

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: INTERPRETING MUSIC IN THE AGE OF RECORDING:
THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN MSTISLAV
ROSTROPOVICH AND BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Kacy Clopton, Doctor of Musical Art, 2019

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Benjamin Britten, a prolific and distinguished English composer, and Mstislav Rostropovich, a virtuoso Russian cellist were both at the height of their popularity mid-twentieth century and were highly celebrated internationally. Upon their meeting in 1960, Britten and Rostropovich formed a uniquely personal and musical bond, and the resulting six pieces written for cello as well as their many recordings together demonstrate the depth of that friendship and collaborative inspiration.

This paper considers the question of musical authority and what may be considered a definitive interpretation, particularly when peering through the lens of recordings. When one is presented with the knowledge that a piece has been composed for the artist performing on the recording, it can become limiting when attempting one's own interpretation. However, said recording can also provide valuable insight into the wishes of the composer, and the evolution of

the music from paper to sound through the subjective perspective of the performer. I suggest that as modern performers, we need a balance of both absorbing what has come before and affirming what we do now.

Reflecting on the work of Britten and Rostropovich together as colleagues and friends, I aim to study the meaning of this kind of collaboration and its larger implications for ensuing generations of musicians, particularly in how it is expressed through the aural heritage of recordings. I hope that through exploring the collaborative output but more importantly the friendship between Britten and Rostropovich, I am able to shed new light on the impact they made together.

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AND BENJAMIN BRITTEN

by

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Introduction

This paper considers the question of musical authority and what may be considered a definitive interpretation, particularly when peering through the lens of recordings. With this as an overarching subject, I focused specifically on the collaboration between Mstislav Rostropovich and Benjamin Britten. Through this dissertation, I explore the link between performer and composer, how this relationship inevitably shaped the music resulting from their collaboration, and ultimately influenced and informed the musicians who inherit this legacy.

Benjamin Britten wrote six total works for cello, inspired by and specifically written for Mstislav Rostropovich.

These works include:

Sonata in C for Cello and Piano, op. 65 (1961)

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68. (1963)

First Suite for Cello, op. 72 (1964)

Second Suite for Cello, op. 80 (1967)

Third Suite for Cello, op. 87 (1971)

Tema 'Sacher' (1976)

This paper is divided into four chapters. A brief background on Mstislav Rostropovich and Benjamin Britten, as well as the story of how the two iconic figures met is featured in the first chapter. A brief discussion of what prompted me to study this collaboration in light of the prolific modern recording era is also included. Chapter two looks at the first two compositions Britten wrote for Rostropovich, the *Sonata* and the *Cello Symphony*, between the years 1960-1964, and the early influences this budding friendship would have on Britten's subsequent works

for cello. Chapter three highlights the collaboration between the two friends, which reached its pinnacle of creative influence in the years 1965-1970. The first two *Cello Suites*, *op. 72* and *op. 80* were composed during these years, and Britten and Rostropovich also recorded many other works together. In the years 1971-1976, Britten's health was declining, and so his output was a bit more limited. In chapter four, the *Third Cello Suite* and the brief *Tema 'Sacher'* are explored as the final works he wrote for the instrument and for Rostropovich, as well as a look at the impact of this collaboration in light of Britten's premature death. Reflecting on their work together as colleagues and friends, the conclusion explores the meaning of this kind of collaboration and its larger implications for subsequent generations of musicians, particularly in how it is expressed through the aural heritage of recordings.

In support of this dissertation, I have performed three recitals at University of Maryland's Gildenhorn Hall and Ulrich Hall. My goal was to feature Britten's Three Solo Cello Suites prominently as the main centerpiece of these performances. To ensure that each recital would be balanced in length, style, and degree of difficulty, I elected to program one of these solo suites on each recital in combination with most of the various other pieces featured on the recordings that Britten and Rostropovich made together. Britten's *First Suite for Solo Cello* and *Sonata in C for Cello and Piano*, along with *Cello Sonatas* by Frank Bridge and Claude Debussy comprised the first recital, presented on 7 July 2018 in Gildenhorn Recital Hall. The second recital, which included Britten's *Second Suite for Solo Cello*, *Fünf Stücke im Volkston* by Schumann, Leoš Janáček's *Pohádka*, and the "*Arpeggione*" *Sonata* by Schubert, was performed on 5 September 2018 in Ulrich Recital Hall. The third recital took place on 31 October 2018 in Gildenhorn Recital Hall, and featured Britten's *Cello Symphony*, the *Tema 'Sacher'*, his *Third Suite for Solo Cello*, and the four Russian themes which inspired the latter piece. The complete works for these

three recitals are listed here. The movements are presented as they appear in the editions cited in the bibliography of this paper.

First Recital Program

Suite for Cello No. 1, Op. 72 (1964)

Benjamin Britten

- Canto primo
- I. Fuga
- II. Lamento
- Canto secondo
- III. Serenata
- IV. Marcia
- Canto terzo
- V. Bordone
- VI. Moto perpetuo e canto quattro

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor, H 125 (1913-1917)

Frank Bridge

- I. Allegro ben moderato
- II. Adagio ma non troppo – Molto allegro agitato

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor (1915)

Claude Debussy

- I. Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto
- II. Sérénade: Modérément animé
- III. Final: Animé, léger et nerveux

Sonata in C for Cello and Piano, op. 65 (1961)

Benjamin Britten

- I. Dialogo
- II. Scherzo - pizzicato
- III. Elegia
- IV. Marcia
- V. Moto perpetuo

Second Recital Program

Suite for Cello No. 2, Op. 80 (1967)

Benjamin Britten

- I. Declamato: *Largo*
- II. Fuga: *Andante*
- III. Scherzo: *Allegro molto*
- IV. Andante lento
- V. Ciaccona: *Allegro*

Fünf Stücke im Volkston, op. 102 (1849) Robert Schumann
I. Mit Humor ‘Vanitas vanitatum’
II. Langsam
III. Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen
IV. Nicht zu rasch
V. Stark und markiert

Pohádka (1912, rev. 1924) Leoš Janáček
I. Con moto – Andante
II. Con moto – Adagio
III. Allegro

Sonata in A minor “Arpeggione” for Cello and Piano, D. 821 Franz Schubert
I. Allegro moderato
II. Adagio
III. Allegretto

Third Recital Program

Cello Symphony, op. 68 (1963) Benjamin Britten
I. Allegro maestoso
II. Presto inquieto
III. Adagio – cadenza
IV. Passacaglia: *Andante allegro*

Tema ‘SACHER’ (1976) Benjamin Britten

Four Russian Songs arr. Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Under the little apple tree
Autumn
The grey eagle
Kontakion

Suite for Cello No. 3, op. 87 (1971) Benjamin Britten
I. Introduzione: *Lento*
II. Marcia: *Allegro*
III. Canto: *Con moto*
IV. Barcarola: *Lento*
V. Dialogo: *Allegretto*
VI. Fuga: *Andante espressivo*
VII. Recitativo: *Fantastico*
VIII. Moto perpetuo: *Presto*
IX. Passacaglia: *Lento solemne*

Chapter 1: The Introduction of Rostropovich and Britten

Benjamin Britten

Britten (1913-1976) was a prolific and celebrated English composer of the mid-twentieth century. Born and raised in Lowestoft, Suffolk as the youngest of four children, Britten lived and composed in this same picturesque coastal region of England for most of his life. He is known mostly for his vocal composition, including operas *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Death in Venice*, other large-scale orchestral works such as *Sinfonia da Requiem*, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and the culmination of both is featured in the *War Requiem*.

As a gifted pianist, it is surprising Britten did not compose more for piano, save the solitary *Piano Concerto* and a handful of pieces for solo piano. He candidly admitted that he preferred the piano as a background instrument rather than a melodic one, and that he found it to be “limited in color”; he went on to say, “I don’t really like the sound of a modern piano.”¹ This is somewhat ironic considering he was well-known for being a gifted “conjurer of colors” at the instrument.² He generally preferred to write for the voice, which he found to be the purest source of expression. He was particularly inspired to write for his long-time partner and tenor, Peter Pears.³ By the time he and Mstislav Rostropovich (1927-2007) met in 1960, he was already a very well-appreciated composer both at home and abroad. While he was grateful for the

¹ Bridcut, John, *Essential Britten: A Pocket Guide for the Britten Centenary*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 268.

² *Ibid.*

³ Kildea, Paul, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*. (London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 2013), 226.

generally glowing reception he received later in life, he believed his higher purpose was to serve his art.

As the first recipient to receive the Aspen Award in 1964, Britten gave a speech in which he addressed this very thing:

Until the 19th century, the composer was the servant of society... Then composers began to blow up their egos... Now the artist is the glorified mouthpiece of God... I believe in the reverse of that. I believe in the artist serving society.⁴

His reputation was becoming more secure both in England and abroad. He was, however, quite sensitive to criticism. He would often feel the need to retreat into a more private group of close contacts and friends, and to his home in Aldeburgh, as he had felt so disturbingly burnt by several harsh critics in London.⁵ As he got older and settled into a more insulated compositional rhythm, he was heavily inclined to spend his time writing in the restful and unencumbered Suffolk countryside – first at The Mill in Snape from 1937, and twenty years later, The Red House in Aldeburgh.⁶

Britten had composed almost nothing for individual instrumentalists in the 1950s, and therefore his first encounter with Mstislav Rostropovich is all the more significant in this context. It was this very meeting which inspired Britten's return to instrumental composition, and specifically in writing for Mstislav.⁷ "Britten's genius had clearly grown thirsty for an instrumental inspiration to match all the singers, from Peter Pears on, who have stood behind the shaping of his vocal music."⁸ This was the beginning of a rich cross-fertilization between

⁴ Carpenter, Humphrey, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 438.

⁵ Carpenter, 414.

⁶ Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the 20th Century*, 234.

⁷ Ariane Bankes and Jonathan Reekie, *New Aldeburgh Anthology*, (Woodbridge: Aldeburgh Music & The Boydell Press, 2009), 260.

⁸ Warrack, John, "Britten's Cello Symphony," *The Musical Times* 105, no. 1456 (June 1964): 419.

musicians in both countries. A close friend to Britten, Marion Thorpe comments that he “was always keen to write for performers who had special qualities that inspired him.”⁹

Mstislav Rostropovich

Born in 1927 in the town of Baku to a cellist father and pianist mother, Mstislav Rostropovich came of age and made his mark under the Soviet system. He studied cello and piano in his early youth and added composition to his many skills once he was enrolled at the Moscow Conservatory in 1937. He was known for having a particularly quick and powerful style of playing. He could draw sounds from the cello that highlighted every acoustic possibility within the instrument, and his technique at the time was unparalleled. Rostropovich likely did more to further the repertoire for the cello as a solo instrument in the twentieth century than any other cellist. He was responsible for half of the now standard works of the twentieth century for cello and orchestra as well as a substantial body of work in which the cello is central and featured.¹⁰ Despite the repressive climate of the pre-war Stalinist era, the Soviet Union was a country where performing artists enjoyed a privileged status. Of course, Rostropovich’s own development owed as much to the circumstances of his upbringing and education as to the extraordinary nature of his talent.¹¹ Using this immense talent, as well as his famous charm and magnetism to great advantage, Mstislav, also known as “Slava” to his friends, quickly catapulted to new heights of fame, both within the former Soviet Union and abroad. “He was popular

⁹ Ariane Bankes and Jonathan Reekie, *New Aldeburgh Anthology*, 260.

¹⁰ Botstein, Leon, “An Unforgettable Life in Music: Mstislav Rostropovich (1927-2007),” *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 2/3 (Summer-Fall, 2006), 162.

