

**Exploring the Expressive World of Early 20th-Century Cello Music**  
by  
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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts  
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## Abstract

This performance based thesis consisting of three separate recitals explored the rich and diverse world of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century music for cello, or arranged for cello, through the analysis of three doctoral recitals, each featuring a selection of works from this period. The recitals, performed also in collaboration with pianists Narae Joo and Natalie Sherer, provided a comprehensive overview of the stylistic and technical developments in cello music during this transformative era.

The first recital featured Béla Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances* (1915), showcasing the composer's fascination with folk music and his contribution to the genre. Bartók's exploration of authentic folk tunes from Transylvania resulted in a collection of six captivating dance movements. These pieces reflect his collaboration with Zoltán Kodály and his dedication to preserving folk traditions of the region. The recital also included Anton Webern's *Drei Kleine Stücke, op. 11* (1914), exemplifying the composer's meticulous approach to atonal composition. With just three small movements and concise structures, Webern's work demonstrates the intricate balance between expression and economy of means. Claude Debussy's *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (1915) showcased the composer's late-Romantic style and innovative use of extended cello techniques. This piece captures the essence of Debussy's last creative period, marked by his exploration of new harmonic and timbral possibilities.

In the second recital, presented through online means, I introduced an unconventional approach to chamber music. I arranged and performed pieces originally written for other instruments, adapting them for an ensemble of twelve cellists. Inspired by the renowned 12

Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic, my project explored the transformative power of arrangements and the versatility of the cello. The diverse repertoire ranges from Astor Piazzolla's *Suite del Ángel* (1965), which fuses traditional tango elements with modern influences, to Igor Stravinsky's *Apollon musagète* (1927-1928), a neoclassical masterpiece that pays homage to Greek mythology. Wilhelm Kaiser-Lindemann's *Variações brasileiras* (2000) introduces bossa nova rhythms to the cello ensemble, highlighting the fusion of classical and popular music. Additionally, Glenn Miller's *Moonlight Serenade* (1939), Richard Strauss's *Morgen* (1984), and Vincent Youmans' *Tea for Two* (1924) provide a blend of genres, showcasing the flexibility and adaptability of the cello ensemble.

The third recital delved into Russian inspired cello repertoire, featuring works that demanded technical prowess and interpretive skills. Leoš Janáček's *Pohádka* (1910) transported the listener into a fairy-tale world inspired by Russian literature, as the cello and piano engage in fragmented yet evocative dialogues. Paul Hindemith's *3 Pieces for Cello and Piano, op. 8* (1917-1919) presented a diverse set of compositions, from the whimsical *Capriccio* to the introspective *Phantasiestück* and the rhythmically playful *Scherzo*. Sergei Prokofiev's *Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 119* (1949) served as the culmination of the recital, reflecting the composer's resilience in the face of political challenges. The sonata combines elements of Russian folk traditions with Prokofiev's signature lyricism, creating a powerful and emotionally charged work.

Through these three recitals, this performance thesis explored the evolution of cello music through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, highlighting composers' innovative approaches to form, rhythm, harmony, and expression. The adaptation of repertoire for a cello ensemble, presented an example of how creative approaches to making music continue in the present day, through modern means. These recitals offered a journey through the expressive world of cello music,

demonstrating the enduring relevance and beauty of these compositions in the contemporary musical landscape.

**Recital 1 Program**

**Anne Richardson, Cello**  
**Narae Joo & Natalie Sherer, Piano**

*Wednesday, February 2, 2022*  
*Walgreen Drama Center, Stamps Auditorium*  
*8:00 PM*

**Romanian Folk Dances (1915)**

Joc Cu Bâtâ

Brâul arr. Zoltán Székely

Pe Loc

Buciumeana

Poarcâ Românească

Mâruntel

Béla Bartók  
(1881-1945)

Narae Joo, piano

**Drei Kleine Stücke, op. 11 (1914)**

Mäßige

Sehr bewegt

Äußert ruhig

Anton Webern  
(1883-1945)

