

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 25 April 2023
7.30pm

Steven Isserlis cello
Connie Shih piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Variations concertantes in D Op. 17 (1829)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 121 (1851) *arranged
by Steven Isserlis*

*I. Ziemlich langsam - Lebhaft • II. Sehr lebhaft •
III. Leise, einfach • IV. Bewegt*

Interval

Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870)

Cello Sonata in E Op. 121 (1850-1)

*I. Allegro espressivo e appassionato
II. Scherzo 'Ballabile'. Allegretto quasi allegro
III. Ballade 'in böhmische Weise'. Andantino
IV. Finale. Allegro vivace, ma non troppo*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Introduction and Polonaise brillante in C Op. 3 (1829-30)



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Connections

Tonight's programme is full of connections of various sorts. To start with: all four composers were on (more or less) friendly terms with each other. Mendelssohn and Chopin knew and admired each other; Chopin even dedicated (at Mendelssohn's request) his Mazurka Op. 50 No. 2 to Mendelssohn's wife Cécile. Mendelssohn and Schumann were friends and colleagues in Leipzig, with Mendelssohn conducting the premières of Schumann's First and Second symphonies and Schumann writing several worshipful reviews of Mendelssohn's music, describing him as 'a real god'. Schumann's very first published review, on the other hand – 'hats off, gentlemen – a genius!' – was of an early Chopin work. Chopin and Moscheles were on cordial terms, once performing together for the French royal family; while Mendelssohn and Moscheles, both Central Europeans hailing from highly cultured Jewish backgrounds, were the closest of friends. The relationship began with Moscheles acting as Mendelssohn's teacher, 'without losing sight for a moment that I was sitting next to a master, not a pupil'; it later evolved into a deeply affectionate friendship between colleagues, the two men teaching, performing and even composing together.

But there are also many connections between the specific works in this programme...

Mendelssohn Variations concertantes in D Op. 17

This set of variations, the first of Mendelssohn's several works for cello and piano, was completed in 1829, the year in which Mendelssohn first travelled to Britain – a trip arranged by Moscheles. The work radiates unwavering confidence, charm and fiery imagination – a fine example of the extraordinary mastery of the young Mendelssohn, now approaching the end of his teenage years.

Connections – On that first, triumphant visit to London, Mendelssohn was invited to perform the *Variations* at Moscheles's house. Mendelssohn had to go out before he had finished copying out the parts, however, so Moscheles – the kindest and most modest of men – 'copied out the remaining half while I was out at dinner.' Another, rather more oblique connection is that the *Variations* were written for Mendelssohn's brother Paul, an amateur cellist who became a successful banker. In later years, he was one of the few people from whom Clara Schumann would accept financial help after Robert Schumann's mental collapse.

Schumann Violin Sonata No. 2 in D minor Op. 121 arranged by Steven Isserlis for cello and piano

Schumann's second violin sonata was written in 1851, the year after he had taken up his appointment in Düsseldorf as music director – an appointment that, having begun with such fair hopes on all sides, was to end disastrously. Having recently written his first violin sonata Schumann, feeling dissatisfied with the work, embarked on this much larger-scale second effort. This sonata stands as one of Schumann's late masterpieces, its astonishing range of expressive drama and heartfelt profundity setting it apart from any other example of the genre. Light and carefree it is not, however; Schumann was evidently writing from a dark place. The scherzo, with its obsessively dark rhythmic figures, reminds this writer, at least, of Schubert's 'Erlkönig'. Towards the end of the movement, in a striking twist, Schumann introduces the chorale *Gelobet seist du,*

Jesu Christ. This chorale then provides the material for the slow movement, a mostly serene set of variations; even here, though, the music is violently interrupted by the re-entry of the scherzo – as if the devil has suddenly ridden into the church.

Connections – the sonata is dedicated to Ferdinand David, Mendelssohn's concertmaster at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, for whom Mendelssohn's famous violin concerto was written (and whom Moscheles had also introduced to London audiences); in a typically Schumannesque gesture, the opening motif quotes letters from David's name (D-A;F-D). The connection to Mendelssohn (who had died four years previously) continues with the appearance of the chorale – which Mendelssohn had quoted (in a very different vein) in his second piano trio Op. 66.

Incidentally, I make no apology for arranging this sonata for cello. Violinists are always complaining that Schumann writes for their lower register; that register is perfect for the cello! Furthermore, at least one cello arrangement of the sonata appeared in the 19th Century; it was expected that these works would be performed on other instruments. Indeed, Clara Schumann's edition of the first violin sonata includes an 'ossia' passage for the piano 'if playing with cello'.

Moscheles Cello Sonata in E Op. 121

Moscheles's only cello sonata, completed in the same year as Schumann's sonata and also – by coincidence – bearing the same opus number, is a similarly large-scale work whose nature, however, could hardly be more different from that of Schumann's. Where Schumann's sonata is complex, soul-searching, Moscheles's is open-hearted, almost childlike at times in its humour and its loveable, joyous simplicity. At its centre is a charming *Ballade* 'in Bohemian manner' (a reference to Moscheles's native Prague), its mercurial changes of mood anticipating the later *dumkas* of Dvořák et al.

Connections – This sonata bears a dedication to none other than Robert Schumann – much to the delight of the latter. 'You have given me joy and done me honour,' Schumann wrote. 'Please accept my deepest gratitude.'

Chopin Introduction and Polonaise brillante in C Op. 3

Dating from the same year as Mendelssohn's *Variations*, this work was written in Vienna for the cultured, cello-playing Polish Prince Radziwiłł and his piano-playing daughter Wanda – although Chopin himself later performed it in public on several occasions. The lively *Polonaise* stood initially as a self-sufficient piece, Chopin afterwards adding the aristocratic *Introduction*. In its completed form, the work presents a fine specimen of the early Chopin style that so captivated Schumann – proudly Polish, celebrating the joy of the national dance.

Connections – When the *Introduction and Polonaise* was published, it bore a dedication to the cellist Joseph Merk – with whom the previous year Mendelssohn had collaborated on another set of variations for cello and piano. Incidentally, Moscheles's cello sonata was composed shortly after he had made an arrangement for piano four hands of Chopin's cello sonata, a violin version of which was made by – Ferdinand David! Small world...

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