¹¹ Wilson, Elizabeth, *Rostropovich: The Musical Life of the Great Cellist, Teacher and Legend*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), 2-3.

wherever he played, but outside his own country he found his warmest and most appreciative audiences in Great Britain.”¹²

Britten saw Rostropovich perform for the first time on 21 September 1960 at the Royal Festival Hall in London. Britten’s *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra* opened the program and was followed by the *First Cello Concerto* by Dmitri Shostakovich. As the two composers featured in that evening’s program, they were seated next to one another in a ceremonial audience box. Shostakovich describes Britten’s enthusiasm at hearing Rostropovich play for the first time, “At the concert tonight, every time Britten admired something in your playing, he would poke me in the ribs, and say, ‘Isn’t that simply marvelous!’ As he liked so many things throughout the concerto, I am now suffering!”¹³ Britten had indeed been overwhelmed by Rostropovich’s mastery; he became an immediate and ardent admirer of the cellist.

Rostropovich, already having established himself as a somewhat obsessive commissioner of new works, quickly pleaded with Britten to write him a piece for cello. He describes their first encounter:

I knew some of his works. In fact, I was extremely fond of them, but I had never seen the composer himself ... I am glad, truly glad, that the living Britten was just like his music – not spoiled by his status as one of the most outstanding musicians of our time. I remember how I attacked Britten there and then and pleaded most sincerely and passionately with him to write something for the cello. ... On the following day the three of us – Britten, Rozhdestvensky [the conductor of this program], and I – met at the Prince of Wales Hotel. ... We decided at this meeting of ours that if Britten wrote a sonata for cello, he would send it to me in Moscow and it would be first performed in public at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1961.¹⁴

¹² Wilson, 178.

¹³ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, Volume 5 1956-1966, (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2010), 277.

¹⁴ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, Vol. 5, 276.

Having agreed, Britten began work on this new piece in December of 1960. He wrote to Mstislav: “I am enjoying thinking about it enormously, especially with your lovely playing in mind. I hope I shall not go too far in exploiting the technique of the instrument, knowing that you can play anything!”¹⁵ By January of 1961, he had produced the *Sonata in C for Cello and Piano*. It was premiered in Aldeburgh, England as part of their Fifteenth Aldeburgh Festival on 7 July 1961.¹⁶ As their collaboration would soon reveal, this indeed marked the beginning of an era.

The Age of Recording

When preparing a well-known and frequently recorded work for the first time, a performer faces the task of bringing an accurate, unique and ultimately convincing interpretation to life. One attempts this by studying many aspects of a composition: its original manuscript, various editions of the score whenever possible, historical and/or biographical context surrounding the work’s composition, referencing available recordings, working on the piece with a senior authority or teacher, and practicing the piece individually to great depth. But what is the “right” way to go about this period of gathering information and refining one’s own opinions? This is particularly relevant in the current age of information, in which we are easily bombarded with an over-abundance of digitally dissected and re-mastered media. This paper explores the profound influence which recordings can have on the evolution of interpretation by examining the collaboration between Mstislav Rostropovich and Benjamin Britten.

There are at least two schools of thought circulating most frequently in the training of young musicians. In most cases, advanced students are advised to resist temptation and stay

¹⁵ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, Vol. 5, 274.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 309.

away from recordings completely when commencing work on a new piece. This is suggested in an effort to keep the mind clear of interpretations that could corrupt and inadvertently influence an ideally blank slate of limitless and imaginative possibilities. Others might suggest that students listen to some recordings or at least a few that they find inspiring and informative, and then to go to work on making their own decisions, based upon what they have gathered. Naturally, there are options which include a little bit of both – one can study recordings up to a point and then cease entirely while one's own interpretation is germinating and growing into something more concrete. Either way, the presence of innumerable recordings creates a thick web of conceptions, analyses, and expectations through which we must constantly maneuver in order to clarify an individual perspective.

Many pertinent questions spring to mind: should all available recordings of a composition be considered or only the original, should all artist's versions be equally consulted or just the performers who worked with the composer (if this is even an option), how accurate are the markings in the edition from which one is reading, what were the composer's true intentions, how much rubato is characteristic for this particular phrase, is this slide style-appropriate or would it be considered in bad taste, and if so, by whom? In this specific case, knowing that Rostropovich worked so closely with Britten in the process of how these pieces came to be, one could argue that we do in fact have an authoritative recording.

While it is of paramount importance to follow the markings in each score meticulously, all musicians must endeavor to be expert interpreters of a written musical language, of which every single composer speaks an individual dialect. Bartok's method of expressing what he wanted through markings on the page differs extremely from the language that was available to Mozart. Debussy and Stravinsky utilized quadruple the number of detailed markings as

compared to Haydn and Beethoven. Articulation, dynamics, expression, tempo, phrasing, and rubato markings changed drastically over the centuries, and this is what musicians must study so intently.¹⁷ For example, as we mature as performers, we discover that printed dynamics are more than just a volume knob – they are moreover an indication of character in a larger context. These are not necessarily things composers need or care to specify; they are usually the experience-driven wisdom of knowledgeable and thoughtful musicians.¹⁸

There are so many things that happen between a composer's initial concept and the moment when the manuscript goes to print at the publishers.¹⁹ Then of course there are reprint editions, creative license, and evolutions in stylistic and aesthetic tastes through changing times and cultures. There are so many variables to consider. As Philip writes:

The relationship between notation and performance is not straightforward. The character of a tempo is more important than the actual metronome marking. Rhythmic characterization is more important than strict accuracy. The composer's own views change over time, and he/she cannot always remember what he/she intended.²⁰

In the age of recording, we no longer benefit solely from the rich aural heritage of string playing passed down through generations of great pedagogues and live concerts to inspire us. We now have the additional privilege of accessing most musicians globally through recordings. A young student has the ability to study recordings made by wonderful modern artists such as Christian Tetzlaff, Truls Mørk, and Kim Kashkashian, as well as those by Joseph Szigeti, Gregor Piatigorsky, Lionel Tertis, and many others we could never have seen live. Musicians that were

¹⁷ Philip, Robert, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 56.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 243.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 178.

born before recordings were made had to base all decisions on the paper scores with which we are left, assuming that there was no direct line to the composer's wishes.²¹

In the last century however, musicians are not trained to only base decisions on written scores. We are also constantly learning from hearing other musicians all over the world – more so than any previous generation. Most current musicians are subconsciously and consciously affected by the powerful need to fit in with and live up to the current trends that have become standard.²² Therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult to insulate oneself from the conformity of interpretation. It seems a bit parallel to the notion that we should resist absorbing what appears repeatedly and almost to the point of subconscious programming in the media, i.e. advertising, airbrushed photos, etc. It is a lofty ideal amidst a bombardment of information. And just like an airbrushed photo, a studio edited recording has been tampered with enormously, down to the last microscopic detail before being released in a polished, glittering sheen of the sonic equivalent of a “snapchat” filter.

The profusion of musical media can also be compared to the instant access one possesses to almost everything in our Western world. “It has become like the availability of asparagus and tomatoes all year round.”²³ It's convenient and fitting with the current need for immediate gratification, yet we've lost some appreciation for a delicious and uniquely obtained time-sensitive treat. As recently as a century ago, each performer was appreciated for their specific individual style – i.e. their sound color, vibrato, phrasing, rubato, and so on. Pablo Casals (1876-1973), for example, would never have faced modern pressures to conform his sound or even his sense of pitch to another contemporary cellist. Based on early twentieth-century recordings, one

²¹ Philip, 178.

²² Philip, 232.

²³ *Ibid.*

can hear the vast differentiation between each performer. Over the last century, the number of string players performing and being recorded has grown exponentially. With the over-abundance of various interpretations, it befalls contemporary performers to untangle the cobwebs and to decide on what or whose authority we make artistic choices.

For better or worse, the age of recording has led to an unprecedented level of self-awareness and an attention to minute detail that was never before possible.²⁴ In general, recordings themselves have changed drastically in the last century. One could describe it as a general tidying of sound. Major changes include preferences towards tighter ensemble, more literal note-value interpretation, the nature of rubato has become more even, tempo range within a movement narrowed, the use of portamento used more sparingly, more discreet shifts (as string players), more continuous and prominent vibrato throughout, less distinct national styles, fewer live recordings, an increase in intricate and extensive editing/sound engineering, etc.²⁵ There has also been a streamline of interpretation. So much has been brought to a middle ground, in order to please every listener and therefore sell more CDs/increase downloads. The main motivation seems less to share a particularly moving and successful interpretation and more to offend the fewest people.²⁶ Having performed in several international competitions, my string quartet often found itself driven to perform in such a way – appealing to the ‘average’ of what we could deduce the range of tastes might be on any given panel. There is an enormous pressure for musicians who wish to succeed on an international level, to model themselves after the

²⁴ Ashby, Arved, *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction*, (CA: University of California Press, 2010), 13-14, Kindle.

²⁵ Philip, 232.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 243.

international standard. We have become beholden to the great sheen of perfectionism in the digital age, and this is largely evident in the music industry.²⁷

In facing the issue of all-consuming lust for perfection, young artists are placed in a challenging position. Besides the counter-productive effects digital perfectionism has on creativity, this also leaves no room for discrepancies in scores or in the generational passage of edits that come from first-hand contact with composers. There are several negative effects of such pressure. First of all, it drives out local traditions and unique tastes. Secondly, it has made recordings a platform for imitating one another, rather than attempting something truly innovative and new. Most importantly, it seems to limit the development of individual imagination. Once a successful career is built however, one can offend as many people as one pleases. Instead of being discouraged as ‘too out there’, greatly appreciated and successfully proven artists can be well-respected for their courageous ideas.²⁸ One such artist was Mstislav Rostropovich, particularly because he specialized in premiering new works by contemporary composers. He recognized the need for a broader range of technically advanced material featuring the cello as a solo instrument and he capitalized on composers’ need to have their music played and popularized by a prominent musician. In this mutually beneficial exchange, albeit occasionally accomplished in a ‘bullying’ manner, Rostropovich successfully altered the course for all future cellists.²⁹

²⁷ Ashby, 23.

²⁸ Philip, 245.

²⁹ Holst, Imogen, *The Great Composers: Britten*, (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1966), 76.

Chapter 2: Early Influences 1960-1964

Sonata in C

As this Sonata was the first work Britten composed for Rostropovich, he made a gift of the original manuscript to Mstislav. Therefore, this is one of the few autograph manuscripts I was unable to peruse in person at the Britten-Pears Archives in Aldeburgh, England. I was able to see some discarded sketches of the piece as well as Britten's own published piano part with handwritten personal markings. Most of these are simply performer's reminders: fingerings, notes which appear to be circled for importance, and a humorously emphatic "Ben pedal!" to himself. The letters exchanged in anticipation of this great Sonata are friendly, exuberant and somewhat apologetic from Britten, as if he is attempting to cautiously sense how Rostropovich will receive his piece. One can intuit their mutual respect, vulnerability, and excitement as they prepare to meet and rehearse this new work together.

Britten wrote to Rostropovich from Aldeburgh, Suffolk on 30 January 1961:

My dear Slava,

I hope the Sonata in C will arrive at the same time as this note. I have copied the cello part and had the piano part roughly photographed (so you can see what's going on!) I hope you can make something of it. I have put some suggestions of bowing, but I haven't had much first-hand experience of the cello and may have made some mistakes. The pizzicato movement (II) will amuse you; I hope it is possible! ... I look forward immensely to working at it with you. [...]

Warm greetings from,
Ben³⁰

Rostropovich describes his reaction at the arrival of the Sonata:

I was called to the telephone: a parcel with the music from Britten! I'm sure I broke all records for 880 yards hurdles for cellists. The hurdles were varied and many; the staircase and the acquaintances I dodged, barely saying, 'Hello'. When I returned, I

³⁰ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, Vol. 5, 298.

made a dash for my cello, locked myself in and went at that Sonata. It was a case of love at first sight. I was astounded; the music resembled no other piece of chamber music I knew.³¹

The two met to rehearse the piece for the first time on 5 March 1961 at Britten and Pears's flat in London.³² Rostropovich recalls that they were both quite nervous to begin playing. So much so that Britten suggested: "Let's have a drink, maybe it'll go easier."³³ Rostropovich claims to have been so excited and delirious at the completion of the first movement that he "jumped up, hopped over the cello, and rushed to the composer to embrace him in a burst of spontaneous gratefulness."³⁴ A picture of this very moment, along with a few others from this inaugural rehearsal, were conveniently captured by Erich Auerbach (See Appendix).³⁵ After that, things were a bit more comfortable, apparently.

