WIGMORE HALL

Monday 9 November 2026
1.00pm

Steven Isserlis cello
Connie Shih piano

William Sterndale Bennett (1816-1875) Sonata Duo for cello and piano Op. 32 (1852)
I. Adagio sostenuto – Allegro giusto e leggierissimo
II. Minuetto caractéristique: Andante grazioso
III. Rondo – Allegretto piacevole – Animato

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) No. 4 Innig from *Studien für den Pedal-Flügel: 6 pieces in canonic form* Op. 56 (1845) *arranged by Steven Isserlis*

Sängers Trost Op. 127 No. 1 (1840) *arranged by Steven Isserlis*

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) Cello Sonata No. 2 in D Op. 58 (1842-3)
I. Allegro assai vivace • II. Allegretto scherzando •
III. Adagio • IV. Molto allegro e vivace

BBC RADIO 3 This concert is being broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 and will be available on BBC Sounds for a further 30 days.

Become a Member and play a part in every performance

Join from just £5.50 a month at **wigmore-hall.org.uk/membership** and enjoy Priority Booking for our concerts.

Join & Support Membership

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. Mobile devices must be powered off during performances. Devices required for medical reasons should be set to silent. Photography and filming are prohibited, other than at the end of concerts during applause. In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster, persons are not permitted to stand or sit in gangways intersecting the seating, or in any other gangways. If standing is permitted at the sides and rear, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited. Disabled Access and Facilities – full details from 020 7935 2141. Hearing aids – if your hearing aids have a music setting, this should be selected. For the best listening experience and to avoid feedback sound, ensure hearing aids are snugly and securely fitted, and set to a comfortable volume.

Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • Wigmore-hall.org.uk • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan

William Sterndale Bennett may not be a household name today, but in the mid-19th Century, the Sheffield-born musician was regarded as one of the finest English pianists and composers of his day. His exceptional promise is demonstrated by his admission to the Royal Academy of Music at the age of 10, and among his many musical admirers was Felix Mendelssohn, who invited Bennett to Leipzig where he met and also befriended Robert Schumann. (Side note: while in Leipzig, Sterndale Bennett organised the country's first ever game of cricket, an endeavour described 'as fitting a young Yorkshireman' by one commentator.) Another close friend to Bennett was the Italian cellist Carlo Alfredo Piatti, to whom Bennett dedicated this Sonata Duo in 1852, the same year in which he was appointed Principal Cellist of the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden. The Duo's première took place in 1852 at Bennett's chamber concert series at Hanover Square Rooms.

The opening movement begins with a poised, tender introduction (marked *Adagio sostenuto*), before the piano erupts into a frenzy of triplet runs, accompanied by lively pizzicato notes and soaring countermelodies in the cello part. The *Adagio* section returns before the mercurial second movement, which oscillates between a minor-key *Minuetto caractéristique* – all sepulchral dotted rhythms and seesawing melodic lines – and its major-key, *brillante* counterpart, ablaze with semiquaver runs. The final *Rondo* sets off in sunlit A major, with a smiling, expansive cello theme that returns via a series of brief, minor-key diversions, before concluding with a final burst of virtuoso triplets.

'Continually engrossed in the study of fugue with [my wife] Clara,' jotted **Robert Schumann** in his 1845 diary, shortly before installing a rented, organ-style pedalboard on his piano which enabled him to play the low bass lines of JS Bach's works for organ with his feet. The Pedal-Flügel, or pedal-piano, is a rarity these days – meaning that these studies are mostly performed by church organists, and occasionally in arrangements for piano trio. Here, Steven Isserlis brings a fresh arrangement for cello and piano, in which these two instruments share the canonical interplay of Schuman's *Innig*, or 'intimate' study.

'Often,' writes today's cellist and arranger, Steven Isslerlis, 'I feel that songs are impoverished when they lose their words; but in this case, I find that the beauty of the music shines out even more clearly… I hope that isn't sacrilege.' Well, if it is sacrilege, it has never sounded so natural, or hauntingly beautiful. The lilting, major-minor fluctuations of Schumann's song encapsulate the sentiment of Justinus Kerner's text, in which a lonesome poet consoles himself with the knowledge that, although he has no sweetheart to weep over his grave, the flowers, moon and stars will remember his affection for them. So the melody strives repeatedly skywards, always folding back into stoic resignation, before the piano's climbing sextuplets trace a final arc of yearning.

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg in 1809 to Jewish parents who later adopted Christianity as their religion, baptising Felix as a Lutheran in 1816. His musical prowess was clear from an early age. A precocious composer, he wrote multiple symphonies for string orchestra and no fewer than five operas while still a boy. Following a wide-ranging education in Berlin and Paris, he became active as a conductor and programmer, playing an integral role in the revival of the works of JS Bach – whose influence is audible in the many fugal and chorale-like moments in this Cello Sonata – as well as numerous other composers whose works have now become mainstays of the classical canon.

By his early thirties, when Mendelssohn was composing this Cello Sonata, he had already achieved remarkable success with works including his String Octet (written when he was only 16), the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826) and his Italian Symphony (1833). This Sonata dates from 1842-3, and was first performed in the first half of 1843; a time when Mendelssohn's personal and professional life was in flux. Having been lured to Berlin in the service of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, he became dissatisfied with his role, and returned to Leipzig with his wife and children, where he resumed his conducting duties at the Gewandhaus. His mother's death in December 1842 brought home the realisation, voiced in a letter to his brother Paul, that 'we are children no longer'. Yet the Sonata is full of life and energy, and Mendelssohn dedicated it to Count Mateusz Wielhorski (1794-1866), one of the founding fathers of the Russian school of cello playing.

Torrents of triplets ripple and flow through the piano part, accompanying a jubilant, singing cello line that bubbles with irrepressible, upward-striving energy. A more turbulent, minor-key section follows, although the galloping major-key theme of the opening soon makes a jubilant return. The playful *Allegretto scherzando* teeters between major and minor keys, restraint and abandon, and mystery and open-heartedness in a joyful exchange between the two players. The *Adagio* opens with a hymn-like succession of chords, marked in the score as being played 'sempre arpeggiando col pedale' (arpeggiated and with pedal). This effect creates a rich and luscious sound-world, somewhere between a Bach chorale and a harp serenade, over which the cello adds an expressive, searching melodic line. Marked 'appassionato ed animato', Mendelssohn's string writing throughout anticipates the direct, emotional music of the Romantic era. The final movement bursts with rapid-fire exchanges between the cello and piano, with only the briefest moments of calm before the finale, an exuberant expression of musical virtuosity.

© Sophie Rashbrook 2026
Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.