

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 13 February 2023
1.00pm

Christian Poltéra cello
Kathryn Stott piano

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

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

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 65 (1845-6)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo •
III. Largo • IV. Finale. Allegro*

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One hundred years separate the creation of Prokofiev's Cello Sonata and Chopin's death. The work, written for the young Mstislav Rostropovich in 1949, occupied the composer at a time of grave concern for his future in the Soviet Union, no doubt magnified by genuine fears of imprisonment or worse during Stalin's post-war period of paranoia and bloodshed. Prokofiev's music had been denounced the previous year by Communist Party Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov, as part of his mission to eradicate so-called formalism, or the indulgence of art for art's sake, from Soviet society. Zhdanov's anti-formalist decree concerning music accused Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Myaskovsky and other leading composers of displaying the 'fullest expression' of the 'formalist and anti-popular trend'. Prokofiev, forced to apologise to the Central Committee for his errors, was broken by his fall from grace. He completed few new works in his remaining years, although he was inspired by Rostropovich's performance of one of Myaskovsky's duo sonatas to compose a sonata for cello and piano, the memorable melodies of which were almost certainly conditioned by thoughts of regaining official approval.

Sviatoslav Richter, who accompanied Rostropovich for the work's première, witnessed the process by which Prokofiev's Cello Sonata was declared fit for public consumption. 'Before playing it in concert, we had to perform it at the Composers' Union, where these gentlemen decided the fate of all new works,' the pianist recalled. 'During this period, more than any other, they needed to work out whether Prokofiev had produced a new masterpiece or, conversely, a piece that was "hostile to the spirit of the people". Three months later, we had to play it again at a plenary session of all the composers who sat on the Radio Committee, and it wasn't until the following year that we were able to perform it in public, in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory on 1 March 1950.' One can imagine the flinty faces of members of the Union of Soviet Composers upon hearing the hammered chords early in the first movement's lyrical introduction and their relief at the arrival of its radiant main theme. The episodic nature of the *Andante grave* provides scope for Prokofiev to present his elegant theme in a variety of different moods, including a slow, rhapsodic dialogue for cello and piano and a cadenza-like coda built from scurrying cello arpeggios.

The dialogue continues in the central *Moderato* with what feels like the playful offspring of a foxtrot and a military march. Prokofiev suspends the dance in favour of a nostalgic song in triple time before politely nudging it aside to make way for the opening theme's return. Simplicity is key to the sonata's finale: the composer here fashioned melodies in line with what, according to Zhdanov's decree of February 1948, were 'the best traditions of Russian and Western classical music'. Echoes of Russian folk tunes run through the *Allegro ma non troppo*, at first wistful, then self-confident. The work ends with a

thrilling uprush of scales, descending cello chords and a final modulatory sequence that resolves with an unequivocal close in C major.

In his two mature piano sonatas and sonata for cello and piano, Chopin found strikingly original things to say in a form that could all too easily be smothered by its conventions. His departure from what conscientious Austro-German theorists defined as the norms of sonata form proved beyond the pale for many critics, so much so that late-19th-century prejudices against his Cello Sonata took root and held firm until their contradiction by persuasive performances by, among others, Rostropovich, Daniil Shafran and Jacqueline du Pré. Chopin's work, acknowledged today for the richness of its invention, is governed by a logic different from sonata form's textbook patterns of dramatic tension and resolution; indeed, Chopin appears determined to evade or at least obscure the traditional opposition of tonic and dominant (or relative major) keys in its first movement, which he frequently achieves by crafting cadences that land in remote keys.

The Cello Sonata in G minor is hallmarked by its multitude of lyrical themes, the first of which bears a family resemblance to 'Gute Nacht' from Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*. Chopin creates tension not from the conflict of key relationships but by contrasting fragmentary melodic ideas with longer, more stable themes, perhaps thereby projecting the restlessness and rootlessness he experienced as a Polish exile in Paris in what proved to be the closing years of his short life. The composition's earliest sketches, drafted during the summer of 1845, were made while Chopin's turbulent relationship with George Sand was beginning to unravel. Sand's subsequent unflattering depiction of the composer in her novel *Lucrezia Floriani*, published in 1846, signalled the beginning of the end of their affair and proved a serious shock to his already fragile physical and mental state.

Chopin's persistent sadness, magnified when the couple finally parted, swirled as he worked to complete his sonata in 1847. Recollections of happier times and past successes surface throughout the work: modified fragments from the First Piano Concerto appear in the Cello Sonata's opening movement, for instance, while a phrase from the Second Piano Sonata's famous funeral march surfaces in its slow movement. Such musical revenants, fleeting players in Chopin's creative engagement with sonata form, served to enhance the work's expressive range. When the composer took to his death bed in 1849, he asked the sonata's dedicatee Auguste Franchomme to perform one of its movements. It is most likely that the cellist bid farewell by playing the composition's profoundly melancholy *Largo*, a fitting tribute to one of the greatest melodists of all time.

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