In this Sonata, Britten follows a four-movement classical sonata blueprint quite closely, with the slight deviation of the insertion of an extra movement (the Marcia). The Sonata opens with a clearly conversational *Dialogo*, one of Britten's favorite compositional dialects, in which the cello offers fractured musings, beginning with a simple two-note figure, of what would otherwise flesh out to a fully realized melodic line. Instead Britten initiates a playful and sensitive interaction between the two voices featuring quick and successive swells. The character abruptly shifts to more abrasive surges of major seventh/minor second intervals, which diminish into more exploratory parallel thirds in contrary motion – some sliding down, others drifting upwards in harmonics, only to now shift into a lively 4/4 meter. The cello and piano switch conversational roles once more and through the lolling recapitulation, the movement comes to a

³¹ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, Vol. 5, 298.

³² *Ibid*, 300.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ Walker, Lucy, *Britten in Pictures*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 173.

quiet close. The second movement, *Scherzo-pizzicato*, is entirely as the title indicates: a plucky and somewhat percussive joke. Britten's use of sharp wit and humorous intervallic playfulness is continued cleverly in this movement. During his school days, he was known to be "frightfully clever", although many of his peers at the Royal College of Music seemed "inclined to suspect technical brilliance of being superficial and insincere."³⁶ In this setting, however, it would seem that this consummate cleverness is put to great use.

In the *Elegia* the parallel thirds return, now chromatically modified, to form a natural ebb and flow to the lilting and meditative melancholy. The climactic mid-section leads us into emotional turmoil with anguished cries before it recedes into a Bridge-inspired wistfulness as the primary theme concludes this elegiac central movement. In 1961, as one of the first critical reviews of this work, Peter Evans comments: "at the largamente climax, the one theme of this arched movement reaches an incandescence without parallel in Britten's chamber music."³⁷ The grotesquely bitonal *Marcia* takes off in a buzzing haste, introducing regular use of quintuplets to propel itself forward. Teasing rhythms in the piano invite responsorial mocking harmonics in the cello. Considering the Russian dedicatee, there is a potential tribute to Prokofiev or Shostakovich in the satirical qualities of this march.³⁸ The finale, *Moto perpetuo*, is cast in a kind of abstract rondo form whose *saltando* (bouncing spiccato) cello articulations are chased around a chromatic wilderness by the piano until, at last, C major appears in a manically triumphant conclusion.

Peter Evans encapsulates his 1961 review by saying, "Britten pays Rostropovich a musician's compliment when he assumes that the technical mastery demanded here will not be allowed to overshadow the deeper beauties of this notable sonata."³⁹ Britten and Rostropovich

³⁶ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, 35.

³⁷ Evans, Peter, "Britten's Cello Sonata," *Tempo New Series* 58 (Summer 1961), 13.

³⁸ Evans, "Britten's Cello Sonata," 14.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 16.

recorded this Sonata in C together under the Decca label in 1962, along with the Schumann *Fünf Stücke im Volkston* and Debussy *Sonata*.⁴⁰ Critical reviews of their first duo recording were enthusiastic to say the least: “the performances are outstanding; Britten showed himself a virtuoso to match even this cellist; the recording is excellent.”⁴¹ It does indeed sound as if these two had been playing together their entire lives.

Britten & Rostropovich: Colleagues & Friends

When studying this recording, I was immediately struck by how sensitively Britten accompanies Rostropovich in the Schumann *Fünf Stücke*; they test the limits of intimacy both in dynamic and atmosphere in the second and third movements. The Debussy *Sonata* moves seamlessly and elastically as they enjoy the rhapsodic exuberance of this compact work. There is an intensity in Britten’s playing and yet it is so subtle in its support, at times it is almost indistinguishable from Rostropovich’s sound. Britten was known for this entirely unique ability to be invisible and yet completely magnetic as a collaborative pianist.

At the end of World War II, he accompanied Yehudi Menuhin in 1945 on a visit to Bergen-Belsen after the liberation of the concentration camp. The cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, a survivor of its horrors, was present at the performance, though did not know at the time who the pianist was. “I can only say that I cannot imagine anything done more beautifully,” she wrote, “he was completely unobtrusive and yet I found myself transfixed by him sitting there,

⁴⁰ Schumann, Debussy, & Britten. *Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Cello Sonata in D minor, Sonata in C for Cello and Piano, op. 65*, Mstislav Rostropovich and Benjamin Britten. Decca SXL 2298 LP, Recorded 1962.

⁴¹ Greenfield, Edward, “Review of: Cello Sonata by Britten and Rostropovich; Fünf Stücke im Volkston by Schumann, Rostropovich and Britten; Cello Sonata by Debussy, Rostropovich and Britten, Decca SXL 2298,” *The Musical Times* 103, no. 1429 (Mar 1962), 178.

playing to perfection.”⁴² Britten’s long-time editor and musical assistant, Imogen Holst (Gustav Holst’s daughter) adds: “He used to accompany songs by Schubert with such intimate concern that the music sounded as if it were his own.”⁴³ Of all that has been said about Britten’s piano playing, nothing is more appropriate than the remark made by Rostropovich himself when he said: “Britten the pianist closely resembles Britten the composer.”⁴⁴ This type of interdependent, entirely musical and supportive collaboration is extraordinarily rare, and therefore especially magical when it occurs. It is also notable, considering Rostropovich was not the greatest fan of recording inside the confines of a label recording purely for commercial release, he and Britten made so many albums together.⁴⁵

Britten also struggled with surprisingly intense stage fright. Normally it’s the accompanist who has to bolster the singer or instrumentalist before a recital. With Britten it was the other way around. Peter Pears had to inveigle his partner onto the stage while the audience was waiting.⁴⁶ Having said that, he was known to be extremely hard-working, disciplined, and even relentless in his commitment to getting the music just so. According to Imogen Holst, he was exactly that:

‘Relentless’ may seem a strange word to use of anyone as sensitive and patient as Britten was. But it was the right word. The professional singers and players who worked with him were not just ‘good’ musicians: they had to be superlatively good, and they had to be prepared to go on getting better and better all the time. There could never be any possibility of compromise, because the music always came first.⁴⁷

⁴² Bridcut, *Essential Britten: A Pocket Guide for the Britten Centenary*, 15.

⁴³ Holst, *The Great Composers: Britten*, 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 56.

⁴⁵ Wilson, Elizabeth, *Rostropovich: The Musical Life of the Great Cellist, Teacher and Legend*, 264.

⁴⁶ Bridcut, *Essential Britten, A Pocket Guide for the Britten Centenary*, 157.

⁴⁷ Holst, 64.

In many ways, Britten credits his teacher and greatest pedagogical influence, Frank Bridge, with this attention to detail and dogged commitment to accuracy. Britten describes his lessons with Bridge as “mammoth”.⁴⁸ He goes on to say:

His loathing of all sloppiness and amateurishness set me standards to aim for that I’ve never forgotten. He taught me to think and feel through the instruments I was writing for. . . Bridge insisted on the absolutely clear relationship between of what was in my mind to what was on the paper.⁴⁹

Britten, having studied the viola as a young boy, was fluent in the written language of string writing. He knew precisely what bowings, articulation, and timbre he wanted to hear, and his markings reflect that.⁵⁰ It is no small wonder that there are quite a few specific indications in all of his works for cello. Britten frequently marks which string upon which he would like a certain passage played, he marks when he wants an open string or a harmonic, he indicates when he would like non-vibrato, and he uses every possible articulation marking. It is clear that he cares deeply about the colors evoked in his music. When listening to the recordings of the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* as well as some of his larger works (such as *Sinfonia da Requiem*), it is evident that, as a conductor, he was thorough and quite particular in coaching the orchestra with whom he was working.⁵¹ Although the ensemble within the orchestra is not perfect on these recordings, the colors and effects are vividly executed; the result, admittedly subjectively described here, is scintillating to my ear.

Rostropovich was known to be a larger-than-life character. “A force of nature, he showered kisses and bear-hugs on all and was. . . in a word, irresistible. He was driven by a superhuman energy and an irrepressible enthusiasm, barely ever contained, for everything and

⁴⁸ Holst, 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Benjamin Britten and Franz Joseph Haydn, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68, Cello Concerto in C (with cadenza by Britten)*, Mstislav Rostropovich and English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Benjamin Britten. (Decca SXL 6138 LP, Recorded 1964).

every person he heard and saw.”⁵² He was not terribly subtle, and he could influence through his charm or extraordinary talent; alternatively, he was known to employ methods more commonly associated with that of a steam-roller. However, perhaps it was this very magnanimous and powerful personality that soothed Britten in allowing him to express his true musicianship. He was obviously attracted to other strong personalities such as Peter Pears and W.H. Auden. Perhaps gregarious nature of Rostropovich freed Britten up in some way. And likewise, Britten could very well have soothed the Russian cellist’s fiery nature in his sensitive, reserved, and brilliant attentiveness. However it happened, the two were openly fond of one another on and off stage.⁵³

Cello Symphony

Benjamin Britten’s *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68* was the second work written for Mstislav Rostropovich, following the *Sonata in C, op. 65*. It was completed in 1963 and was premiered by Rostropovich with the Moscow Philharmonic at the city’s Conservatory on March 12, 1964. It received an enthusiastic reception, according to John Warrack, a British critic, who was in attendance:

Moscow: It was cordially received at its premiere, in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, though as far as the musical establishment in the smart seats went, I thought a trifle too politely (the students in the gallery were overjoyed, stamping and slow-handclapping until they got the finale encored. I later heard from a professor that no work had so excited the younger generation for years). Rostropovich later assured me that this reception was one of the best he could remember, one of deep emotion and thoughtfulness rather than superficial excitement.⁵⁴

⁵² Peter Andry, Robin Stringer, and Tony Locantro. *Inside the Recording Studio*, 131.

⁵³ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, eds. *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, Volume 6 1966-1976. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 90.

⁵⁴ Warrack, John, “Britten’s Cello Symphony,” *The Musical Times* 105, no. 1456 (June 1964): 419.

He originally titled the piece ‘Sinfonia-concertante’ and later revised the title to ‘Cello Symphony,’ to make it clear that this is a piece for double forces: one solo, one orchestral.⁵⁵

Warrack sums up his impression of Britten’s homage to dedicatee, Rostropovich: “The Sonata for cello and piano was a pleasant souvenir of affection for a virtuoso; the Cello Symphony is a full, deeply thought and intricately fashioned musical tribute.”⁵⁶

Britten intentionally steered away from the typical title of ‘Concerto’ which implies a much more heavily featured solo line to be set atop more “supportive” music. His musical ideas here seem destined for double discussion – sometimes expressed in conflict, other times a dialogue or, less commonly, in uniting forces. While it is a powerful work to be sure, it can take more than one listening to fully appreciate all that lies beneath its surface. However, even at first hearing, the piece is at once arresting and disturbing.⁵⁷ A soothing aspect of this mammoth composition can be found in the challenging terrain traversed as it gradually evolves from darkness to light.

