



NINA KOTOVA
FABIO BIDINI

WITH *affection*



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Shostakovich composed his Cello Sonata in 1934. During the same year, criticism of his newly-premiered opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* appeared in the *Pravda* newspaper. Despite the opera's initial success during the same year, the government-backed condemnation of the work led to a ban of the opera being performed for nearly thirty years. Parallel to this disruption in the composer's career was a crisis in his personal life, caused by a love affair that led to a temporary separation from his wife. He was reunited with her during the same year of the premiere of the Cello Sonata.

Only four chamber compositions precede the Cello Sonata in Shostakovich's oeuvre. His fifteen string quartets, trio, quintet and two more sonatas would follow, in addition to his major works for cello and orchestra which include two cello concertos, both dedicated to and premiered by Mstislav Rostropovich. With the backdrop of Stalin's repressive regime ordering composers to write music for the masses and Shostakovich's music being accused of formalism, The Sonata is classically proportioned. The work fulfils Shostakovich's intention to compose with simplicity without simplification and clarity without the obligatory "euphony".

The Sonata's first and most extended movement is in sonata-form with an exposition repeat – a curiously old-fashioned feature in the 1930's.

Both main themes are lyrical: the first rather restless, and the second in B major thoroughly romantic and unusually comforting and blissful, imbued with a youthful nostalgia. A new, rhythmic idea in the piano left-hand brings in a sense of restlessness which then leads to the culmination of the development, the beginning of the recapitulation, and the start of the second theme. This figure plays an increasingly foreboding role in the development and, after an enigmatic coda (*Largo, con sordino* – a slow version of the opening theme), returns to haunt the final bars.

According to his contemporaries, Shostakovich was by nature reserved and the classic personification of the Russian intelligentsia. A musician attending the premiere recalled that the composer's nonromantic playing of this movement was rather collected and restrained.

The second movement is a scherzo with a minuet-like trio section. The movement clearly exemplifies Shostakovich's penchant for grotesque humor with its witty harmonics and rhythmical patterns indirectly hinting of stylized Georgian folkloric dance elements.

The meditative third movement's increasing eloquence leads to an impassioned climax. The latter part of the movement is characterized by a sense of tranquility and concludes with a peaceful but questioning resolution.

The rondo-finale has a sardonic, mocking main theme and vividly contrasting episodes, requiring virtuosic mastery from both musicians. One of these is a manic piano cadenza, a whirlwind of cascading semiquavers. The sarcastic rondo theme reappears, transforming itself into a lullaby-like phrase, which is interrupted abruptly and dismissively, ending the sonata.

In 1915 Debussy planned a series of six sonatas but lived to complete only three. The Cello Sonata is an elusive work of wide imaginative range, with frequent changes of mood and fluctuations of tempo. This is Debussy at his most capricious. However, when he described his new work to his publisher he stressed: 'The proportions are almost classical... in the best sense of the word'. Nevertheless, there is no development of themes in the conventional manner. The sonata opens with a noble, declamatory figure on the piano, before the cello plays florid arabesques. A theme *dolce sostenuto* leads to an increasingly animated passage culminating in a big crescendo. The cello recalls the declamatory opening bars, the sweetly played melody returns, and the movement ends peacefully.

For the restless, disgruntled *Sérénade* Debussy initially considered the subtitle 'Pierrot angry with the moon'. The opening is marked 'fantasque et léger' (whimsical and light), while subsequent directions include 'ironique' and 'fuoco' (fiery). Initially the cello's guitar-style dominates, but in the faster middle section (*Vivace*) pizzicato is replaced by arco – the most extended of the few sustained melodic passages in the sonata.

A brief recall of music from the opening section leads to a sustained diminuendo, and then, without a break, the finale marked 'Léger et nerveux' (light and nervous) begins, in which a Spanish flavor adds piquancy. Debussy uses some unusual words in his expressive indications: the opening pizzicato notes are marked 'arraché' (torn off), then later a scampering cello theme is 'volubile' (fickle). One passage marked 'Con fuoco ed appassionato' leads to a short slower section, 'con morbidezza' (with tenderness), before the resumption of the original tempo with its shimmering bow technique and indication *sur la touche* on the fingerboard. A declamatory cello solo is abruptly dismissed by the violent final chords.

Shostakovich's *Adagio* is a transcription for solo cello of Zina and Petr's love duet from the comedy ballet *Bright Stream*. It was written in 1935, at the height of the Stalin's regime and repression.

