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NAXOS

# RUSSIAN BALLADS

Prokofiev · Shostakovich · Kissin

Gabriel Schwabe, Cello  
Roland Pöntinen, Piano

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## Sergey Prokofiev (1891–1953) • Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–1975) Evgeny Kissin (b. 1971): Russian Ballads

The repertoire for cello and piano from Russian composers is an extensive one, for which the abundance of notable Russia cellists this past century is undoubtedly a factor, and of which the works featured on this release constitute a small though notably representative selection.

The opening item emerged near the outset of Prokofiev's composing career. Written in 1912, *Ballade* is one of his select few items of chamber music and received its premiere in Moscow on 5 February 1914 by Yevsey Belousov with the composer as pianist. Seldom revived, it is notable for a taciturn, inward manner Prokofiev revisited periodically over the next quarter-century, and proceeds for the most part spontaneously, as though an improvisation. Against a halting piano accompaniment, the cello unfolds an impassioned theme which finds effective contrast with the capricious idea which follows. Elements from both themes are combined as the forward impetus becomes increasingly hectic, the relationship between these instruments more fraught. At length, tension subsides into a pensive theme for piano, belatedly partnered by cello as the music resumes its ominous character. From here the piano gently descends from the top of its register, the cello musing eloquently upon the first theme. Such rumination slowly winds down into the depths, from where this piece moves towards its calmly regretful close.

Of Shostakovich's three string sonatas, the earliest is the *Cello Sonata*. Its appearance must have looked anomalous within an output hitherto dominated by music for the stage. Yet in 1933, Shostakovich had written his *First Piano Concerto* [Naxos 8.553126] and his *24 Preludes* for piano [8.555781], both working within Classical constraints. Written in August and September 1934 for Viktor Kubatsky, who premiered it in Leningrad with the composer on 25 December, all four movements of the *Cello Sonata* follow Classical models but not always to the letter.

The *Allegro non troppo* begins with a pensive yet restless melody on cello over a closely related piano accompaniment. This builds to a brief climax, after which the second theme is heard, a more tranquil idea that gives vent to the cello's expressive qualities. After a repeated-note codetta, the exposition is repeated literally – the development section commencing with an impulsive discussion of the first theme (cello initially playing *pizzicato*), ominously underpinned by the repeated-note idea in the piano. The second theme restores a measure of calm, but instead of the expected reprise, the piano initiates a walking-bass motion over which the cello unfolds its halting version of the first theme to serve as an uncertain and not entirely conclusive coda.

The *Allegro* is among the earliest of Shostakovich's bracingly sardonic *scherzos*, without the element of bitterness to the fore in subsequent works. The piano introduces the rhythmically forceful, folk-inflected main theme over a churning cello accompaniment, both instruments sharing in its continuation. The trio is an arresting idea which makes prominent use of cello *glissandi*, before a largely straightforward reprise of the *scherzo* followed by a brusque coda.

The *Largo* is a 'romance' drawing on a lineage as recalls Tchaikovsky and even Rachmaninov. The yearning initial cello phrase gradually opens out into a restrained but expressive melody, one that builds in an unbroken arc to a central climax where the theme is powerfully restated. This dies down to an affecting passage where the theme migrates to the piano, while the cello maintains a ruminative counterpoint before both instruments combine for the poignant coda. The *Allegro* which follows is, for Shostakovich, an unusually clear-cut finale. It commences with a sprightly piano theme that is soon taken up by the cello and twice extended with intensive passagework, in what are interludes of a modified *rondo* design. At its centre is a contrasting episode, exuding the mordant wit typical of the composer at this period, then the movement heads into a final restatement of the main theme that ends with a pointedly curt final gesture.

Although he improvised and wrote his own music at an early age, Evgeny Kissin abandoned composing as his career as a pianist took off during the mid-1980s then only returned to it in earnest a decade ago. He has written *Four Piano Pieces*, a *String Quartet* and this *Cello Sonata*, which was completed in 2016 and first played by Gautier Capuçon with Yuja Wang at Verbier Festival on 27 July 2016 and since taken up by such musicians as Steven Isserlis and David Geringas. Unfolding in one movement, the sonata is akin to a ballad in its restraint and introspection. It begins with a sombre theme on cello which takes on greater pathos as it builds towards a brief climax, underpinned by the theme on piano. There follows an understated development of the main motifs which soon returns to the theme itself, atmospherically complemented by the piano, over the course of a modified and slightly more demonstrative reprise. Before long, however, this winds down into the ruminative depths from where the piece draws to its close.

Prokofiev's *Cello Sonata* was written in 1949 when the composer, in poor health and finding much of his music banned under the Zhdanov Decree of the previous year, adopted a simpler idiom acceptable to Soviet officialdom. Even the public premiere, by Mstislav Rostropovich and Sviatoslav Richter in Moscow on 1 March 1950, followed two 'closed door' hearings to secure its endorsement. Direct in manner though it may be, the work's formal and expressive subtleties have since made it among the most often heard of such pieces in the modern repertoire.

The first movement begins with a long-breathed theme for cello that is soon complemented by a more ironic response from piano. No such duality is discernible in a second theme which is among Prokofiev's most affecting. The ensuing development entrusts the first theme to an intensive as well as methodical dialogue, out of which the theme's successor only gradually makes its presence felt and from which emerges a subtly transformed reprise that manages to preserve the essential nature of both themes. The second of these is interrupted by a sudden increase of tempo that presages an animated coda, but this in turn makes way for limpid recollections of the initial theme as the music moves towards its unruffled if undeniably bittersweet close.

