

JEAN-GUIHEN QUEYRAS, cello
ALEXANDER MELNIKOV, piano

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in C major Op. 102 No. 1

Andante - Allegro vivace

Adagio - Tempo d'andante - Allegro vivace

(approx. 15 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D major Op. 102 No. 2

Allegro con brio

Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto

Allegro fugato

(approx. 20 minutes)

Intermission

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor

Prologue

Sérénade

Finale

(approx. 20 minutes)

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor Op. 19

Lento - Allegro moderato

Allegro scherzando

Andante

Allegro mosso

(approx. 36 minutes)

Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata for Cello and Piano in C major Op. 102 No. 1

Beethoven's two cello sonatas Op. 102, along with the preceding Op. 101 piano sonata, mark the beginning of his late period, a period in which we hear the willful musical thoughts of a composer who has retreated from the world of sound, but with his love of that sound-world intact. The C major Cello Sonata, so irregular in its formal outlines and so free in its inner patterns of musical thought, is a typical product of that world.

The first noticeable irregularity in this sonata is that it features only two free-standing movements, each of which begins with a slow introduction. Or rather a free fantasy, because instead of building up a sense of anticipation for the section that will follow, the slow introduction of this work's first movement seems blissfully happy to merely meditate over the main motives that will recur throughout the sonata as a whole: a stepwise falling 4th and a stepwise ascent of the same interval, presented by the solo cello at the outset.

Andante
teneramente
p dolce cantabile

Op.102 Nr. 1

Andante (♩ = 88)
p dolce

With a dynamic marking of piano and the expressive indications *teneramente*, *dolce cantabile*, this slow introduction is a virtual love duet between piano and cello, which sing together in 3rds or echo back to each other their billing and cooing in a placid C major.

The end of this cheek-to-cheek slow-dancing comes all the more suddenly, then, when the sonata movement begins in earnest — in the key of A minor.

vivace
ff

vivace (♩ = 144)
ff

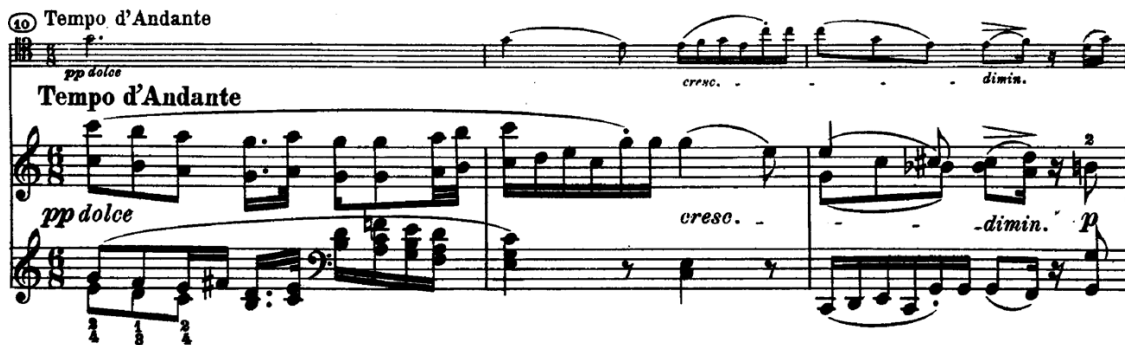
An opening theme in octaves and unisons between the piano and cello opens the exposition but expends its fury after two statements, stopping abruptly to allow a musical thought of smaller range, the second theme, to intervene.

This abruptness is a characteristic feature of the movement. Beethoven feels no real need to create transitions between sections: he merely stops, as if a new thought has occurred to him, and goes off in a new direction after a pause. Although the exposition is repeated, that is perhaps the most “normal” feature of this movement, which has a compressed development section and a recapitulation that seems ready to luxuriate in a lingering coda — but no, it decides not to after all and puts a quick end to the discussion.

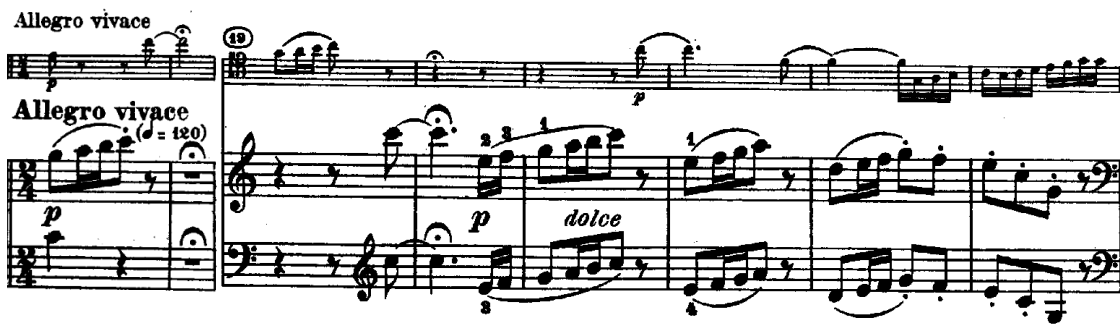
The slow introduction that opens the *Adagio* second movement is a more serious affair, introspective and reflective as if gazing at the stars.



