

Of Love, Joy and Despair

Featuring Cheng² Duo

Saturday, March 19, 2022 | Holy Trinity Anglican Church

Program notes by Morgan Luethe

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Seven Variations on “Bei Männern,” WoO 46 (1801)

Twice Beethoven adapted popular tunes from Mozart’s singspiel, *Die Zauberflöte*, as subjects for sets of duo variations. His earlier twelve variations on the aria “Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen” (1796) is shaped similarly to the “Bei Männern” variations of 1801. Both are duo works for cello and piano (a literature to which Beethoven can be said to have made the first enduring contributions), and both expertly explore Mozart’s lilting melodies while respecting their original simplicity and character. *Die Zauberflöte* is, after all, a comedy, and Beethoven’s variations take up this material with a lighthearted humour. Through a rollicking dialogue between the two instruments, Beethoven cleverly shows us the possibilities to which a simple melody lends itself and, in so doing, distills for listeners the creative genius of two masters at once. The seven “Bei Männern” variations are Mozartian laughter with a Beethovenian accent – champagne flutes filled with brown beer.

Eugène Ysäye (1858–1931)

Sonata for Solo Cello in C Minor, Op. 28 (1925)

I. *Lento e sempre sostenuto*

Ysäye’s Cello Sonata, composed shortly after his popular Six Sonatas for Solo Violin (op. 23), is a work pervaded by the melancholy of its times. Its slow first movement derives a sense of despondency from the contrast created by juxtaposing wandering chromatic episodes with motivic statements firmly rooted in the minor key. Arguably, the opening movement is understandable as a grim musical-emotional commentary on the political and social instability of the interwar period. Ysäye was 87 at the time of its composition and had seen Europe shredded by the violence of the 19th century and the First World War. The unanchored character of this music reflects a feeling of being adrift, of resigning to the whims of historical currents.

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)

Sonata for Cello and Piano, FP 143 (1948)

- I. *Allegro*
- II. *Cavatine*
- III. *Ballabile*
- IV. *Finale*

Begun in the summer of 1940, Poulenc’s Cello Sonata wasn’t completed until 1948, premiering in the following year in concert with cellist Pierre Fournier, dedicatee of the work. A piece that has unjustifiably struggled to gain much critical appreciation in the 75 years since its debut, the Cello Sonata makes extensive use of the trademark Neo-Baroque and Neo-Classical styles that characterize Poulenc’s music. Its four short ternary-form movements make for a colourful, breezy work that sees the cello and piano collaborate closely to create a democratic texture that delegates interesting passagework to both instruments. Poulenc’s skill in cohesively channeling influences from diverse musical traditions shapes

the enigmatic character of this music; moments of sincere lyrical beauty contrasted with flashes of wit make for a work both interesting and pleasant to listen to.

Paul Hindemith (1895–1963)

Three Pieces for Cello and Piano, Op. 8 (1917)

II. *Phantasiestück*

The second of Hindemith's three Opus 8 pieces for cello and piano makes no bones about its stylistic roots, firmly planted in the late 19th century. From direct formal predecessors such as Schumann's Opus 73 *Fantasiestücke* to the warm instrumental textures and melodic rapture of Brahms' chamber music, this piece bares its musical heritage unabashedly and, even among its two contemporary companion pieces, sounds somewhat anachronistic. Taken alone though, Hindemith's *Phantasiestück* is a skillful essay in the German late-romantic idiom, peppering sustained sentimentality with moments of intriguing 20th century harmonic tang.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Minor, Op. 40 (1934)

I. *Allegro non troppo*

II. *Allegro*

III. *Largo*

IV. *Allegro*

Written early in Shostakovich's career, the Sonata for Cello and Piano emerged during a time of considerable emotional turmoil, the composer having recently separated from his wife in the aftermath of an extramarital affair. The sonata is also among the last of his works completed prior to the censure of his music by Soviet authorities. The harsh critical rejection of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (following Stalin's infamous abandonment of a performance of the opera in 1936) imperiled Shostakovich both professionally and personally. A subsequent targeted and sustained campaign of denunciation in the journal *Pravda* caused Shostakovich's commissions and concert engagements to quickly evaporate and marked the onset of a period of desolation in the composer's life.

A weighty work, the Sonata for Cello and Piano develops through the course of four movements that survey a full emotional range with compelling sincerity. The terse opening movement assigns a dark theme to the cello overtop arpeggiated figurations in the piano. This tension relaxes somewhat in a secondary motif that proceeds into a development of themes punctuated by spikey modulations and rhythmic ideas. The following vigorous ostinato repeated patterns that hurl the short second movement along to its sudden conclusion contrast starkly with the bleakness of the expansive slow movement. Here, the unforgiving landscape of a Russian winter is given expression by way of a mournful cello theme, set atop the chilly dissonances of a sparse piano accompaniment. The *Largo* movement's atmosphere of deep personal introspection fades sorrowfully to make way for a punchy *Allegro* finale. While the mocking playfulness so beloved in Shostakovich's music is no doubt present here, it's haunted by a lurking sense of urgency, of seriousness. After minutes of unexpected tonal pivots and episodic virtuosity the movement's main theme returns to bring the work to an abrupt yet brilliantly decisive conclusion.