The second movement is more a lively intermezzo than a *scherzo*, its piquant opening idea on piano joined by the cello in a lithe and engaging interplay. The middle section centres on another theme of deft eloquence – after which, the initial idea resumes in even more whimsical terms. The third movement sets off immediately with a flowing and affable theme which draws both instruments into an agile and reciprocal dialogue, then on into a quizzical codetta. The central section is more earnest and introspective in underlying mood, yet elicits a no less imaginative interplay, and from where the main theme continues its course with a renewed resolve. This time, however, the music opens out towards a coda in which the theme heard at the work's start is made the basis of an extended apotheosis more affecting for its hard-won affirmation.

Prokofiev began his second full-length ballet *Cinderella* in 1941 which, due to wartime, did not see its first staging until the end of 1945. A year earlier, Prokofiev arranged this *Adagio* for Alexander Stogorsky (younger brother of Gregor Piatigorsky, who changed his surname in the interest of differentiating himself from his more famous sibling – long since in exile). Premiered in Moscow on 19 April 1944, the piece portrays the first, gently eloquent dance of Cinderella and the Prince at the ball and has long been a popular recital item.

**Richard Whitehouse**

## Roland Pöntinen



Photo: Simon Larsson

Since his debut with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra in 1981, Roland Pöntinen has performed with major orchestras throughout the world. He has been invited to many prestigious festivals including Schleswig-Holstein, Verbier and Mostly Mozart, and worked with conductors including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos and Leif Segerstam. Highlights include performances with the Philharmonia Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic and Scottish Chamber Orchestra as well as appearances at the London Proms. He has recently performed the complete Beethoven sonatas and Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage*. Many composers, among them Sven-Erik Bäck, Veli-Matti Puumala, Anders Eliasson and Anders Hillborg, have dedicated works to him, and in 2007 he gave the world premiere of Rodion Shchedrin's *Romantic Duets* together with the composer at the Verbier Festival. As a chamber player Pöntinen has worked with artists such as Janine Jansen, Håkan Hardenberger and Christian Lindberg. His extensive discography spans over 100 recordings for, among others, BIS, cpo, EMI and his own label Haddock. Pöntinen is also active as a composer and his latest work, *L'heure bleue*, dedicated to Christian Lindberg, was premiered in 2021. Pöntinen is a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music and in 2002 received the Litteris et Artibus. He has been juror in several international competitions.

[www.rolandpontinen.com](http://www.rolandpontinen.com)

## Gabriel Schwabe



Photo: Studio Monbijou

Gabriel Schwabe has established himself among the leading cellists of his generation. He is a laureate of numerous national and international competitions, including the Grand Prix Emanuel Feuermann and the Concours Rostropovich in Paris. In 2009 he won the prestigious Pierre Fournier Award in London. As a soloist, he has worked with orchestras such as the Philharmonia Orchestra, ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, NDR Radiophilharmonie, Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Malmö and Norrköping Symphony Orchestras and the Royal Northern Sinfonia with conductors including Marek Janowski, Eivind Gullberg Jensen, Dennis Russell Davies, Cornelius Meister, Marc Soustrot, Lars Vogt and Michael Sanderling. In 2010 Schwabe gave his recital debut at Wigmore Hall in London. He is a regular guest at festivals such as the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival, Kronberg Academy Festival and the Amsterdam Biennale, and has performed with artists including Isabelle Faust, Christian Tetzlaff, Lars Vogt, Kirill Gerstein and Jonathan Gilad. Schwabe was born to German-Spanish parents in Berlin. He studied with Catalin Ilea in Berlin and Frans Helmerson at the Kronberg Academy and received further guidance from János Starker, Gary Hoffmann and Gidon Kremer. He is a professor at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Cologne and the Conservatorium Maastricht and plays an instrument by Giuseppe Guarneri (Cremona, 1695).

[www.gabrielschwabe.com](http://www.gabrielschwabe.com)

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The 20th century saw an abundance of notable Russian cellists inspiring an extensive repertoire by Soviet composers. In the cello sonatas by Shostakovich and Prokofiev, both composers explore the rich and emotive timbre of the instrument with expressive subtleties and bittersweet emotions, alongside their typical touches of wit and irony. Internationally acclaimed pianist Evgeny Kissin has recently returned to composing, and his *Cello Sonata* is akin to a ballad in its restraint and introspection.

## RUSSIAN BALLADS

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|-----------|--|--------------|
| <b>1</b>  | <b>Sergey Prokofiev (1891–1953):</b><br><b>Ballade in C minor, Op. 15 (1912)</b>         | <b>12:03</b> |
|           | <b>Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–1975):</b><br><b>Cello Sonata in D minor, Op. 40 (1934)</b> | <b>28:30</b> |
| <b>2</b>  | <b>I. Allegro non troppo</b>   | <b>12:33</b> |
| <b>3</b>  | <b>II. Allegro</b>   | <b>3:09</b>  |
| <b>4</b>  | <b>III. Largo</b>  | <b>8:27</b>  |
| <b>5</b>  | <b>IV. Allegro</b>   | <b>4:14</b>  |
| <b>6</b>  | <b>Evgeny Kissin (b. 1971):</b><br><b>Cello Sonata in C major, Op. 2 (2016)*</b>         | <b>9:50</b>  |
|           | <b>Sergey Prokofiev: Cello Sonata, Op. 119 (1949)</b>                                    | <b>23:40</b> |
| <b>7</b>  | <b>I. Andante grave</b>  | <b>11:00</b> |
| <b>8</b>  | <b>II. Moderato</b>  | <b>4:45</b>  |
| <b>9</b>  | <b>III. Allegro, ma non troppo</b>   | <b>7:54</b>  |
| <b>10</b> | <b>Adagio, Op. 97bis (from <i>Cinderella</i>, Op. 87) (1944)</b>                         | <b>4:37</b>  |

**\*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

**Gabriel Schwabe, Cello • Roland Pöntinen, Piano**



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