A musical interdependence extends through every aspect of the work. We begin with the typical roles of the solo cello and orchestra reversed, while the melodic material is featured in the orchestra and the chordal harmony is punctuated by the cello. A ground bass line is presented immediately in the lowest voices of the orchestra (contrabassoon, tuba, and double basses), along with a craggy figure which winds this ground bass back to its head. It is this figure precisely that, to me, evokes the image of a giant leviathan grumbling around in the very bottom of the ocean. Massive and pre-historic, this creature rules the deep – its power unmatched. As a balancing force, Britten casts the opposing smaller characters in the very highest instruments of

⁵⁵ Warrack, “Britten’s Cello Symphony,” 419.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Henderson, Robert, “Britten’s Cello Symphony” *Tempo New Series*, no. 70 (Fall 1964): 25.

the symphony (oboe, E-flat clarinet, and piccolo). He also does this, in a more practical light, to leave ample room for the mid-range of the solo cello to cut through some of the intensity of the orchestral sound.⁵⁸

This Allegro maestoso first movement, in full sonata form, begins as if already amidst a raucous and dangerous brawl, which quickly boils over into a shrill and searing outpouring from both orchestra and solo cello. Once tempers have cooled a bit, a rocking and bubbling theme oscillates between cello and winds, leading us into the secondary *tranquillo* theme. Here Britten reiterates a similar figure utilized in his *Sonata in C* with a two-note cell commencing a pleading tune which is cut off mid-stream, as if a quiet wailing is repeatedly choked to a halt, never to be fully expressed. The counterpart to this figure takes place in the strings of the orchestra as they gently “pluck” with the bow (in a short *martellato* stroke) a trickling, suspenseful, almost expressionless theme. Soloist and orchestra later trade these roles in the recapitulation. The struggle soon resurges to disrupt this milder mood and one can sense there is still a much larger internal battle raging on, ascending in waves throughout the development. Upon the arrival of the recapitulation, once again Britten exchanges the roles of soloist and orchestra, now with cello joining forces with the leviathan ground bass instruments while the treble factions take on the chords. As the movement nears its conclusion, the hope of a more optimistic moral to the story wanes (besides a final resolution in D major); instead, the beginning is reframed in much quieter, more reflective terms. This time, the soloist strums the opening chords while the leviathan ground bass begrudgingly resigns itself to meander back into the depths of the abyss from whence it came.

The Scherzo second movement, marked *Presto inquieto*, is a restless “unquiet” experience, to be sure; the cello is muted through the entire movement, creating yet another submerged

⁵⁸ Evans, Peter, “Britten’s Cello Symphony,” *Tempo, Britten’s 50th Birthday*, no. 66/67 (Fall-Winter 1963): 15.

sensation. The movement begins with furtive and irregular spurts of energy from the cello, quickly followed by an orchestral interval (usually a major second), momentarily suspended in time. In a major key under sunnier skies, this movement could pass for a friendly and bright little waltz. But in this muted, scampering, somewhat shadier context, its grotesque and mangled form is tangible. In the irregular scale passages leading to chaotic dissolution near the end of the movement, Britten demonstrates how greatly Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto proved to be an inspiration. As the strings scurry around in the dark with a flutter of measured tremolo, a bolt of lightning streaks across the sky in the form of glissandi false harmonics in the solo cello. This little exchange mirrors the beginning of the Scherzo and resolves as would a dark comedy – that is to say, questionably humorously.

The third and fourth movements are bonded together in form and time, acting as a balance to the first and second movements. The music finds its mirror image in the smallest details. The Adagio, with its soaring tune in thirds and irregular phrase lengths (fives and sevens), reveals a more traditionally Britten-esque composition.⁵⁹ The timpani is heavily featured throughout this movement, as it calls to order and announces each new utterance of repeated motifs. A hauntingly beautiful melody emerges in the stratosphere of the cello in conversational and tonal communion with the horn. This melody foreshadows the final Passacaglia, as it is the theme upon which all its variations will be based. The Adagio proves to be the elegiac emotional center of the Symphony, consequentially reflected in an extensive cello cadenza. Said cadenza acts as a developmental bridge that makes one entity of the last two movements.⁶⁰ Here the cello mimics the timpani in a kind of drumroll pizzicato interspersed with the original thematic material. As the cadenza carries

⁵⁹ Henderson, "Britten's Cello Symphony", 25.

⁶⁰ Evans, "Britten's Cello Symphony," 12.

us into the fourth movement, another similarity to the structure of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto is revealed.

In this final Passacaglia, six variations long, the theme initially introduced in the Adagio is celebrated in many facets, more light-heartedly in character than we have yet seen in this Symphony. Thus, the dark intricacy of the first movement and its nervous, shifty scherzo companion are answered by the glowing Adagio and finally the triumph of this fourth movement. A deeply distraught and painful thread has simmered throughout the work, straining to be resolved, and finally it seems to burst through the surface into the unexpected sunlight of the fourth movement. Britten's immense skill with this form of composition is well-featured here, with many versions to enjoy. The coda highlights the orchestra in soaring broad triplets atop the cello's growing arpeggiation of the opening ground bass. In what could be called an "apotheosis" the cello and orchestra join forces in a grandiose and expansive conclusion to this epic journey.

As to the question of authoritative recordings, a review of the newly released LP in 1965 addressed this very thought: "Within months of the first performance in Moscow comes this recording, as near definitive as could be."⁶¹ To this day, only a few other recordings of this mammoth work exist.

⁶¹ "Review of: Britten Symphony for Cello and Orchestra op. 68; Haydn Cello Concerto in C (cadenzas by Britten). Rostropovich/English Chamber Orchestra/Britten, Decca SXL 6138" *The Musical Times* 106, no. 1463 (Jan 1965): 46.

Chapter 3: The Height of Collaboration 1965-1970

The story of how all the three suites came to be corresponds with the humor evident in the friendship between Britten and Rostropovich. Marion Thorpe (then Lady Harewood, the Princess's daughter-in-law) tells the tale:

The "contract" was signed on the back of the menu at a restaurant in Lincoln, on the way from the Aldeburgh Festival of 1964 to Rosehill in Cumbria, where Britten and Rostropovich were to give a recital. We were breaking the journey at Harewood House in Yorkshire, where Princess Mary was in residence. Rostropovich had threatened to make an elaborate curtsy, which would have highly embarrassed the shy Princess. When Ben and I realized that Mstislav's threat was serious, this "blackmail" solution was found! The "Contract" was for six solo cello suites, to equal the number by Bach. The "contract" is now buried, with over relevant papers, in the fountain stone of the Britten Theatre at the Royal College of Music.⁶²

Other accounts of this comical folklore (which was surely only half-serious motivation for the composition's formation) have described this as specifying only three pieces for solo cello.⁶³

Suite No. 1

Writing for one specific person presents a small complication – a complication which one cannot assume had occurred to Britten. Knowing that Rostropovich had no technical limitations, Britten went about composing complex and thick textures very freely; the result is, particularly in this first suite, a kinesthetically challenging endeavor for any cellist. Moreover, Rostropovich had exceedingly large hands not to mention one of the most formidable cellos ever made; others

⁶² Carpenter, 415.

⁶³ Bridcut, 158.

with a smaller reach could struggle to produce an equally fluid and powerful rendition of these pieces. It takes a bit of creative problem solving and unconventional fingering adjustments to get around some of these issues.

The cantos recurring throughout this suite provide a gentle reference to vocal song, rendered instrumentally. He also takes a few ideas from the cadenza of his *Cello Symphony*: for example, the pizzicato accompaniment of a bowed melody foreshadows the similar technique used in the *First Suite*. He also applies his affinity for chaconne/passacaglia, and fugues in all three of his *Suites for Cello*.

Britten's *Suite for Cello, op. 72* is the first in the series of three suites he composed for and dedicated to Rostropovich. Having completed this first installment in December of 1964, Britten presented the piece to his friend as a Christmas present, and it was premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in Snape Maltings on June 27, 1965.⁶⁴ This suite is to be performed with no pauses between the nine movements. We begin with a *Canto primo* or "first song" which serves as a brightly declamatory and sweeping introduction of the three canti to follow. These intermittent canto movements act as thematic landmarks, always resembling each other but morphing and developing as we traverse the six suite movements. Modeled after the dances commonly found in Baroque solo instrumental suites, the six main movements evoke a variety of cultural dances, including a German *Fuga*, a Spanish *Serenata*, an Italian *Marcia*, and an Indonesian/Balinese-inspired *Bordone*. The *Fuga* emerges from the *Canto primo*, expertly designed in its display of the instrument and its four open strings: A-D-G-C. Heavily influenced by Bach's solo cello suites in form and timbre, Britten utilizes each of these four open strings

⁶⁴ Britten, Benjamin, *Suite for Cello, op. 72*. Ed. Mstislav Rostropovich. London: Faber Music Ltd., 1966. Musical score.

throughout the composition, perhaps as both an homage to the cello's natural resonance, and also as a self-accompanimental tool.

Following the idiomatically clever *Fuga* comes a *Lamento*, which conjures terraced cries of sorrow, and then eventual resignation; in the *Lamento* Britten marks *piangendo*, an uncommon Italian indication which, in English, translates to “crying”. This then bleeds seamlessly into the brief *Canto secondo*, evoking a surrender as if to the sea's tranquil and inexorable depths. We move into the *Serenata* in which the cello briefly transforms into what could be a guitar, strumming a passionate flamenco accompaniment. It has also been referred to as a Japanese kyoto-inspired movement.⁶⁵

Much like his mentor, Frank Bridge, Britten was a fervent pacifist, which is occasionally evident in Britten's writing through his frequent use of march movements. It has also been suggested that this affinity for the march in his compositions is perhaps more of a nod to Russian contemporary, Sergei Prokofiev.⁶⁶ This particular *Marcia* begins with the sound of distant pipes or toy bugle and drums through the use of harmonics and *col legno* (in which the string is percussively struck with only the wood of the bow). It is as if we embark upon this military march from a seemingly jocular place, as imminent danger draws closer and closer. Finally, the dramatic horror reaches an apex in the middle of this movement, from which we can only retreat back into the pipes and drums, eventually numb with loss in the concluding funereal bugle call. The *Canto terzo* which follows displays a darker tumultuous struggle within. Born of some primordial ooze, this movement centers around the interval of maximum tension, the tritone, and we finally surface, exhaustedly resolved on the open D string. This open D string now functions as the drone for the *Bordone*. Trading two conversational voices above and below this drone, this

⁶⁵ Holst, 58.

⁶⁶ Pyke, Cameron, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016), 111.

exotic movement of intimate discourse appears to reflect Britten's time traveling in the Far East, studying musical traditions of Japan, India, Indonesia and Bali.⁶⁷

Finally, the devilish *Moto Perpetuo e Canto Quarto* explodes out of this meditative stasis in a flurry of chromaticism spanning the range of the instrument, no doubt a nod to the composition's virtuoso dedicatee. Out of this volcanic turmoil, the luminous voice of the *Canto primo* bursts forth through the thicket of presto sixteenth-note duplets. A dualistic struggle for prominence commences between the fury of the *Moto Perpetuo* and the optimism of the *Canto*. These two voices blur and ultimately unite in a blazing finish. This *First Suite* in particular features nearly every extended string technique known in the mid-twentieth century and even now, it remains extremely challenging. While these suites were still somewhat of a rarity in programming twenty years ago, they have quickly become a staple ingredient of the modern cellist's repertoire. Rostropovich recorded this *First Suite* along with the *Second Suite* on Decca's label in 1970.⁶⁸

Mstislav Rostropovich was married to famous soprano, Galina Vishnevskaya, for whom Britten would write *A Poet's Echo* and *War Requiem*. Soon after Britten and Rostropovich met, Peter Pears and Galina Vishnevskaya were introduced to the mix and the bonds forged were quick and magnetic. The four of them took holidays together in Russia, Armenia, and England throughout the 1960s.⁶⁹ Vishnevskaya said of Britten, "From the beginning, I felt at ease with him."⁷⁰ Rostropovich introduced Britten to pianist, Mstislav Richter, and he was also instrumental in encouraging Britten's friendship with Shostakovich. Several influential and

⁶⁷ Holst, 58.

⁶⁸ Britten, Benjamin, *The Suites for Cello*, Mstislav Rostropovich. Decca SXL 6393 LP, Recorded 1970.