The ballet aimed to satisfy the interests and carry out the ideas of the Stalinist government, including implementing its slogans. In particular, the work attempts to conflate the distinction between the art of professionals and amateur performances, and in doing so, minimizing the importance of individuality in art. The bright, cloudless lyricism, found in this work and rare in Shostakovich's music, gained national popularity.

The prolific composer Bohuslav Martinů wrote three sonatas for cello and piano in addition to several other works he wrote for this combination including two sets of variations. *Variations on a Slovakian Theme* was his final chamber work, composed in six days and completed on 12 March 1959.

The F minor theme, its improvisatory character typical of much folk-music, is 'Ked' bych já vedela' (If I had known), No. 335 from Viliam Figuš-Bystrý's collection of 1,000 Slovak Folk songs. After an introduction evoking the sound of the cimbalom, a folk instrument of Eastern European countries, the passionate theme has the short-long rhythm more often associated with Hungarian folk-music and commonly heard in Bartók's compositions. Generally Martinů does not closely adhere to the theme, though he does clearly refer to a part of it towards the end of each variation. Variation 1 is characterized by Martinů's distinctive lyrical, or 'swinging', syncopation, a feature which briefly reappears subsequently. Rhythmically variation 2 is largely straightforward, before becoming intensely lyrical, whereas the following variation is introspective. The fourth variation (marked *Scherzo*) is robustly rhythmic, propulsive, then expansive. The final variation makes a vigorous, uncomplicated and unceremonious conclusion to a work of quite different character from his earlier *Rossini Variations*.

Martinů wrote his *Variations on a Theme of Rossini* for Gregor Piatigorsky in 1942. For his theme Martinů adapted 'Non più mesta', Angelina's final aria from Act Two of *La Cenerentola*. His version of this melody, never quite as Rossini wrote it, inspires variations which are humorous, sarcastic and flippant. With remarkable originality, Martinů disrupts and deconstructs his chosen theme throughout the work. After the lively exchanges of variation 1, the skittishness of the second variation is followed by the soulfulness of variation 3 (*Andante*). The madcap playfulness of the remaining variations leads to the mock grandeur of the final *Moderato maestoso*.

In this delightful showpiece Martinů's instrumental writing inevitably outdoes Rossini's challenging writing for soprano in the original aria, but alongside its brilliant virtuosity, the piece exudes a palpable sense of fun. In few of his works is Martinů's irreverent wit so evident.

Every one of Chopin's compositions is either for solo piano or piano with orchestra, piano with voice or cello, for piano trio or (spurious) flute and piano. The outstanding piece for cello is the late sonata of 1845/46, whereas the *Introduction and Polonaise brillante* in C major, Op. 3, is much earlier. Chopin composed the Polonaise in October 1829 but the Introduction dates from the following April. The piece begins (*Lento*) with brilliant flourishes from the piano alternating with expressive cello phrases. As the cello continues with a sustained melody, the piano part is intermittently virtuosic, including octave-writing. Concluding with a tremendous cadenza-like flourish for the piano, the Introduction leads directly to the Polonaise (Chopin would later compose more than twenty of these for piano solo). Although the piano still has a virtuosic role, Kotova takes this arrangement by Pierre Fournier/Igor Gavrysh a notch further by balancing out the virtuosity of both instruments throughout the piece and taking over the piano passages in the coda. Though an early work of Chopin's, this exuberant piece, especially the extrovert polonaise, is a captivating addition to the cello/piano repertoire.

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Martinů Slovakian Variations © Edition Muzyka



WITH *affection*

Nina Kotova *cello* | **Fabio Bidini** *piano*

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975)

Cello Sonata in D minor, Op. 40

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------|
| 1. Allegro non troppo | 11:24 |
| 2. Allegro | 3:03 |
| 3. Largo | 7:00 |
| 4. Allegro | 3:59 |

Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

Cello Sonata

- | | |
|--|------|
| 5. Prologue: Lent, sostenuto
e molto risoluto | 4:22 |
| 6. Sérénade: Modérément animé | 3:07 |
| 7. Final: Animé, léger et nerveux | 3:53 |

Shostakovich,

arr. Levon Atovmyan (1901 – 1973)

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|---|------|
| 8. Adagio
(from The Limpid Stream, Op. 39) | 5:26 |
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Bohuslav Martinů (1890 – 1959)

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|---|------|
| 9. Variations on
a Slovakian Theme | 9:34 |
| 10. Variations on
a Theme of Rossini | 8:08 |

Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849)

arr. Pierre Fournier (1906 – 1986),
Igor Gavrish (b. 1945) & **Nina Kotova**

- | | |
|---|------|
| 11. Introduction and Polonaise
brillante in C major, Op. 3 | 9:26 |
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Total Running Time: 69:27