



## Steven Isserlis, cello Olli Mustonen, piano

Wednesday 10 July 2019      20:00  
Hindsgavl Festival

- Prokofjev      Cello Sonata Op. 119 23'  
Kabalevskij      Cello Sonata Op. 71 26'  
*Intermission*  
Tjajkovskij      Nocturne Op. 19/4 5'  
Sibelius      Malinconia Op. 20 12'  
Sjostakovitj      Cello Sonata Op. 40 25'

---

### Sergej Prokofjev (1891-1953): Sonata for Cello and Piano in C major, Opus 119 (1949)

Longing for “*the Russian winter and the sound of my mother tongue*”, Prokofjev moved back to the Soviet Union in 1936 after 15 years of exile. The timing could hardly have been worse. In 1936 Stalin tightened his grip on the country’s composers. Artistic freedom disappeared, and the purpose of music was to support the communist ideology. At the same time Prokofjev’s

passport was taken away and in reality he was a prisoner in his own country for the last 17 years of his life.

In the years after WWII the political interference in the work of the Soviet composers increased. Prokofjev reacted with a deep depression. But in his darkest hour he met the young cellist Rostropovitj who roused him to compose a cello sonata. The result is a miraculously light, virtuoso work with a lot of gusto.

The first movement opens with a lamenting solo cello, though. Reminiscences of a Russian folk tune appear. But with the entrance of the main theme, darkness turns into light, expressive moods and amazing, romantic pleasing sounds. The second movement is a typical Prokofjev-scherzo with rhythmic bite, encircling a lyrical middle section. And in the finale, Prokofjev combines the expressions from the two earlier movements: A folk music-inspired theme treated with an uncompromising rhythmic effectiveness.

### Dmitrij Kabalevskij (1904-1987): Sonata for Cello and Piano in B flat major, Opus 71 (1962)

Even Kabalevskij composed his cello sonata for Rostropovitj. Even Kabalevskij experienced a stormy life as a composer in the Soviet. Even Kabalevskij wrote into his sonata the creative suppression which was the reality for the composers in the communist regime.

The first movement is an emotional roller-coaster trip. From gloom to expressions of aggressive energy. The second movement is a ghostlike dance of death full of grotesque effects. The finale is like a perpetuum mobile, a manically pumping perpetual motion machine, which only in the last minute lowers its intensity and ends in the same gloom which began the sonata.

**Pjotr Tjajkovskij (1840-1893): Nocturne, Opus 19 No 4 (1873)**

With his long, singing lines, romantic yearnings and Slavic pathos, Tjajkovskij is one of the most charming melodic composers in music history. One of the best examples is this Nocturne-movement from *6 Morceaux*, Opus 19. The piece is originally for solo piano, but later Tjajkovskij himself arranged it with the melancholy cello sound in the lead.

**Jean Sibelius (1865-1957): Malincolia, Opus 20 (1900)**

In the year 1900 Sibelius' young daughter died. Sibelius reacted with a deep depression, extreme drinking and thoughts of committing suicide. In this condition he composed *Malincolia* (Melancoly) in just three hours as in a transport of grief. The composition in one movement is tragic and full of pain. The cello begins alone. The following cascade of notes in the piano is not an attempt to create virtuosity, but to fill up the void of grief. And with the darkness at the end, Sibelius seems to move deep into his daughter's grave.

**Dmitri Sjostakovitj (1906-1975): Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor, Opus 40 (1934)**

*"Jelena, I love you so much, as nobody has loved another human being before!"* Sjostakovitj wrote these words in 1934. Maybe it sound like happiness, but Sjostakovitj was married to Nina, not to Jelena. The affair made Nina slam the door in his face, and Sjostakovitj was left with enormous love and extreme remorse. The Cello Sonata was his musical reaction.

The first movement was sketched out during a single love-intoxicated night and is one of Sjostakovitj's most romantic movements. But on the way, a fatal rapping motive sneaks into the piano part and the movement ends in a puzzling manner. The second movement is an irascible scherzo concluding in the total resignation in the third movement. The all-embracing elegiac darkness shows the other side of Sjostakovitj's emotional life: the grief he felt of having caused Nina so much pain. The fourth movement is like a cheerful consolation. But Sjostakovitj's conclusions are always ambiguous. Is this a celebration of love? Or is it a sarcastic parody of himself and his failing emotional control?

Incidentally, the love only lasted for a short while. A couple of months later Nina and Sjostakovitj were back together again. Jelena? She was picked up by the secret police and spent a year in a Soviet labour camp. Nobody knows why.

*Text: Mathias Hammer  
English translation: Susanne Lange*

## Steven Isserlis – Olli Mustonen

In the early 1980s Steven Isserlis was invited to participate in a concert in Finland. Here he was to perform as one of three young soloists, a cellist, a violinist and a pianist. He already knew the violinist, but not the young – very young – pianist, the 16-years old Olli Mustonen. He had heard – and kept hearing - some amazing things about him, though. In the evening, after the day's rehearsals with a lot of time to spend and feeling a bit lonely in the land of the thousand lakes, he asked the violinist if it would be possible to meet up with young Olli. The violinist waved his hand with a negative answer. "Oh no, he's always practising." At the same time Olli Mustonen had become interested in meeting up with the British pianist. Therefore he asked their mutual acquaintance whether it would be possible to meet Isserlis. "Oh no," the violinist again waved his hand with his negative answer, "he's always practising."

But even the most diabolic opera-plot can't keep apart a couple meant to be together. Isserlis and Mustonen finally met up after the concert, and a lifelong friendship and musical partnership was born. By the way, it's quite evident that what attracted Mustonen to sneak into the rehearsals of the cellist, 10 years his senior, was his musical talents, and not his star status at the time – because that didn't exist. As a matter of fact, Steven Isserlis didn't have a proper career until in his 30s. A tough learning period, but an important period. Important because it gave him sufficient time to find his own voice, for which he's very grateful today. Especially when he sees musicians in their early 20s – or

even teenagers – who suddenly have to live up to the pressure of having become a star (a title given to them by somebody, and to the joy of their agency) and therefore never get round to developing their own personal voice.

Finns may have an easier time. Olli Mustonen, at least, has his own theory about how the youngest Finns via the voice and the ear receive a highly original, musical impression – not through their mother's milk, but through their mother tongue. The Finnish language has such a strong rhythm and clear vowel-sounds that it simply trains all the small Finnish ears musically. And apparently well, one has to admit, considering the amount of talented pianists, singers, conductors, composers etc, which Finland each year send out into the world. A mixed group, which Mustonen nevertheless feels should be united under the collective name of musician, as they did earlier on in history of music, where for instance being a composer, pianist, conductor and teacher formed a synthesis – the *musician* . Something which according to Mustonen, should be the case again. If Steven Isserlis feels he should have had a Finnish childhood, it's probably not because he wants things to be easier. Since he was ten years old, he hasn't missed playing on his cello for more than three days in a row – including holidays. "I like the cello", he states.

*Text: Ulrik Damgaard Andersen  
English translation: Susanne Lange*