris with Widor, and for a while, it seemed as though a career in Western Europe and North America beckoned. Yet Isserlis returned to Russia, where he established a growing reputation as a pianist and composer. He did not immediately leave his homeland after the October Revolution, but by 1923, material privations and the growing atmosphere of political intolerance led him to emigrate to Vienna. It was to be his home for the next 15 years, but with the rise of Fascism and the German annexation of Austria, Isserlis was forced to move again, this time to London, where he died in 1968. Dedicated to the great Catalan cellist, Pablo (or Pau) Casals, the Ballade in A minor is imbued with the spirit of late Romanticism, evoking something of the music of Rachmaninov and Scriabin. It alternates wistful moments of expansive lyricism with vigorous episodes of dance-like virtuosity, with themes and ideas exchanged playfully between cello and piano.

Prokofiev made his career first in Imperial Russia, then in the émigré world of Paris and America, before finally returning for good to the Soviet Union in 1936. Isserlis's journey took him from Imperial Russia to interwar Austria and eventually to London. Born in St Petersburg in 1904, **Kabalevsky** was a product of an almost entirely Soviet education, and both his career and his music reflect the many shifts in ideology and aesthetics that took place between 1917 and his death in 1987. He joined the Community Party in 1940, and as a composer, administrator, teacher and editor, he had a knack for intuiting and understanding the constantly changing party. In the eyes of his critics, Kabalevsky's reputation is tainted by the compromises he clearly made with officialdom. Even leaving aside the question of whether any Soviet artist could truly withstand the impact of politics, his music is largely conservative in style, seemingly conforming with the expectations of Socialist Realism. However, it is unfailingly well-crafted, and at its best, strikingly personal in tone. The Cello Sonata, Op. 71, was premièred in Moscow in February 1962 by Rostropovich, accompanied by the composer himself. Stalin had died nearly a decade before, and under the more liberal rule of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet arts began to breathe a little more easily. The Sonata's opening movement is ruminative, even confessional, with flashes of something more impassioned. Then comes a short Allegretto that offers no light relief or emotional respite from what has come before. Rather, it is a frenetic waltz, danced as if by two flailing skeletons in the moonlight. The Sonata closes with a bravura *perpetuum mobile*, whose final moments return to the introverted music of the very opening.

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