

WIGMORE HALL 125

Tuesday 13 January 2026
1.00pm

Li-Wei Qin cello
Jeremy Young piano

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 65 (1960-1)

*I. Dialogo. Allegro • II. Scherzo – Pizzicato •
III. Elegia • IV. Marcia • V. Moto perpetuo*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasiestücke Op. 73 (1849)

*Zart und mit Ausdruck • Lebhaft, leicht •
Rasch und mit Feuer*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Cello Sonata No. 5 in D Op. 102 No. 2 (1815)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio con molto
sentimento d'affetto • III. Allegro – Allegro fugato*



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Benjamin Britten first met Mstislav Rostropovich in September 1960 when the great Russian cellist was giving the London première of Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto. Introduced by Shostakovich, they quickly became close friends, holidaying together with Peter Pears and Rostropovich's wife, the singer Galina Vishnevskaya. Their association flourished despite the language barrier – knowing virtually nothing of each other's language, they conversed in a primitive idiom they labelled 'Aldeburgh Deutsch' – and spawned an extraordinary series of works, including three Suites for unaccompanied cello, perhaps the finest since those of JS Bach, and the 'Cello Symphony' of 1963. The Sonata in C was Britten's first piece for Rostropovich, and the two men premièred it together at the Aldeburgh Festival in July 1961.

The Sonata's construction owes little to classical sonata form: it is a suite of five contrasting movements with a heartfelt elegy at its core. William Mann speculated that the Sonata might have been conceived as a portrait of its dedicatee: 'gay, charming, an astonishingly brilliant executant, but behind all these qualities a searching musician with the mind of a philosopher'. Certainly Britten relished the musical possibilities Rostropovich's astonishing technique opened up. The second movement, for example, uses pizzicato in an unprecedented way: Britten told his friend that 'the pizzicato movement will amuse you; I hope it is possible! I'd like it ... to be played "Non arpeggiando" with 2 or 3 (sometimes 4!) fingers – rather like guitar technique!' The finale, a *moto perpetuo*, strongly recalls Shostakovich and even quotes the Russian composer's musical 'signature': D–S (= E flat) –C–H (= B). Britten thus pays tribute to a composer he deeply admired, and whose concerto for Rostropovich had inspired him to write for the cello, an instrument he had not previously favoured.

Schumann was the first composer to use the generic description *Fantasiestücke*, for a set of piano pieces composed in 1837; he adopted it from one of his favourite authors, ETA Hoffmann, who had used it in 1815 to describe a collection of writings in various genres. The term clearly appealed to Schumann, with its suggestion that the form of the piece could follow the composer's fantasy or imagination rather than being pre-determined, and he reused it in 1842 for his first work for piano trio and again in 1849 for the pieces heard today. These were one of four duet works for piano and different solo instruments composed in Dresden that year: Op. 73 was originally conceived for clarinet, but Schumann indicated that the solo line could also be adapted for violin or cello and the set has become equally well-known as a cello work. The three pieces are closely related both harmonically (the first progresses from A minor to A major, the key of the second and third pieces) and thematically (material from the first piece is recalled obliquely in the second and more conspicuously in the third). Schumann indicates gradually increasing tempi both from one piece to the next and within the course of the third

piece, meaning that the set as a whole builds from a calm, dream-like beginning to an exhilarating climax.

Given that neither Haydn nor Mozart composed any music for cello and piano – though Haydn wrote two ground-breaking cello concertos – it is notable how much **Beethoven** wrote for this combination. Blending piano and strings was considered a daunting challenge by many 18th-century composers, whose keyboards did not offer the same capacity for sustaining sound as today's instruments, but Beethoven's willingness to take the challenge up was evident from the start of his career: his first numbered opus consisted of three piano trios, composed and published in 1795. The first two cello sonatas (Op. 5) were composed the following year, while the last (Op. 102) were composed in 1815 (and published two years later). Beethoven's music for cello and piano therefore spans all three of the creative 'phases' into which musicologists commonly categorise his work, and coincides with rapid developments in the manufacture of keyboard instruments, from the fortepiano he would have expected to hear in the first sonatas, to something much closer to today's 'concert grand'.

The two cello sonatas that make up Op. 102 were composed in 1815, often regarded by Beethoven scholars as the start of the 'late period' that produced so much visionary music. They were dedicated to the amateur pianist and long-standing friend of Beethoven, Countess Marie Erdödy; at that time Joseph Linke – cellist in Ignaz Schuppanzigh's quartet, which premièred many of Beethoven's works – was living on the Countess's estate, and they probably performed the sonatas together in summer 1815.

Both sonatas continue the trend of Beethoven's work towards refinement of texture and compression of material, lasting only a little over half as long as their counterparts in Op. 5. Both sonatas also display many features that, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see as characteristic of Beethoven's 'late style', such as unconventional treatments of harmonic relationships and thematic cross-references between movements. There is intensive development of very small motivic cells, such as the five-note figure (a turn followed by an octave leap) that begins the D major sonata, and mysterious, startling sonorities. Amongst this knotty, challenging material there is also exquisite beauty, nowhere more so than in the D major sonata's *Adagio* – the only full-length slow movement in any of the sonatas, and described by Steven Isserlis as 'a prayer that must surely be the most beautiful movement ever written for cello and piano'. With the bold juxtaposition of opposites that characterises late Beethoven, this leads straight into a fugue that is both intellectually brilliant and viscerally enjoyable, and which brings Beethoven's work in a genre that he had effectively invented to a triumphant conclusion.

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