

CHENG² DUO

Bryan Cheng, cello Silvie Cheng, piano

PAUL WIANCKO (b. 1983)

Sonata No. 1 for cello and piano, ‘Shifting Baselines’

Part I: Steady stroll—Flowing

Part II: Free—Angular—Calm—Driving

Part III: Glacial—Moto—Unwavering, but not too fast—Steady stroll

(approx. 22 minutes)

SULKHAN TSINTSADZE (1925-1991)

Five Pieces on Folk Themes

I. Arobnaya. Adagio

II. Chonguri. Allegretto

III. Sachidao. Allegro

IV. Nana. Andante cantabile

V. Plyasovaya. Tanzlied. Allegro assai

(approx. 14 minutes)

Intermission

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

Andante molto in F minor for cello and piano JS 36

(approx. 5 minutes)

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Sonata in G minor for cello and piano Op. 19

Lento – Allegro moderato

Allegro scherzando

Andante

Allegro mosso

(approx. 35 minutes)

Paul Wiancko

Sonata No. 1 for Cello and Piano, 'Shifting Baselines'

Kronos Quartet cellist Paul Wiancko is a composer for the 21st century. Not only has he performed with Mitsuko Uchida and Yo-Yo Ma, he has toured with the late Chick Corea, collaborated with Arcade Fire and done string arrangements for Norah Jones. Which is your cue to assume that you needn't pull out your slide rule to understand his music.

His Sonata No. 1 for Cello and Piano was commissioned by the Cheng² Duo in 2020 and was largely inspired by the composer's admiration for the compactness of expression he found in Beethoven's Sonata for Cello and Piano in C major Op. 101 No. 2, which, you may recall, opens like this:



The composer has provided the following commentary on this new work.

"I began playing cello when I was 5 years old, but it wasn't until high school that I first started learning Beethoven's C Major Sonata. The piece spoke to me in a way that much of the rest of traditional cello and piano repertoire did not. Its utilization of the cello's natural resonance, as well as its ability to express such a wide range of emotion via a fairly no-frills-approach to harmony and rhythm, made it feel as though I were learning a Beethoven symphony—but distilled down to its fundamental parts.

The more I performed the sonata, the more my appreciation for it deepened. Years later, I found myself in the fortunate position of performing it numerous times with the Mark Morris Dance Group, whose choreography shed even more light on the piece, highlighting gestures and shapes that I hadn't appreciated before. To this day, those physical movements are deeply intertwined with my interpretation of the music.

Shifting Baselines is at once a reflection on my continuing journey with Beethoven's C Major Sonata, a love letter to the cello, and an attempt to distill my own musical language down to its core elements—many of which are inextricably linked to my lifelong, ever-transforming relationship with music as a performer and improviser. It is essentially the piece I've wanted to compose since 20 years prior to becoming a composer.

The title refers to a phenomenon defined as "a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of the natural environment due to the loss of perception that occurs when each generation redefines what is 'natural.'" It is my hope that this music may also create a space for us to practice resisting indifference to that change."

Sulkhan Tsintsadze

Five Pieces on Folk Themes

The Soviets promoted the ideal of music rooted in the traditions of their native soil and, in this regard, it would be hard to find a composer more congenial to Soviet ideals than Sulkhan Tsintsadze, one of the leading composers of the Soviet Republic of Georgia. Honoured throughout his long career for his prodigious output of operas, ballets, symphonies, chamber works and film music, Tsintsadze is especially well-known in the West for his 12 string quartets, and above all for his many sets of miniatures, each a picture of traditional life in the land of his birth.

Tsintsadze's scores are remarkable for their wit and for the level of picturesqueness they achieve using just the standard effects of traditional string writing. In these short pieces, with their toe-tapping rhythms and melodies built up out of short, repeated phrases, we hear the exotic sounds of traditional Georgian folk songs and imagine the colourful gestures of village dancing.

The melancholic *Arobnaya* (Song of the Ox-Cart Driver) is a 'work song,' a genre familiar to Western audiences from the well-known *Volga Boat Song*. In Tsintsadze's instrumental version of a work song we hear the cello singing out the role of a village cart-driver as he toils, lyrically lamenting the hardships he faces in the course of his daily labours.