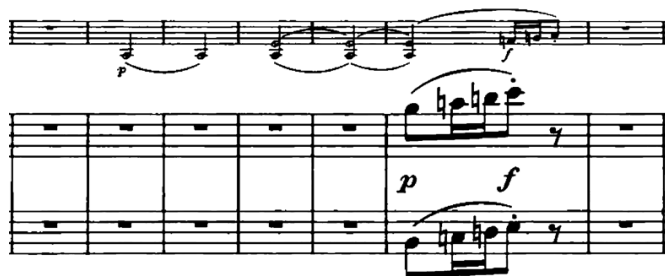
At first, the piano and cello seem to be in another duet, trading florid phrases back and forth, but then each retreats to its own corner, the cello ruminating deep in the bass as the piano explores ever higher terrain above.



Bringing them back together is the opening theme of the first movement, recalled in a mood so lyrical that it dissolves into a dreamy triple trill before the perky theme of the *Allegro vivace* bursts its bubble with a playful game of “tag” between cello and piano using the “rising 4th” motive.



Once this movement starts, we are on psychologically healthy ground. Beethoven uses the nimble rising-4th motive in many mostly humorous or ironic ways. One of the most ingenious is when the cello plays a drone in the bass, as if it's slowly looking around for the piano, then quickly turns around and just misses "tagging" it (imitatively) with the motive.



In this context the fugato that follows is anything but dead serious. Another game of tag follows later, and the two instruments end the movement the best of friends.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D major Op. 102 No. 2

The second of the two sonatas that Beethoven published as his Op. 102 is a particularly thorny creation — elemental, sinewy and unyielding in its pursuit of musical ideas at the expense of musical sentiments. This is not the place to look for pleasant tunes to hum in the shower.

It comprises three sharply chiselled movements: a sternly brisk first movement with a drill-sergeant edge to it, an emotional black hole of a slow movement and a full-on, gritty fugue finale to let the duffers know just who they are dealing with.

The sonata opens with an arresting fanfare, ideal for deep sleepers to program into their alarm clocks.



These four quick notes and a big leap set the tone of brusqueness and forthright direct statement that characterizes the exposition throughout.

The military bearing of its musical manner is reinforced by the frequent use of “snap-to-attention” dotted rhythms, bare-bones unison accompaniments and the odd feeling that there is a bugle somewhere playing along with its many motives based on the major triad. Even the patriotic second theme sounds like a slow-motion fanfare.



A development section is where you would expect a composer to mix things up a bit, but this movement’s development section is actually where you start to feel for the first time the unbuttoned sweep of long phrases governed by an overarching harmonic unfolding in place of the exposition’s “stop-and-go” pattern of delivery.

This new “smoother” mood continues into a recapitulation where the gaps are filled in and the pulse remains more continuous. The harmonic wanderings of the coda promise mystery, but then — like an adult amusing a child by hiding his face behind his hands only to spring out gleefully into full view — Beethoven steers the movement at the last moment to a resolute cadence in the home key.

* * *

The second movement, extravagantly labelled *Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto*, is oppressively Baroque in mood, its dark emotional tenor reinforced by a dirge-like pace and an almost Brahmsian obsession with the low register of the piano. But this is the only real traditional slow movement in all the cello sonatas, a place where the cello gets to display its lyrical gifts in a pool of light at centre stage.



The movement’s solemnly paced melody of even 8th notes, with a pause at the end of each phrase, suggests a chorale tune.

But the comparison is undercut by the oddly “limping” dotted-rhythm accompaniment it soon receives from the piano.



There is something “not quite right” about this deep lyricism, with its eerie unisons and its melodic turns that are more worrying than graceful. Relief arrives in a middle section in the major mode that restores a happier tone to the proceedings. When the opening section returns, however, the gravity of its ominous message is reinforced by low-register rumblings in the piano, and its “limping tic” has only gotten worse.

* * *

In keeping with Beethoven’s emerging tendency in his late period to isolate his musical material before developing it, he begins his transition to the *Allegro fugato* finale by spelling out the rising scale figure that will become his fugue subject. It comes first in the solo cello, then is echoed back in the piano like a magician first showing you both sides of a silk handkerchief from which he is later going to miraculously pull a flapping pigeon or a bouquet of flowers.



This fugue subject, when it arrives, is both merry and dainty, but it’s metrically a bit “off” in the way that it weakens the first beat of the bar. This gives it ample forward momentum but no predictable rhythmic pulse, so trying to follow the dazzling patchwork of fugal entries is a daunting exercise in mental concentration, especially given the many off-beat accents in the score.

And the merriment gets a bit crowded after a while, much like when too many people are crammed into a Volkswagen, leading to a mind-bending traffic jam of strettos in contrary motion.

The long series of buzzing trills in the texture near the end point to their successors in the “sound-symphony” finales of the last piano sonatas.