⁶⁹ Kildea, 448.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

mutual friendships ensued. The correspondence between Rostropovich and Britten between 1960-1976 is prolific and filled with affection and genuine admiration.⁷¹

Second Suite for Cello

Britten's *Second Suite for Cello, op. 80*, was composed in 1967 and premiered by Rostropovich at the Aldeburgh Festival on June 17, 1968.⁷² Like its predecessor, Benjamin Britten's *Second Suite for Cello, op. 80* was inspired both by J.S. Bach's solo cello suites and the artistry of Rostropovich, the piece's repeat dedicatee. These suites blend Baroque dance forms with Britten's modern sensibility. The first two movements, a declamation and a fugue, are similar in structure to a Bach prelude and fugue. The *Declamato* has an improvised, rhapsodic feel, sounding like an impassioned speech; quiet, pleading passages are juxtaposed with bold and theatrical gestures. As Shostakovich and Britten were developing a meaningful friendship at this time – thanks to their mutual colleague, Rostropovich – it seems that in this movement Britten pays rhythmic and gestural homage to the opening theme of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony.⁷³ The slow, halting, almost entirely pianissimo *Fuga* follows. Britten makes extensive use of the style brisé here, which allows him to suggest, with melodic lines shifting between high and low pitch levels, counterpoint that cannot easily be expressed on a string instrument. Since the fugue is so slow, however, the melodic lines can be somewhat difficult to follow, giving the movement a mysterious air. A short *Scherzo* follows, featuring breakneck melodic motion occasionally interrupted by a four-note motive that climbs upwards and breaks off mid-flight – as if covering

⁷¹ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, eds. *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, Vols. 5 & 6.

⁷² Britten, Benjamin, *Second Suite for Cello, op. 80*. Ed. Mstislav Rostropovich. London: Faber Music Ltd., 1969. Musical score.

⁷³ Pyke, 52.

one's mouth in the midst of an excited outpouring. The whole movement seems to poke fun at its self-interrupted babbling – sometimes blustery, occasionally coy and playful.

In the subsequent *Andante lento*, Britten makes use of a technique (which he previously employed in the *Bordone* of the First Suite) having the cellist play a sustained melody on one string while plucking the accompaniment on another. The winding, sad melody goes through a few variations, including one played entirely pizzicato, before ending up approximately where it began. It is worth mentioning that this fourth movement curiously lacks a Latin title, unlike its companions; a haunting and emotional utterance of overarching sentiment, perhaps Britten preferred to leave the interpretation of this movement more to the imagination. The final *Ciaccona*, which features a ground bass, a favorite form of both Bach and Britten, carries the most weight of the movements; it is by far the longest. The *Ciaccona* sounds more like a Baroque movement than any other, as it adheres closely to proper chaconne form prominently featured in Bach's violin partitas. The music moves quickly between emotional extremes, at one moment robust and joyous, at another tender and leisurely, but retains a forward momentum until the final exclamation.

This final utterance exemplifies a somewhat humorous, even cheeky thread that runs through much of this suite. It is as if Britten purposefully writes clever little jokes for his friend, Rostropovich, sharing an idea specific to their personal musical language. It could even embody a nod to their comically derived personal language 'Aldeburgh Deutsch'. (As the two did not initially speak each other's language, they communicated with a hybrid blend of broken German with a sprinkling of English – they referred to this language as 'Aldeburgh Deutsch'.)⁷⁴ Much

⁷⁴ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, Vol. 5, 387.

like Britten's *First Suite*, this *Second Suite* is a highly creative and displays the composer's characteristic inventiveness and fluency – perhaps with a slightly lighter flare than its siblings, the *First* and *Third Suites* – but no less evocative or artful in its creation. Mstislav Rostropovich recorded this *Second Suite* along with *First Suite* for Decca in 1970.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Britten, Benjamin, *The Suites for Cello*, Mstislav Rostropovich. Decca SXL 6393 LP, Recorded 1970.

Chapter 4: Reflections on Friendship 1971-1976

Third Suite for Cello

Britten's *Third Suite for Cello, op. 87* was the final volume in the set of three written for Rostropovich. Though completed in 1971, it did not receive its premiere until 1974 due to the cellist's political confinement.⁷⁶ In 1970, he publicly defended and housed Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel-prize-winning author, who had been discredited and shunned by the Soviet leadership. This noble decision to publicly support his friend and speak out against the Communist Party resulted in a harsh consequence – Mstislav was no longer allowed to travel outside of the Soviet Union.⁷⁷ So, the premiere finally took place in Aldeburgh on 21 December 1974, three years after the piece's completion. As an introductory inscription to this *Third Suite*, Britten writes:

I wrote this suite in the early spring of 1971 and took it as a present to Slava Rostropovich when Peter Pears and I visited Moscow and Leningrad in April of that year. The occasion was a week of British music, and our program with the London Symphony Orchestra was made memorable by the fact that both Richter and Rostropovich joined us – surely a unique gesture of Anglo-Russian friendship.

As a tribute to a great Russian musician and patriot I based this suite on Russian themes: the first three tunes were taken from Tchaikovsky's volumes of folk-song arrangements; the fourth, the 'Kontakion' (Hymn for the Departed), from the *English Hymnal*. When I played the suite through for Dmitri Shostakovich during our visit to Moscow, he remarked that he had been brought up on a different version of the Kontakion. I consulted my friend, Bishop Pimen of Saratov and Volgograd, who confirmed that my version was the one he had always known and regularly used. In the score I print both versions, for players to choose whichever they prefer.

B.B.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Carpenter, 537-538.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Britten, Benjamin, *Third Suite for Cello, op. 87*. Preface Composer's Note. (London: Faber Music Ltd., 1976).

This Kontakion Hymn for the Departed is based on the Byzantine chant taken from the Russian Orthodox Divine Liturgy. Rostropovich considered himself Russian Orthodox, and one can appreciate the impact of Britten presenting a score based on this theme as a gift to his dear friend. The *Third Suite* also serves as a dual tribute to Shostakovich. The second movement, *Marcia*, includes the signature “anapest” rhythm found in Shostakovich’s symphonies; the seventh movement, *Recitativo*, features a direct quote from the slow movement of Shostakovich’s First Cello Concerto, and in a subtle yet ingenious linking, the final statement of the Kontakion in C minor employs the notes C–B–E-flat–D: a reordered allusion to Shostakovich’s famous four-note D–S–C–H signature (D–E-flat–C–B).⁷⁹ This somber four-note subject occurs in the ricercar-like Fugue No. 4 in C-sharp minor in J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Klavier, Book I*. Britten, as a pianist would have been well-aware of this great triple fugue.

Britten goes about weaving the Russian-themed motifs in inconspicuous ways as one might bury treasure throughout the nine movements. These three Russian folk songs (See Appendix) have been around for hundreds of years, but Britten found them while perusing his *Complete Collected Works of Tchaikovsky* which included a volume of the romantic composer’s arrangements of these folk songs. The three songs he chose, while grouped together in Tchaikovsky’s arrangements, are actually from two separate collections of folk songs dictated by other composers. The first song Britten features in the *Third Suite* is a song of mourning titled “Under the little apple tree” (or some slight variation thereof).⁸⁰ The other two are “Autumn,”

⁷⁹ Pyke, 66-67.

⁸⁰ Prokunin, Vasily, Arr. Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Complete Collected Works, vol. 61 (pp. 59-166)* “65 Russian Folk Songs”, Moscow: Muzgiz, 1949. Musical score.

not to be confused with an original composition for solo piano by Tchaikovsky, and a street song called “The grey eagle”.⁸¹ How he came to select these three tunes specifically is unclear.

At times, these thematic folksongs can seem a bit murky deeply buried in the texture, but occasionally the Russian tunes break through the clouds like focused beams of light. The Kontakion and the folk song melodies are not heard in their original form until the end of the final movement, at which point they occur in direct succession. This technique, known as ‘hidden variation’, can be thought of as a theme and variations in reverse.

Throughout Britten’s life and work several consistent themes reappear. Operas like *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, and *Death in Venice* idealize youthful innocence and mourn the corrupting effects of such adult trappings as war, jealousy, and intolerance. In this suite, nostalgia for the past, affection for its Russian dedicatees, and perhaps a meditation on death are revealed in multiple facets. A distant, primal chant appears as we encounter something sacred in the *Introduzione*, punctuated by bells or drums in the C string pizzicato. Next, we encounter a bit of Shostakovich’s symphonic snare drum figure as conflict gradually emerges and intensifies in the *Marcia*. The mourning folk song “Under the little apple” makes its first obvious appearance in the *Canto*. Britten pays his most overt homage to the Bach Cello Suites in the *Barcarola*, where we explore the Prelude from Bach’s First Suite in slight variation, even introducing groups of three and five. This serenity is quickly dissolved as we melt down into the *Dialogo* with a grotesque first subject introduced in 6/8. The strummed chords in a 2/4 attempt to respond by soothing this rough and obnoxious primary voice. The dialogue continues in a tense and somewhat sarcastically *grazioso* waltz.

⁸¹ Mamontov, Mariya, Arr. Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Complete Collected Works*, vol. 61 “Children’s Songs on Russian and Ukrainian Tunes”, Moscow: Muzgiz, 1949. Musical score.

From this contentious argument comes the *Fuga*, the mournful song returns in a more somber setting, gaining momentum in rich harmonies as the choral effect Britten employs develops. The simplicity of the opening theme returns, leading us into an improvisatory *Recitativo*, which features a little bit of every effect on the cello and wraps up with the street folk song, “The grey eagle”. Over in a flash, the following *Moto perpetuo* resembles a set of fighting bumblebees quietly whizzing about, perhaps with a parry and thrust of their stringers. In the concluding movement, we near the heights of passion and tragedy reflected in the duality of the *Passacaglia*. And now we finally hear the elemental building blocks of the Suite – the three folk songs and Hymn for the Departed in their original forms. The cumulative effect for the audience is that of *déjà vu* by the time the borrowed melodies are fully unveiled.

The suite ends on a low C – this is the same note that began the suite and permeated the introduction, as a pizzicato, distant drumbeat or ringing of a bell, to announce the birth of something. Now we return to the same note that represents our purest origins, the earth from which we came – particularly for cello, the low open C epitomizes our bass, the deepest of our roots. The journey finally brings us full circle to our true origins and an acceptance of death. Marked with a *diminuendo* and *ppp*, the sound literally dies away, as if it is releasing its very last breath. In a review of this composition, Peter Evans describes it as, “of Britten’s five tributes to him is the most personal of them all.”⁸²

Rostropovich never recorded this *Third Suite* commercially. The only recording of him performing the work exists in the Britten-Pears Archives in Aldeburgh, England.⁸³ I had the great privilege of listening to this live recording while there in March 2018. In listening to this

⁸² Evans, Peter, “Review of: Canticale V: The Death of Saint Narcissus, op 89; Third Suite for Solo Cello, op. 87 by Benjamin Britten and Mstislav Rostropovich,” *Music & Letters* 58, no. 3 (July 1977): 353.

⁸³ Britten, Benjamin, *Suite No. 3*: Mstislav Rostropovich. Digital recording of LP, Recorded Live 21 December 1974, Snape Maltings Concert Hall, Suffolk, UK. [Britten-Pears Archives, Aldeburgh, UK]

recording, I noticed, analyzed, and have since come to appreciate the slight alterations Rostropovich had made in his interpretation of the piece. He underlines a few notes more than the markings on the page might indicate, he lingers a bit longer on a few notes, and flutters through sections more brusquely than one might anticipate. However, the piece holds together as one fluent journey. It works, as a story narrated by an experienced actor works – brought to life through that one performer’s interpretation.

In 1973, Britten had to undergo an operation to replace a faulty heart valve. During the operation, an unexpected complication caused him to have a slight stroke which in turn affected his ability to move his right arm properly. As he was recovering from this surgery, his exhaustion and this new disability proved to be a terrible shock to him. In fact, he felt so depressed about this turn of events that for a while he thought it might have been better not to have survived the operation.⁸⁴ But before too long, he readjusted to his new limitations. He knew that he would no longer be able to fully take care of himself, but he was determined to continue composing. “Now that I can write again, I have the feeling of being of some use once more.”⁸⁵ Britten’s output in his final three years was indeed impressive, considering his illness. The dense miniature *Tema ‘Sacher’* was among these final works.