The musical score for 'Arobnaya' is written for a single melodic line, likely cello. It begins with the tempo marking 'ad lib' and the dynamic 'pp'. The melody is characterized by a series of eighth notes and a prominent five-measure rest. The tempo then changes to 'Adagio'. Later in the piece, the tempo changes to 'a tempo' and the dynamic is marked 'p'. The score is attributed to 'Sulchan Zinzadse'.

The *Chonguri* movement for solo cello is meant to imitate the plucking of the *chongur*, a lute-like instrument traditionally popular in the folk music of the Caucasus region.

The musical score for 'Chonguri' is written for solo cello. It begins with the tempo marking 'Allegretto'. The melody is characterized by a series of eighth notes and a prominent pizzicato section marked 'pizz.' and 'p'. The score includes a 'sul D' section and a final section marked with 'v' for vibrato. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

As might be expected, this impersonation of the *chongur* involves a combination of plucked melody notes and strummed multiple stops. It has been described by one classical music blogger as a "a highly virtuosic, lively, jazzy, syncopated *pizzicato* orgy" for the instrument.

The *Satchidao* is a ‘fighting’ song or dance and its origin in folk music is evident from its many drone figures, beginning with the opening two-voice texture of the solo cello.



Its more dance-like passages feature an exotic Middle Eastern scale pattern that sounds straight out of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

The *Nana* is a lullaby that also uses drone tones, but in the bass to provide sonic swaddling clothes for a small child at sleepy time.

A musical score for a lullaby, featuring piano and cello parts. The piano part is on the left, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It is marked 'Andante cantabile' and 'pp'. The cello part is on the right, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It is marked 'con sord.' and 'p'. The piano part features a recurring dotted figure in the right hand, while the cello part provides a drone in the bass.

Aiding and abetting the soporific effect is a recurring dotted figure that in European music is characteristic of the *siciliana*.

The collection ends with a *Plyasovaya* (dance tune) movement with a rough rhythmic surface texture bristling with syncopations and cross-accents as the piano wants to accent the first and third beats of the bar while the cello regularly gives stress to the second.

A musical score for a dance tune, featuring piano and cello parts. The piano part is on the left, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It is marked 'Allegro assai' and 'ff'. The cello part is on the right, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). It is marked '(senza sord.)' and 'f'. The piano part features a rough rhythmic surface texture with syncopations and cross-accents, while the cello part provides a regular stress to the second beat.

Jean Sibelius

Andante molto in F minor for cello and piano JS 36

Although Sibelius' reputation rests on his achievements as a composer of large-scale symphonic works such as the Violin Concerto, the tone poem *Finlandia* and his seven symphonies, he also wrote more than a scattering of miniatures. Many of these come from the period 1885-1889, Sibelius' so-called "chamber music period." This was a period early in his career when he was still learning his craft and testing his powers by writing small-scale works for domestic performance in his own home, where his sister Linda could always be counted on to play piano and his brother Christian the cello.

The *Andante molto in F minor* dates from the summer of 1887 and packs a good measure of musical drama into its modest dimensions. Its style is Romantic to the core, with a melody that breathes an air of Tchaikovskian melancholy as it searchingly climbs upward in small steps then falls back downward in resignation.



By dint of a series of hope-inspiring modulations, however, growing confidence and increasing resolve emerge in the middle section culminating in a remarkable cadenza for solo cello. The daydream is broken, though, with the hushed return of the opening melody and the work ends quietly, ebbing into silence with echoes its former self.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sonata in G minor for cello and piano Op. 19

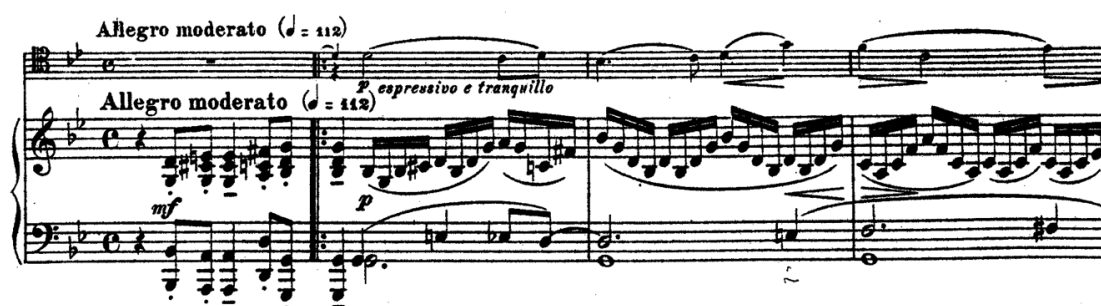
Rachmaninoff's piano music is renowned both for its lushness of scoring and for the technical challenges it presents to any pianist with a hand smaller than a catcher's mitt. The role given to the 'accompanying' instrument in his Cello Sonata in G minor is no exception. The keyboard writing in this chamber work is just as opulent, its technical demands every bit as challenging as anything in his concertos or major works for piano solo. Its piano textures still feature a rich panoply of countermelodies in the mid-range riding sidecar to sumptuous melodies ringing out in the right hand above, regardless of whatever throbbing lyricism might also emerge below in the baritone range from the cello. Most of the themes in the work are introduced by the piano and one could almost believe, as has often been said, that the work is really just a big piano sonata with cello accompaniment.

