

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 July 2023  
7.30pm

Kian Soltani cello  
Seong-Jin Cho piano

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Suite italienne for cello and piano (1932) *arranged by  
Igor Stravinsky*

*I. Introduzione • II. Serenata • III. Aria •  
IV. Tarantella • V. Minuetto e Finale*

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 119 (1949)

*I. Andante grave • II. Moderato •  
III. Allegro ma non troppo*

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 19 (1901)

*I. Lento. Allegro moderato • II. Allegro scherzando •  
III. Andante • IV. Allegro mosso*

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**Stravinsky** came to fame, at least in Western Europe, thanks to the colourful scores that he composed for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. If *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* represent the acme of Russian artistic nationalism in the years running up to the Great War, then *Pulcinella* marks a turn towards a new aesthetic of neo-classicism that swept Europe in the 1920s. Using pieces by Pergolesi and other Italian composers of the 18th Century to illustrate stories from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition, and with sets by Picasso, *Pulcinella* opened at the Paris Opera in May 1920. Stravinsky's beautifully calligraphed notebook is in the possession of the British Library, where it can be browsed online.

As Stravinsky later recalled: '*Pulcinella* was my discovery of the past, the epiphany through which the whole of my late work became possible. It was a backward look, of course – the first of many love affairs in that direction – but it was a look in the mirror, too.' His affection for the score can be seen in the number of arrangements he made of it, including an orchestral suite dating from 1922, a suite for violin and piano from 1925 (in collaboration with the Polish-born violinist Paul Kochanski), and another suite for the same combination, this time arranged with Stravinsky's recital partner Samuel Dushkin, dating from 1932.

In 1931, the Ukrainian-born American cellist Gregor Piatigorsky began to programme his own arrangements of a number of movements from the ballet, and he and Stravinsky were soon collaborating on a joint transcription of the five extracts that would be published as the *Suite italienne* in 1934. Much of the work was carried out on a transatlantic liner from New York to Italy, and when not working, the two men would distract themselves with rounds of poker. There is nothing idle or insouciant about the results of their collaboration, however, which is a testament to Piatigorsky's fearless virtuosity.

Stravinsky's status as an émigré, as well as the cosmopolitan turn that his music took in interwar Europe and later in the United States, meant that he was regarded with a great degree of suspicion and hostility in the Soviet Union, at least until his return to Russia in 1962. **Prokofiev**, too, spent nearly two decades in Europe and America after the October Revolution, only returning permanently to the Soviet Union in 1936. There, he found new opportunities for composition, although his creativity was often hampered by political considerations and personal rivalries on the part of his fellow composers.

The Cello Sonata in C Op. 119 is a relatively late work. It was inspired, like so many Soviet works for the instrument, by the playing of Rostropovich, who had revived Prokofiev's ill-fated Cello Concerto (1933-8) in 1947 and who gave the première of Myaskovsky's second cello sonata in 1949. The previous year, Prokofiev – together with Khachaturian, Myaskovsky and Shostakovich – had been viciously criticised for

so-called 'formalism'. The Cello Sonata seems to have been a sincere attempt to respond to such criticism and adopts a direct, open-hearted tone that eschews the kind of daring and complexity that had once been characteristic of Prokofiev's compositional style. Its home key of C major – which it shares with a number of other works, such as the fifth and ninth piano sonatas (1923 and 1947), third piano concerto (1917-21), 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, having been cleared by the various artistic committees charged with vetting new works. Yet for all its apparent conformism to the spirit of socialist realism, Prokofiev's sonata seems far removed from Soviet ideology, breathing instead the freedom of artistic friendship and a hope for the fairer judgement of posterity.

The figure of Rostropovich so dominates our perception of the Russian cello school that it can be easy to overlook the many other great performers who have shaped that tradition. One of Piatigorsky's teachers at the Moscow Conservatory was Anatoly Brandukov, who also served as best man at the wedding of **Rachmaninov** in 1902. If Rachmaninov's Cello Sonata honours that personal and creative friendship, it also looks back to the legacy of Chopin, in particular his Cello Sonata of 1846. Both sonatas are cast in G minor, and both employ the same basic four-movement structure: allegro, scherzo, slow movement, and finale. But where Chopin's sonata is a work by an ailing composer, Rachmaninov's marks its composer's return to health after a period of creative silence. In 1897, his first symphony had received its disastrous première in St Petersburg. Stung by the negative critical reaction (and disappointed by Glazunov's careless conducting of it), Rachmaninov fell into a profound depression. He made ends meet by taking on a series of conducting engagements, but composition proved impossible. It was only after a course of hypnotherapy with Dr Vladimir Dahl in early 1900 that he began to feel well enough to write again. By April 1901, he had completed his second piano concerto, which he dedicated to Dahl in gratitude.

The Cello Sonata followed soon afterwards and received its première in December 1901 in Moscow, with Rachmaninov himself taking the piano part. The piano writing is, of course, everything that one might expect from a virtuoso pianist and certainly cannot be described an 'accompaniment'. Yet Rachmaninov was wise enough to work closely with Brandukov to ensure that the solo part was idiomatically written and that the two instruments achieve a true sense of dialogue. As originally conceived, the sonata ended quietly; after the première, Rachmaninov added the bravura 24 bar coda we know today.

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