Tema ‘Sacher’

Tema ‘Sacher’ was Britten’s final composition for Rostropovich. It came about as a result of their mutual friendship with the Swiss conductor, Paul Sacher. Sacher founded the Basel Chamber Orchestra and was known for promoting works of new composers, particularly through

⁸⁴ Holst, 85.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

this ensemble. The links between the three musicians intensified in the early 1970s when both Britten and Sacher were concerned for Rostropovich's plight in the wake of his support for Solzhenitsyn; at this time, it appeared that the cellist might not be permitted to continue to give performances outside of the Soviet Union. After Rostropovich was essentially forced out in 1974, he sought refuge in various homes abroad, particularly in the UK and the US.⁸⁶

Sacher celebrated his 70th birthday in 1976, and to mark the occasion Rostropovich asked twelve of Sacher's composer friends to collaborate in writing a set of variations based on his name. Britten was asked to write a variation, but as he was already seriously ill, he agreed to write the theme itself rather than a variation. *Tema 'Sacher'* is a piece based on the musical spelling of Sacher's name. This set is now quite well-known to cellists. The musical equivalent of S-A-C-H-E-R in pitches: E-flat – A – C – B – E – B-flat.⁸⁷ Britten makes clever use of these pitches in a variety of orientations, making particular use of quintuplet rhythmic groupings. While brief, this single page of music is densely packed, typical of Britten's skill at building quite a lot with very little material. Rostropovich premiered this one-minute theme in Zurich, along with the compositions from eleven other distinguished composers, on May 2, 1976, just seven months before Britten died.⁸⁸ It was a tribute to Sacher, but it was to Rostropovich's incomparable friendship and musical partnership that Britten here bade farewell.⁸⁹

Farewell

Several writers have referred to Britten's death as "untimely" or "premature" as he passed at the age of sixty-three. However, he himself might have disagreed; he used to say that

⁸⁶ Peter Andry, Robin Stringer, and Tony Locantro, *Inside the Recording Studio*, 132.

⁸⁷ Strode, Rosamund, *Tema 'Sacher'*, Editorial Notes, London: Faber Music Ltd., 1976. Musical score.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Kildea, 552.

he had “a very strong feeling that people died at the right moment”.⁹⁰ What would eventually become the Britten-Pears Academy at Snape Maltings was founded as a practical memorial to him, to ensure the continuity of Britten’s sort of music-making. “The students, as future performers or composers, can hope to learn to recognize the quality of magic which he valued more than anything else in music. It is this magic that Rostropovich was thinking of when he reminded us all that Britten’s own music will always convey ‘the joy of life and the hope for happiness’.”⁹¹ Mstislav remained on the board of the Aldeburgh Festival for several years after Britten’s death to ensure its smooth transition and survival, while Galina Vishnevskaya continued to teach at Pears’s educational courses for vocalists.

Britten’s legacy is felt throughout the music world, as his widely-celebrated centennial and many tributes reflect. Rostropovich mourned the loss of his friend deeply. Having lost Shostakovich just one year before, Rostropovich shares the story of one of his final visits with Britten, who was very ill even in 1974:

‘Slava, I’ve got a present for you,’ and from the piano Peter brought the beginning of a cantata Ben was writing for me to conduct in Washington. You see, Shostakovich had started to write a piece for my first season in Washington, but then he died [in 1975]; so Ben had said, ‘Now I must write it twice – once for myself, and once for our Dmitri.’⁹²

In 1976, after Britten had passed away, Rostropovich found himself in a difficult position. He and his family had been politically exiled from their motherland, and his two closest composer friends had both died in the past year. Reflected in the detailed dedication to Rostropovich, the Third Suite’s meditation on death, and the concluding Russian Kontakion for the Departed, it becomes evident that Britten was explicitly paying tribute to his friend and to everything

⁹⁰ Holst, 88.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Carpenter, 581.

Rostropovich held dear.⁹³ In light of all of these factors, it is no wonder that Rostropovich was reluctant to ever perform the piece in public again. He chose not to record the piece after its live premiere in 1974.⁹⁴

The head librarian of the Britten-Pears Archives, Dr. Nicholas Clark, told me personally that when he traveled to Rostropovich's dacha in St. Petersburg, he observed that in the cellist's master bedroom there hung only two equally prominent portraits: one of Dmitri Shostakovich and another of Benjamin Britten. These were the two colleagues and friends he held in the absolute highest esteem, which in retrospect of Rostropovich's extensive circle of distinguished artists, is saying quite a lot. Perhaps the real magic of recordings lies in their ability to reflect a fraction of the magic that was once created – these beautifully profound musical moments that one can only attempt to capture.

⁹³ Pyke, 48.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

When I initially set out to research this topic, I intended to find a great deal more editorial input on the part of Rostropovich; in particular I hoped to find evidence of this in the manuscripts I studied at the Britten-Pears Archives. In truth, what I found was far greater evidence that Britten, himself, was fastidious and specific to the letter. Rostropovich certainly added a great deal of fingerings and a few bowing alterations to these works for cello, but what I discovered revealed that Britten had specified a certain amount already and Rostropovich was merely filling in a few blanks. Actually, Rostropovich could have added far less to the original suites' manuscripts, for example, and one could still have deduced what was important to Britten, in terms of color, emphasis, and expression. Much like the ability to see the forest through the trees, I am now able to glean more of Britten's wishes from the written score than I do those of Rostropovich. I hypothesize this has been the result of studying the idiomatic dialects and individual characteristics of both artists separately and together.

I also expected to find a certain rigidity forming in my interpretation through studying the first recordings of these pieces; instead I found a surprising degree of freedom materializing as I became more deeply acquainted with Britten's music. Having been a student in an academic environment for most of my life, I have found discovering, shaping, and believing in my own interpretation to be a challenge. This project has given me an exciting inkling of what is possible in that department. I look forward to expanding on that aspect of this dissertation as I move forward in my career and share what I've discovered with others.

The correspondence between Britten and Rostropovich was endearing, humorous and inspiring. The stories I heard firsthand, as well as the anecdotes I read portray a pair of oddly brilliant people who found in each other something very rare indeed – a true friend. Despite an

initially large language barrier as well as vast differences in character and upbringing, Britten and Rostropovich grew to respect and love each other.

I was intrigued upon seeing a picture of the pair before conceiving this project, and after a very brief search, I found that Britten had written the most instrumental music for Rostropovich. I surmised that perhaps Rostropovich had simply “collected” Britten as he had so many other contemporary composers in his, sometimes self-serving, quest for more solo repertoire. After examining all the materials that I have collected over the past year, I can honestly state that his relationship with Britten was markedly unique. The impact of this respect and care is evident in the music which remains prominent today.

I also find that I have barely begun to scratch the surface of what lies within these pieces that Britten wrote for Rostropovich, but more importantly, for the cello. Amidst the story of their friendship and collaboration, my inspiration and desire to study these compositions has only grown. I hope my studies and exploration will continue to blossom into a deeper and more multi-faceted investigation of this collaboration, and perhaps this exploration will encourage others to investigate other histories of significant collaborations.

Additional Program Notes

Frank Bridge – Sonata in D minor

Frank Bridge (1879-1941) composed his *Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor* between the years of 1913 and 1917. The sonata was premiered in 1917 by Felix Salmond and William Murdoch in London's Wigmore Hall.⁹⁵ We hear elements of Fauré, Brahms, and Rachmaninoff, among others, in this vividly pastoral and intoxicating work. The first movement is structured in typical sonata form, marked *Allegro ben moderato*, and opens with the cello embodying a restless and melancholy theme stretched across the landscape of oscillating figures in the piano. A haunting second theme soon appears, in which Bridge continues to employ Brahms-ian triplet-duple tension as the rhythmic interplay grows more intricate and the melodies more impassioned. After an elongated and exalted development of these initial themes, the opening material recurs from which a coda blossoms in a briefly triumphant D major celebration only to recoil quickly into the submission. In the final *tranquillo e meno mosso* this movement comes to rest as the opening theme once again melts back into D minor, concluding just as we began.

According to Antonia Butler, a cellist who gave the first performance of the work in France in 1928, Bridge was “in utter despair over the futility of the First World War and the state of the world; and would walk round Kensington in the early hours of the morning unable to get any rest or sleep”.⁹⁶ It was at this time that the idea of the slow movement came to him, which he wrote during the war. This contemplative and harmonically lush *Adagio ma non troppo* is an intimate and sensuously sung duo between the two instruments. Just when one believes the

⁹⁵ Apter, David, *Tovey & Bridge Cello Sonatas*, David Apter and Rebecca Rust, Digital Booklet Notes, Marco Polo 8.223637 Audio Recording. Released 1994.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

resolution of a harmony is finally realized, Bridge shifts the foundation once more, creating a sense of floating dreamily through each phrase. A brief *Andante con moto* gently nudges the Adagio forward with a lilting and tender tune in 9/8 meter. The motor of the *Molto allegro e agitato* breaks the spell and churns forth, in what could be considered the third movement of the sonata. This bustling texture travels through enharmonic tonicization and chromaticism to illustrate its intrinsic conflict with little comfort of resolution. However, left to its own devices for a brief moment, the cello issues an invitation to the piano to return home to a version of the opening exquisite beauty of the *Adagio ma non troppo*, this time featuring the triplets of the *Andante*. Bridge seems to possess an affinity for bringing all his themes together rhapsodically throughout each section of this movement, for we now journey back to the first movement's declamatory motives. All of the internal struggle comes to a frenzied and anguished climax in an expansive and ever-climbing melodic line in the cello, juxtaposed with swirling non-tuplets (group of nine notes) in the piano. Now exhausted and emotionally drained, the rocking comfort of the *Andante* returns to soothe us, perhaps reflective of the illusory dream-world we experienced at the opening of the second movement. The final coda, returns to the opening theme of the piece now in triumphant D major, bringing the sonata to a reassuring and vigorous conclusion. The Great War was reported to be a shattering experience for Bridge, and his music changed dramatically both during and after this Sonata was completed. One of the most exquisitely beautiful pieces in the cello and piano repertoire, Bridge's Sonata embodies the height of European romanticism of the time with an unmistakable dash of impressionistic flare as well. Britten and Rostropovich recorded Bridge's Sonata together in 1970.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Robert Schubert and Frank Bridge, *Sonata for Arpeggione, Bridge Sonata*, Rostropovich and Britten. Decca SXL 6426 LP, Recorded 1970.

Claude Debussy – Sonata in D minor

Another *Sonata in D minor for Cello and Piano* was written at approximately the same time by the celebrated French composer, Claude Debussy (1862-1918). Completed in 1915, and a mere eleven minutes in length, this three-movement work is packed to the brim with exciting, evocative, and electric colors and textures. This piece was composed as one of a cycle of six sonatas Debussy intended to publish. As it happens, he was only able to complete three sonatas before he passed away in 1918: one for flute, viola and harp, one for violin and piano, and one for cello and piano.⁹⁸ Demoralized by the carnage of World War I and fighting his own battle against cancer, Claude Debussy found himself cruelly faced with his own mortality. In a letter to the conductor Bernardo Molinari from October 6, 1915 he writes, “I spent nearly a year unable to write music... after that I’ve almost had to re-learn it. It was like a rediscovery and it seemed to me more beautiful than ever!”⁹⁹ Later in the same letter, in reference to his sonatas, he writes: “For many people that won’t be as important as an *opera*... But I thought it was of greater service to music!”¹⁰⁰ After much debate, it has been established that the first performance took place in London, and was given by C. Warwick Evans and Madame Alfred Hobday in London’s Aeolian Hall on March 4, 1916.¹⁰¹ Shortly thereafter, on March 9, the work was performed again in

⁹⁸ Lockspeiser, Edward, *Debussy: His Life and Mind, Vol. 2*, (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1965), 50.