Narae Joo, piano

**Sonate pour Violoncelle et Piano (1915)**

Prologue

Sérénade

Finale

Claude Debussy  
(1862-1918)

Natalie Sherer, piano

*Intermission*

**Sonata for solo cello, op. 8 (1915)**

Allegro maestoso ma appassionato

Adagio

Allegro molto vivace

Zoltán Kodály  
(1882-1967)

## Recital 1 Program Notes

Béla Bartók (1881-1945): Romanian Folk Dances (1915)

Béla Bartók originally composed his *Romanian Folk Dances* for solo piano in 1915. Comprised of 6 short dance movements, the melodies all derive from folk tunes the composer heard in the Transylvanian region of modern-day Romania, an area that had been a part of Hungary before 1920. Bartók's interest in folk music was piqued in 1904, and was fully embraced after beginning a lifelong collaboration and friendship with fellow Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály in 1905. The two composers traveled together throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and with the help of a phonograph, notated Hungarian, Romanian, and Slavic folk music, much of which had never been written down before. Bartók continued his research as an ethnomusicologist, transcribing some 3500 authentic folk tunes, up until the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire forced him to stop his travels.

All 6 movements of Romanian Folk Dances are based off of dance songs originally performed on either fiddle or shepherd's flute. The dances translate to English as:

1. Dance with Sticks- a solo dance that involves kicking one's legs up towards the ceiling.
2. Sash Dance- a group dance in which the dancers hold each other's' waists, with a sash used as a visual prop.
3. In One Spot- a more static dance in which the performers stay in one place.



4. Hornpipe Dance- a dance from the Bucsony region of Transylvania.
5. Romanian Polka- a faster dance with changing meter.
6. Fast Dance- a courting-type dance that combines two melodies.

Bartók later arranged the work himself for small orchestra in 1917, but friends of Bartók also made other transcriptions as well. Arthur Willner made an arrangement for string orchestra, but more well-known is Zoltán Székely's adaption for solo violin and piano. Székely, a talented violinist who premiered and was the dedicatee Bartók's Second Violin Concerto, transposed some of the movements and added different bow strokes, false harmonics, and double stops, to transform the work into a more virtuosic work for violin and piano. Cellists now also perform Bartók's composition as well, thanks to an arrangement by cellist Luigi Silva.

Anton Webern (1883-1945): *Drei Kleine Stücke* Op. 11 (1914)

Although Anton Webern's *Drei Kleine Stücke*, or *Three Little Pieces*, takes less than 3 minutes in its entirety to perform, the amount of musical content and artistic expression that is condensed within the work is a testament to both the intricacy and efficiency of Webern's compositional language. Born in Vienna, Webern was influenced early on not only by the music of Beethoven, Schubert, and Wagner, but also by French composer Claude Debussy, whose music he conducted in 1911. Webern was one of Arnold Schoenberg's pupils, and, along with Alban Berg, was a principal member of the Second Viennese School. Webern also helped his mentor, Schoenberg, form the Society for Private Musical Performance in 1918, an organization that championed the performances of newly composed works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Not only were many of Webern's works performed here, but also those of Béla Bartók and Debussy, among others.

Webern embraced the 12-tone technique of his teacher, writing in an atonal style that is highly organized in its pitch class content and incredibly detailed in its expressive direction. His Op. 11, composed in 1914, is one of the best representations of his purposeful meticulousness. With the first movement containing 9, the second movement containing 13, and the last movement containing 10 bars, nearly every note has a dynamic or expressive marking. The cello and piano carry an intimate dialogue throughout, in a slow and extremely soft manner in the outer two movements, and in an explosive and loud way in the second movement.