Written in 1901, around the same time as Rachmaninoff's famous Piano Concerto No. 2, this sonata is remarkable for its expressive range and the orchestral heft of its textures. As cellist Steven Isserlis has pointed out, many of its themes bear the stylistic imprint of Orthodox hymns,

especially in their use of close intervals, their obsessive repetition of single notes, and their bell-like sonorities. The first movement begins with a slow introduction

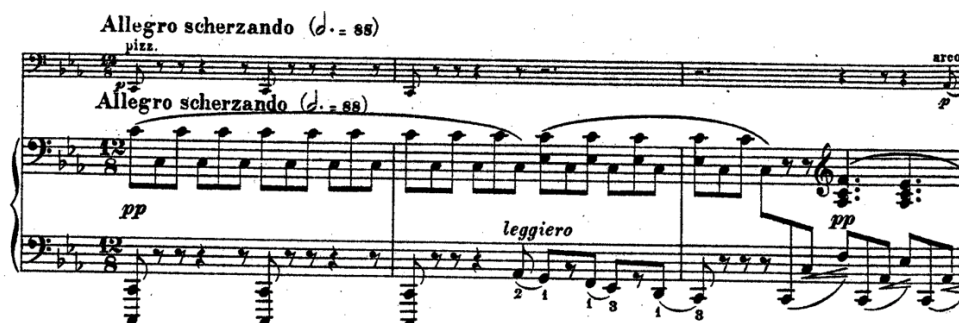


that slips in much of the thematic material that will be pursued in the following *Allegro moderato*.



Of special note is the rising semitone, intoned in the cello's mid-range, that opens the work. This oft-repeated motive pervades the themes of the exposition and drives the momentum of the stormy development section, which is end-weighted, merging into the recapitulation at its climactic point of highest tension, as in the first movement of the Second Concerto. The movement closes with the punchy, rap-on-the-door rhythmic gesture that was to become this composer's signature sign-off: RACH-man-in-OFF!

The second movement *Allegro scherzando* is remarkable for its emotional volatility.



It begins with a worrisome patter of triplet 8th notes reminiscent of Schubert's *Erkönig* but lyrical impulses soon begin to mix in with all the fretting and the middle section is a swaying duet of no small sentimental charm.

Nonetheless, Rachmaninoff does not hesitate from time to time to reveal the iron fist within the velvet glove in outbursts of distinctly muscular pianism, as in this transition passage to the return of the opening material.



The *Andante* third movement is the jewel of this sonata, its quivering harmonic ambivalence between major and minor a bittersweet and vaguely exotic sonic background to the bell-like repeated notes of its opening phrase.



Dark and brooding, the long phrases of this elegiac movement build up to an impassioned climax before ebbing into a consoling calm of warm contentment.

The *Allegro mosso* finale in a triumphal G major is a sonata-form movement of abundant contrasts. It features an upbeat “sleigh ride” of an opening theme built up out of short motives, doggedly repeated, like the opening themes of the 2nd & 3rd piano concerto finales.



The stand-out melody of this movement is its heartbreaking second theme, announced in the cello, a wistful anthem of tribute to every underdog who has ever struggled against overwhelming odds.



From time to time, however, these themes yield to the type of fervent military march that so often emerges in Rachmaninoff's finales. Just before the end, the pace slows to a crawl in a coda that seems to want to pass in review the movement's best lyrical moments past.

Will this be the end? No, of course not. Our dreaming duo awake from their reverie and scamper off to the work's brilliant conclusion like a pack of squealing school children let loose to find Easter eggs.

Program notes by
Donald G. Gíslason 2023