⁹⁹ Wheeldon, Marianne, *Debussy’s Late Style*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 32.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Lesure, François, *Sonate pour Violoncelle et Piano in D minor*, Preface Editorial Notes. (München: Henle Verlag, 1998).

Geneva; but what is considered to be the “real” premiere took place in Paris on March 24, 1917, and was given by Debussy on the piano and Joseph Salmon on the cello.¹⁰²

Almost classical in shape, it still comes as a surprise that the Cello Sonata, while utilizing a rich palette of timbres and achieving exquisite subtlety and technical virtuosity, structurally relies mostly on sonata form. The *Prologue*, initiated by an introductory fanfare in the piano and quickly followed by a quasi-cadenza in the cello, is based on a melodic-rhythmic figure that originates in the music of the French Baroque. Subsequently, the cello introduces a theme that takes its character from a Baroque operatic lament and introduces a theme that alternates between the minor and major tonalities. Amidst the sighing theme of this *Prologue* churns an accelerating machine-like motif which is brought to life in both instruments, leading to the climactic arrival in this introductory movement. In a long musical arc, the fanfare and lamenting themes are repeated, with the fanfare, now subdued and exhausted, providing the satisfactory conclusion.

The *Sérénade* movement evokes the imitations of a singing puppet, accompanied by the stylized strumming of a guitar. Playful and quirky jolts of movement punctuate the scene here, along with more sensual chords resembling jazz in what could be felt as taking place in dark-lit smoky cafés. This movement flows seamlessly without pause into the *Final*, that offers an inexhaustible array of instrumental effects while dancing between D major and D minor sonorities yet again in a sizzling conclusion. The *Sonata for cello and piano* is one of Debussy’s most forward-looking and most aggressively experimental works. The rhythmic language is full of surprising interjections, short bursts of accented notes, and frequent sudden changes of tempo, indicative of a written-out improvisation. And the harmonic language veers far away from

¹⁰² Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol. 2, 300.

tonality for long stretches, leaning heavily instead into modal and pentatonic scales. Special effects in the cello writing—harsh pizzicato, glassy ponticello and floating *flautandi* in higher registers – assert a composition of startling modernist originality. Britten and Rostropovich recorded Debussy’s Sonata in 1962.¹⁰³

Franz Schubert – “Arpeggione” Sonata

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) composed the “Arpeggione” Sonata in November of 1824 for piano and the recently invented *arpeggione*, a fretted six-stringed instrument (tuned E-A-D-G-B-E) that was essentially a cello and guitar hybrid.¹⁰⁴ The arpeggione was held between the knees, like a cello without an endpin as was typical in the baroque era, was strung and fretted like a guitar, but most importantly, was played with a bow. The instrument somewhat resembles a viola pomposa or a baryton; like those more intimate and delicate instruments, it was not able to sustain itself among its much louder and versatile string predecessors and so the arpeggione was quickly forgotten after ten years.¹⁰⁵ The incorporation of frets was designed to make playing easier and intonation more accurate; Schubert makes full use of the instrument’s natural ease in expressing fast runs and arpeggios, its softer, more intimate soundscape, as well as the extra strings which surely resonated sympathetically throughout the E major and A minor sonorities. There were, however, potential flaws of this new instrument. In particular, the difficulty of crossing strings cleanly or playing in a louder dynamic proved troublesome because of the reduced differential angle of the bridge and due to the smaller body of the soft-spoken

¹⁰³ Schumann, Debussy, & Britten. *Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Cello Sonata in D minor, Sonata in C for Cello and Piano, op. 65*, Mstislav Rostropovich and Benjamin Britten. Decca SXL 2298 LP, Recorded 1962.

¹⁰⁴ Wirth, Helmut, *Sonata in A minor “Arpeggione” arranged for Violoncello and Piano D. 821*, Epilogue Editorial Notes, (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter, 2005) Musical score.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

arpeggione. One would inevitably hit other strings while attempting to play one at a time if too much weight was applied.¹⁰⁶ It is likely that Schubert wrote this sonata largely as a friendly gesture or perhaps it was commissioned by the instrument's inventor, Vincenz Schuster, who premiered it in 1824.¹⁰⁷ Today, the piece is heard almost exclusively in transcriptions for cello and piano or viola and piano, which were arranged after the posthumous publication circa 1871.¹⁰⁸

The first movement, in A minor, is imbued throughout with a touching blend of sadness and joy (as was Schubert's own life) – the beauty, sensitivity and lyricism of its first theme contrasting with the carefree nonchalance of the second, culminating in a weary sighing of resignation in the coda. The first movement's ending is punctuated by two resolute and final chords landing us firmly back in A minor, only to transition into E major at the start of the second movement. The theme of this Adagio unfolds gently like a love song and for a while imbues the atmosphere with simple tranquility. However, a sinister undercurrent emerges, threatening the restful beauty of this world and anticipating the icy bleakness of the *Winterreise*. The movement ends, like its predecessor, in an experience close to death, the pace slowing almost to a complete stop before finding the most fragile of lifelines to carry the music through to the finale. The last movement, marked Allegretto, begins as a joyful rondo, the theme predominantly bathed in the sunshine of A Major, interspersed with energetic, lively interludes with traces of folk idioms and demanding considerable virtuosity from both performers. We end with one of the many rising arpeggios that characterizes this work, a positive and satisfying end to a composition that has reflected the gamut of human experience. As with many of Schubert's

¹⁰⁶ Kjemtrup, Inge, "Why Do String Players Still Love Schubert's 'Arpeggione' Sonata?" *Strings Magazine*, April 1, 2018, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Wirth, *Sonata in A minor "Arpeggione" D. 821*, Epilogue Editorial Notes.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

compositions, the fragility present in this sonata is palpable.¹⁰⁹ With this in mind, the intimate and fleeting nature of his musical language lends itself to this piece in a particularly beautiful light. As performer and listener, one can simply revel in the present moment, for all too soon, it will pass, and we are on to the next.

Robert Schumann – *Fünf Stücke im Volkston*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) composed the *Fünf Stücke im Volkston*, or Five Pieces in Folk Style, in 1849 originally for cello and piano, and later published an alternative scoring for violin and piano.¹¹⁰ As a young man, Schumann took cello lessons; although it was not until much later in his career, his connection to the voice of the cello materializes as especially significant, indicated by his Cello Concerto, op. 129 and this set of Five Pieces, op. 102.¹¹¹ In late 1832, Schumann realized that he had strained his right hand with his vigorous experiments at the piano and that he could no longer envision a career as a pianist. In light of this physical limitation, he again took up the cello, which, according to Schumann, “requires [more of] the left hand”.¹¹² It is likely that through this unique set of five miniature folk tales Schumann was attempting to establish his credentials (as in several of his vocal works) as a “man of the people”.¹¹³ The *Fünf Stücke* were premiered in Leipzig by his wife, Clara Schumann, a gifted pianist herself, and its dedicatee, cellist Andreas Grabau on June 8, 1850, which happened to be

¹⁰⁹ Kjemtrup, Inge, “Why Do String Players Still Love Schubert’s ‘Arpeggione’ Sonata?” *Strings Magazine*, 21.

¹¹⁰ Draheim, Joachim, *Fünf Stücke im Volkston für Violoncello und Klavier, op. 102*, Preface Editorial Notes. (Wiesbaden, Germany: Breitkopf & Härtel, Spring 1991) Musical score.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Isserlis, Stephen, *Digital Booklet Notes Robert Schumann’s Fünf Stücke im Volkston, op. 102*, Hyperion Records CDA67661. Recorded June 2008 – Henry Wood Hall, London, UK. Released 2009.

Schumann's 40th birthday.¹¹⁴ His desire to compose in a more "popular" vernacular emerges not only in the title "*Im Volkston*" meaning "in a popular tone", but also through his utilization of simpler rhythmic and harmonic figures, which commonly emulate an element of folk music.¹¹⁵ There is a distinct sense that each little piece is telling a story, unpretentious and songful. Within the folk style, these pieces are not meant to be performed as a loud display of virtuosity; rather it is through the vibrant expression of an imaginative narrative which captures us.

The first piece is titled '*Vanitas vanitatum*' ("all is vanity" or "all is transient") – one of Schumann's favorite sayings.¹¹⁶ It may have been inspired by a poem by Goethe which tells the story of a drunken, one-legged soldier.¹¹⁷ A repetitive jocular theme permeates this movement, as we get the sense that perhaps the subject of the story is unaware that their recurrent guffawing and wobbly movement is being observed. The second piece, set in a soothing F major, resembles a lullaby, gently rocking through three- and four-bar phrases in which the simplest of melodies sways peacefully and delicately. A gorgeous countermelody emerges in the cello while the piano echoes the original theme; these lines subsequently trade places, intricately woven and expertly transparent together. "The heart of the work lies in the third movement, with its sparse, tragic accompaniment recalling a song from *Dichterliebe*: 'Ich hab' im Traum geweinet' ('In a dream I wept')."¹¹⁸ Here we encounter an affirming middle section in A major, sandwiched between restless and meandering A minor surroundings. The fourth piece is joyous and carefree – even triumphant, somewhat resembling a patriotic anthem. But we are not in this contented self-satisfaction for long, for the finale is positively fierce. Johannes Brahms's E minor cello sonata

¹¹⁴ Draheim, *Fünf Stücke im Volkston*, Preface Editorial Notes.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Isserlis, *Robert Schumann's Fünf Stücke im Volkston, op. 102*, Digital Booklet Notes.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

contains moments of strong resemblance to this dark and restless, triplet-laden final movement. If each vignette narrates a piece of folklore, then this finale, *Stark und Markiert* (strongly and marked), certainly tells the tale of a grizzly and stormy character who brings this set to a ferocious and tantalizing conclusion.

Leoš Janáček – Pohádka

The germination of Janáček's *Pohádka* was a long one. First composed in three movements in 1910, originally intended to be part of a larger work, it was revised in 1912 to include a tranquil fourth movement. It was revised a second time in 1923, resulting in its final three-movement version which is generally performed today. It was first heard in Brno on March 3, 1923.¹¹⁹ Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) demonstrated a sincere admiration of Russia, particularly the music and literature of Russia. He quite often composed music either to Russian text or under the influence of Russian authors, such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Žukovsky.¹²⁰ This 'tale' is inspired by Žukovsky's story, *A Tale About Tsar Berendyey*, which tells of a bearded Tsar Berendyey, his son Ivan the Tsarevich, the Immortal Kaschei (Lord of the Underworld), and the wise Tsarievna Maria (Kaschei's daughter).¹²¹ Janáček works out his 'Tale' in three parts; the part of the story represented in *Pohádka* concerns the handsome Prince Ivan (conveyed by the cello in a dotted pizzicato figure), who falls in love with the beautiful Princess Maria.

The only slight issue with this otherwise idyllic match is that her father happens to be Kaschei the Undead, King of the Underworld. Due to some unfortunate bargaining on the part of

¹¹⁹ Vogel, Jaroslav, Rev. and ed. Karel Janovicky, *Leoš Janáček: A Biography*, (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1981), 198.

¹²⁰ Janáček, Leoš, Ed. F Smetana, *Pohádka (A Tale) for Violoncello and Piano*, (Masters Music Publications, Inc.) Musical score.

¹²¹ Vogel, 197.

