



Zoltán Despond
Violoncello

Vesselin Stanev
Piano

Programme

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 119 (1949)

Arrangement of the solo part by Mstislav Rostropovich

Andante grave – Moderato animato – Andante – Andante grave, come prima – Allegro moderato

Moderato – Andante dolce – Moderato primo

Allegro, ma non troppo – Andantino – Allegro, ma non troppo

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Six Pieces for Piano, Op. 19 (1873): No. 4 *Nocturne*,

for violoncello and piano arranged by David Geringas after Wilhelm Fitzenhagen

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Six Pieces for Piano, Op. 51 (1882): No. 6 *Valse sentimentale*,

for violoncello and piano arranged by David Geringas after Wilhelm Fitzenhagen

Tempo di Valse – Tranquillo – Più presto – Tempo I

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Sonata in G minor for Cello and Piano, Op. 19 (1901)

Lento – Allegro moderato

Allegro scherzando

Andante

Allegro mosso

On Friendship with Cellists

Sergei Prokofiev was hardly the only Russian composer who opted to go West following the October Revolution of 1917. However, unlike his compatriots Stravinsky and Rachmaninov, he voluntarily returned from his exile and settled again in Russia, receiving the Stalin Prize multiple times and even being designated a “People’s Artist of the Soviet Union.” However, his name and reputation were destroyed overnight. In 1948, the cultural functionaries of the Communist Party arbitrarily rejected his recently lauded works as “alien to the people” and “formalistic,” banishing Prokofiev from active Soviet musical life and humiliating the composer, who was seriously ill, with public rituals in which he was compelled to criticise himself.

Yet the Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 119, which Prokofiev completed in 1949, resembles a musical declaration of independence that sets it apart from these difficult times. The choice of C major has the effect, programmatically speaking, of finding a moment of sunlight while staying on the fence. A few years before his death, Prokofiev was writing music of the purest essence: youthfully fresh and at the same time worldly-wise, an amusing, serene, self-deprecating late style of incomprehensible perfection, a balanced outlook on his own art with echoes of his symphonies, cantatas, ballet and film scores. Despite all the challenges he faced, the composer wrote the work for the energetic young cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, creating a masterpiece that savours and exhausts the sonority and singing quality of the instrument, teeming with rich colours, swirling pizzicati and magical effects — the endings of the movements alone offer the most startling payoff, before the sonata concludes, with an almost defiantly triumphant spirit in the finale’s coda, with a cryptic apotheosis that suggests a beginning of its own.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed the *Valse sentimentale* of 1882 and the earlier *Nocturne*,

whose performance instruction is the basically similar phrase ‘Andante sentimentale’, for two albums of piano pieces. These are commissioned works reflecting the sophisticated salon culture of the 19th century with their combination of elegance and melancholy, cosmopolitanism and world-weariness. The American cellist Leonard Rose transformed the waltz into a duet for piano and cello, while Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, the German cellist to whom the composer dedicated his *Rococo Variations*, arranged the *Nocturne* for cello and piano during the composer’s lifetime. Tchaikovsky in turn crafted Fitzenhagen’s arrangement of the *Nocturne* into a version for cello and orchestra as a gift for the young Russian Anatoly Brandukov. Had he lived longer, Tchaikovsky might have even written a cello concerto for him, since Brandukov pressed the composer with this request in the fall of 1893 — but too late! Tchaikovsky died early in November of that year.

Still, Brandukov was not left empty-handed. In 1901, his younger friend Sergei Rachmaninov presented him with the Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor, Op. 19, the four movements of which are equal in scale and ambition to any symphonic concerto. Rachmaninov had been plunged into a bottomless creative crisis following the disastrous failure of his First Symphony; an agonising sense of self-doubt nearly drove him insane. But after overcoming his writer’s block, he managed to compose not only the Second Piano Concerto but his first (and only) sonata for cello as well. This phenomenal work is replete with contradictions: music that is in equal measure laconic and overflowing, comprising short and very compact ideas that unfold in infinitely wide arcs. On top of that, it makes a highly intelligent and profound declaration of love for the cello. To the violinist Nathan Milstein, Rachmaninov once retorted: ‘Why should I compose for the violin when the cello exists?’

Wolfgang Stähr