Claude Debussy Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor

Debussy's compact little sonata for cello and piano was written in 1915 as part of a series of instrumental sonatas meant to assert the value of French culture during a depressingly long Great War that Debussy saw as threatening France's very survival. The work comprises three movements, each successive movement shorter than the previous.

We find Debussy's trademark sense of understatement everywhere in this sonata. It unfolds in a subdued atmosphere of soft to medium-soft dynamic levels, imbued nonetheless with considerable emotional warmth. Phrases tend to be short and often unpredictable, either coquettishly playful or tender and pensive. Textures are thinned out and made more transparent by the use of streams of parallel 5ths, especially in the bass, and by means of melodic octave doublings throughout the texture.

There is little sense of "stable" melody since Debussy's melodies are self-developing — they mutate as soon as they are announced — but to compensate, the pace of harmonic rhythm is slow. Debussy thus inverts the normal relationship between melody and harmony.

It has been suggested that the title "Sonata" for this work is equivalent to "Untitled" as the title of a painting, and the reference to visual art is quite appropriate. Debussy treats melody and tempo like the eyeball movements of a viewer in front of a painting and harmony like the moods that slowly melt into one another as the viewer gazes from one area of the canvas to another.

* * *

The first movement *Prologue* announces its motivic foundations in the first bar: a quick triplet and long note followed by a descending modal scale figure.

Lent (48 à 54 = ♩) Sostenuto e molto risoluto

Lent (48 à 54 = ♩) Sostenuto e molto risoluto

Rhapsodic elaborations of the triplet figure form its first theme, while tender ruminations on the descending scale figure form its second. An animated

middle section prepares for the triumphant return of the opening material and its serene farewell.

* * *

The *Sérénade* that follows lives up to its title with ample pizzicato writing for the cello and a fair imitation of guitar strumming in the piano.

The musical score for the *Sérénade* movement is presented in two systems. The first system shows the cello part in the upper staff and the piano part in the lower staff. The tempo is marked **Modérément animé (72 = ♩)**. The cello part begins with a **pizz.** (pizzicato) instruction and a dynamic of **pp**, with the performance style noted as *fantasque et léger*. The piano part starts with a **pp** dynamic. The second system continues the piano part, which includes a **pp** dynamic and a **p** dynamic. The key signature has one flat and the time signature is 2/4.

Capriciously paced and leering with portamento slides, this movement pursues its evening entertainment goals with infinite delicacy.

* * *

In contrast to the spare scoring of the previous movements, the *Finale* simply bubbles over with running notes, but the scamper is often interrupted by — or superimposed with — long strands of lyrical melody.

It has a distinctly Spanish flavour with its frequent use of the Phrygian-scale descending bass figure typical of flamenco music.

The musical score for the *Finale* movement is presented in two systems. The first system shows the cello part in the upper staff and the piano part in the lower staff. The tempo is marked **Animé (92 = ♩)** with the character *Léger et nerveux*. The cello part begins with a **pizz.** instruction and a dynamic of **p**, marked *parraché*. The piano part starts with a **p** dynamic. The second system continues both parts, with the piano part featuring triplets and a **p** dynamic. The key signature has one flat and the time signature is 2/4.

In this last movement, upbeat dancelike sections alternate with less hurried, more sensuous passages that loiter rather than progress through their harmonic terrain.

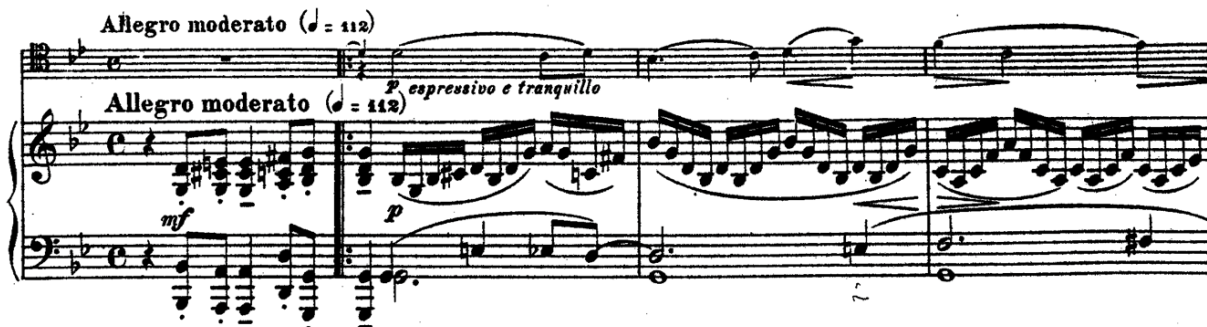
Sergei Rachmaninoff
Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor Op. 19

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 is just as opulent, its technical demands every bit as challenging as anything in his concertos or major works for piano solo. The Sonata features piano textures swimming with countermelodies in the mid-range riding sidecar to sumptuous main 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 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, just as in the first movement of the Second Piano 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.

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 second and third 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.

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 schoolchildren let loose to find Easter eggs.

Donald G. Gíslason 2025