Ivan's father, Kaschei feels he owns the young prince's soul, and strongly objects to the marriage of these two lovers.¹²² Ivan's Undead future father-in-law Representing the magical lake at which Ivan and Maria meet, the dreamy opening of the first movement leads to a tender love-duet; but soon after, the sense of urgency grows quickly, culminating in a passage of violent syncopations as Kaschei chases the young lovers on horseback.¹²³ There is a strong sense of playful magic in the opening of the second movement, where the young lovers have taken refuge temporarily at the palace of a neighboring Tsar. This conversational and plucky motif is immediately followed by a more lyrical restatement of the opening canonic interplay as Ivan and Maria carry on.¹²⁴ But alas, all is not well – fancying Ivan as the perfect match for their own daughter, this neighbor Tsar and Tsarina cast a spell on poor Ivan, causing him to fall in love with their own daughter.¹²⁵

“Maria reacts just as any normal adolescent girl would under these circumstances: she turns into a blue flower.”¹²⁶ On the bright side, this draws from Janáček (near the opening of the movement) a tenderly beautiful melody. And then, someone has the brilliant inspiration to summon a wise magician, who breaks the spell. One can hear the restatement of the initial dotted rhythm, now bowed rather than plucked, as an indication of Ivan's recovery. To exhibit Ivan's return to health, the cello vigorously shoots up to a searing high B-flat.¹²⁷ In the last movement, Ivan and Maria have triumphantly returned to the sanctuary of Ivan's parents' palace, where they live happily ever after – “well as happily as one can live in the key of G-flat major.”¹²⁸ The

¹²² Isserlis, Steven, *Pohádka 'A Tale'*, Digital Booklet Notes, Hyperion Records CDA67948. Recorded December 2011 – Concert Hall, Wyastone Estate, Monmouth, UK. Released 2012.

¹²³ Isserlis, Steven, *Pohádka 'A Tale'*, Digital Booklet Notes.

¹²⁴ Vogel, 199.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Isserlis, *Pohádka 'A Tale'*, Digital Booklet Notes.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

atmosphere of the 'Fairytale,' (as this piece is commonly referred to) is heightened in this succinct composition.¹²⁹ This feature is enhanced by Janáček's use of rich harmonies, (in which he employs many, many flats), operatic leaps, thrilling chase scenes, along with evaporative gestures. As usual, the narrative, however bizarre and beautiful, is alive and well with Janáček in his *Pohádka*.

¹²⁹ Vogel, 199-200.

Appendix

1. Russian folk song: "Under the little apple tree"

11

13

ПРОТЯЖНАЯ

(Моршанскаго уѣзда села Сосновки)

Неочень медленно (Andante ma non troppo)

ГОЛОСЪ.

Фортепьяно.

Какъ подъ яблонкой, подъ кудрявою
Бѣль горючь камень лежитъ (два раза)

Бѣль горючь камень разгорается,
Какъ мой миленькій разнемогается,

Разнемогся мой милый, похотѣлось ему
Со Дунай рѣки ключевой воды.

Я (и) въ первомъ часу за водой пошла,
Во другомъ я часу воду черпала;

Я во третьемъ часу ко двору пришла —
Какъ лежитъ милый мой во передь-углу,

Во передь углу-переставился,
Какъ надъ милымъ моимъ свѣча теплится;

Какъ отецъ тои мать въ головахъ стоятъ,
Въ головахъ стоятъ, елезно плачутся.

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2. Russian folk song: "Autumn"

4а
ОСЕНЬ

173

Медленно

p

Солн-це спря-та-лось за ту-чу, Ве-тер силь-ный, хо-ло-дно;

p

Листь-я сып-лют-ся, и вку-чу Ве-тром все их по-ме-ло.

Листь-я сып-лют-ся и вку-чу Ве-тром все их по-ме-ло. // хо-ло-дно.

Для повторения | Конец

3. Russian folk song: "The grey eagle"

31

35

УЛИЧНАЯ.

(Касимовского уезда деревни Ибердусь)

Скоро (Allegro)

ГОЛОСЪ.

Вот си - зой _____ о - релъ по го - рамъ.

Фортельяно

лѣ - талъ Ой! по го - рямъ по до - ламъ тя - же - ло взды - халъ.

НЕМНОГО СКОРѢ. *meno più mosso*

Вот сизой орелъ по горамъ леталъ, ой!
 По горамъ по доламъ, тяжело выдыхалъ;
 Тяжелѣй того дѣвка плакала, ой!
 Не по батюшкѣ, не по матушкѣ,
 По милонъ дружкѣ, по Иванушкѣ; ой!
 У Иванушки висѣлись кудряшки;
 Они висѣли, развѣивалися, ой!
 Въ три ряда, въ три ряда заплеталися;
 Но четвертый рядъ по плечамъ висѣтъ: ой!
 , Далеко я шла провожать дружка,
 Дальше города дальше Нового, ой!
 Посередѣ Москвы разставалися,
 И всѣ люди дивовалися: ой!
 Да и кто такой разстается съ кѣмъ?
 Либо братъ съ сестрой, либо мужъ съ женой, ой!
 Либо первый другъ съ любовницей?
 Какъ и по мосту мосту, по калиновому, ой!
 По другому, по сухому перелетывалъ.
 Тамъ и шелъ, прошелъ молодой почтарь, ой!
 Молодой почтарь, голубой кафтанъ;
 Голубой съ галуной, весь изорванный худой, ой!
 Поны машутся, раздуваются;
 Миткалевая рубашечка бѣлѣется: ой!
 „Бѣла, бѣла, итѣ сударушкѣ дала,
 Итѣ дала, дала, итѣ пожеловала: ой!
 Итѣ носи, носи, носи, а другую не проси.“

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4. Mstislav Rostropovich and Ben Britten at their first reading of the *Sonata in C, op. 65*, London, 1961.



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Peter Andry, Robin Stringer, and Tony Locantro. *Inside the Recording Studio: Working with Callas, Rostropovich, Domingo, and the Classical Elite*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008.

As a musician, record producer, and administrator, Peter Andry has worked with many of the twentieth century's greatest classical music artists and performers. Here he recounts his experiences with these exceptional talents. He presents intimate portraits of such artists as Luciano Pavarotti, Joan Sutherland, Otto Klemperer, Simon Rattle, Jacqueline DuPré, and Mstislav Rostropovich. These artists were in close quarters with Andry through tough times of work, play, stress, and relaxation. He admired their talent, and of course had to cope with their idiosyncrasies and egos. In the chapter devoted to Mstislav Rostropovich, he explores not only what it was like to record with the great cellist, but also what his personal relationship with Mstislav entailed. Ultimately, he reveals himself to be a great admirer of Rostropovich and despite all of his unique and sometimes hard-edged characteristics, the die-hard fan within Andry has the final word.

Ariane Bankes and Jonathan Reekie. *New Aldeburgh Anthology*. Woodbridge: Aldeburgh Music & The Boydell Press, 2009.

The *New Aldeburgh Anthology* takes its inspiration from Ronald Blythe's classic *Aldeburgh Anthology* of 1972, which summoned the spirit of Aldeburgh and the coast of east Suffolk in words and images that still resonate. This collection brings the story up to date, combining new voices with old, those of writers and musicians with poets and artists, of historians with naturalists, and the people of Suffolk. As with the original edition,

Britten and Pears's Aldeburgh Festival and its descendent, Aldeburgh Music, lies at its heart. Much has changed, but Aldeburgh Music still owes its unique appeal to the inspiration of its founders, as well as to their strong sense of place. Here their legacy is considered by many musicians and writers. Aldeburgh and its surroundings are about so much more than music, so poets, writers and artists who have all been inspired by its bright yet haunting landscape contribute. A combination of personal recollections of Britten, Pears and all that the Aldeburgh Music has meant to this region of Suffolk create a unique tribute to a special place.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992.

This is a full-scale biography of Benjamin Britten. Working with the full cooperation of Britten's estate, Carpenter has used Britten's diaries, letters and manuscripts, as well as the recollections of the people closest to Britten, to create a thorough narrative of the composer in action. Humphrey Carpenter was also the biographer of W.H. Auden (who had a long-standing friendship with Britten), J.R.R. Tolkien and Ezra Pound. He discusses Britten's personality and musical brilliance amidst the backdrop of an openly homosexual "marriage" to Peter Pears; he also takes a very close look at Britten's depression, self-doubt, and other key relationships (including that with M. Rostropovich). He highlights the unforgettable portrait of a man who was, in Leonard Bernstein's words, "at odds with the world."

Holst, Imogen. *The Great Composers: Britten*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1980.

Britten's last years are described in this revised third edition of the Great Composers book about him, which continues the narrative until his death in 1976. Imogen Holst worked

with Britten for some twenty-four years and is therefore able to write about his life and works with particular sympathy and insight. Included are short musical examples, quite often photos of manuscripts, many direct quotes, and photos. The first edition of this book was published in 1966, the second in 1970 and this third edition in 1980. So as each edition has included more updated information, in this version, Imogen Holst is able to summarize and reflect on Britten's life and works more fully. Given her close relationship with him, the quotes and personal anecdotes are particularly unique. And although it seems this publication is perhaps intended more for a Britten audience member than a professional scholar, it remains a strongly reliable and abundant source.

Kildea, Paul. *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the 20th Century*. London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 2013.

As the most recent published biography, Paul Kildea's book now holds the title of the "definitive account" of Britten's extraordinary life. Kildea explores Britten's passionately held and controversial pacifism, his complex forty-year relationship with Peter Pears, and his determined – sometimes ruthless – making of an artistic community in Aldeburgh. Above all, the author focuses on understanding the relationship between Britten's music and his life, tunneling deep into his creative process. This proves to be an easy and enthralling read – far more so than any of Britten's other biographies. As a conductor, Kildea demonstrates an intimate knowledge of Britten's music as well as his life. He manages to connect all elements of Britten's personal relationships and other accounts of his life seamlessly into a detailed discussion of his compositions.

Philip, Robert. *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

In this wide-ranging book, Robert Philip considers the interaction between music making and recording throughout the entire twentieth century. He compares the lives of musicians and audiences in the years before recordings with those of today, as well as discussing the effect that recordings have had on our entire modern concept of sound and interpretation of music. The globalization and therefore homogenization of music and musicians has occurred mainly, he puts forth, as a result of the age of recording.

Pyke, Cameron. *Benjamin Britten & Russia*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016.

This book explores Benjamin Britten's creative relationship with Russia throughout his life by examining his engagement with Russian composers, musicians and writers in the context of twentieth-century politics. Cameron Pyke explores Britten's relationships with Shostakovich, Rostropovich, Galina Vishnevskaya, and Mstislav Richter; he also highlights Britten's admiration of Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky. The book also analyzes Britten's responses to various Russian composers and musicians and considers personal and political perceptions of Britten in the Soviet Union. Ultimately, it assesses the wider question of Russian influence on Britten's works and in turn whether Britten's music had any influence on the younger generation of Russian composers, such as Alfred Schnittke. This study draws on Foreign Office and British Council files at the National Archives, published and unpublished materials from the former Soviet Union, and oral history, in addition to the Britten-related archives.

Taruskin, Richard. *Defining Russia Musically*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Famed musicologist, Richard Taruskin draws on his extensive knowledge of Russian traditions both culturally and musically, having published three other books on Russian musical masters and their enormous global impact. In *Defining Russia Musically* Taruskin uses music, together with history and politics, to illustrate the many ways in which Russian national identity has been constructed, both from within Russia and from the Western perspective. He offers thought-provoking insights in this multifaceted look at Russian music and its storytellers, questioning the foundations of nationalism and Russian “character” as he traverses three centuries of compelling history.

Wilson, Elizabeth. *Rostropovich: The Musical Life of the Great Cellist, Teacher and Legend*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008.

Elizabeth Wilson, a former student and avid admirer of “Mstislav,” and the acclaimed biographer of Shostakovich and Jacqueline du Pré, offers a definitive, if somewhat admittedly biased, biography of Rostropovich. She passes along Mstislav’s stories of his interactions with Britten, Shostakovich, Casals, and Prokofiev, as well as many stories of his interactions with his students. She shares the integrity and courage with which he led his life, especially displayed in his interactions and conflicts with the Soviet regime. He strongly defended composers and literary figures who were cast out, such as Shostakovich and Alexander Solzhenitsyn and successfully promoted the works of many twentieth century composers. His efforts in this arena profoundly altered the course of music and repertoire for cellists for generations to come.

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