#### Claude Debussy (1862-1918): Sonata for Cello and Piano (1915)

In 1914, French composer Claude Debussy began a projected cycle of six sonatas for various instruments. The ambitious effort came at a time in great sadness in the composer's life, due to his cancer diagnosis in 1909 combined with the onset of the Great War five years later. The composer worked furtively despite his overall unhappiness, and completed both his sonata for cello and piano and his sonata for flute viola and harp (or Piano) both within the same year of 1915. Debussy's third sonata within this cycle, his sonata for violin and piano in G minor, would unfortunately be his last major composition in 1917, and the composer passed away at the age of 55 the following year. The remaining three sonatas were never completed.

The Cello Sonata is short in length, usually not exceeding 11 minutes in performance. Although the opening piano solo of the work establishes D minor from the first chord as the key, Debussy's use of modal, whole-tone, and pentatonic scales mix together to create a more

ambiguous and fluid tonal language. Its three movements flow together in time as well, with the second and third joined by an attacca. The sonata employs a wide variety of textures, often brought to life by the extended techniques used by the cello, such as false harmonics, flautando and sul ponticello bowing. The amount of pizzicato transforms the cello into sounding more like a guitar in the second movement, and contributes to a more percussive texture in the final movement. The work is riddled with dynamic and timbre instructions that aim to portray subtle color changes from both the cello and piano.

Perhaps similarly to Webern's *Drei Kleine Stücke*, Debussy writes his cello sonata in a concise manner. However, the sound world he creates has an improvisatory aura to it and a virtuosic flare that distinguishes itself among the cello repertoire.

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967): Sonata in B minor for Solo Cello, Op. 8 (1915)

Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály is perhaps best remembered for his pedagogical methods, immortalized by the "Kodály Method," as well as his collaborative ethnomusicological studies with Béla Bartók. However, his compositional voice was also impressively unique. Kodály combined his knowledge and love of folk music with more traditional structures, and with his understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century French music. It was actually Kodály who, after spending some months in Paris attending lectures by Charles-Marie Widor, brought back and introduced the compositions of Claude Debussy to Bartók, who was, as a result, also influenced by the French compositional style.

A skilled violinist, violist, and pianist, Kodály was also a self-taught cellist. His knowledge of the instrument, as well as his love for the cello, is apparent based off of his Op. 4 Sonata for Cello and Piano, his Op. 7 Duo for Violin and Cello, and his Op. 8 Sonata for Solo Cello. The Op. 8 Sonata for Solo Cello not only encompasses all of the technical

capabilities of the instrument, but actually augments the registral range by having the cellist tune down their lowest two strings by a half step. Tuning the G and C strings down to F# and B, respectively, transforms the sound of the cello into something uniquely dark and rich in timbre. Written in 1915, the work wasn't premiered until 1918, when Jenő Kerpely of the Waldbauer-Kerpely String Quartet first performed the work, and it wasn't published until 1921 due to World War I.

The work is strongly influenced by the Hungarian folk Lament style. Hungarian Laments are performed by women only in intimate settings during times of mourning, and are characterized by melodies with descending contour, repeated notes that get faster, and an overall improvisatory feel. These qualities are heard in all three movements of Kodály's Solo Cello Sonata. Kodály often evokes the rhythm of the Hungarian language as well, in which the stress is always on the first syllable of a word, by accenting the first note in a rhythmical cluster. Each movement combines structural elements of sonata form with more strophic elements of the lament. While the work, and especially its middle movement, sounds improvisatory, Kodály is scrupulously precise in his notation, often writing out even how many oscillations of left hand tremolos occur.

Still considered among the most virtuosic and challenging of solo cello works, Kodály's writing in his Solo Cello Sonata allows for both melody, harmony, and even countermelodies to be heard throughout with the help of extended techniques. The first movement displays this best through the use of suspension like double stops, which paints a haunting atmosphere, sounding often times like crying. In the second movement, more developmental like material is played in a freer style, with left hand pizzicato accompanying the lyrical melodies. The last movement is an energetic dance that seems to build excitement endlessly. While all three movements differ in character, texture, and color, the overall sound world of B minor links the solo sonata together as an entire work.

**Recital 2 Program**

**Anne Richardson, Cello**

**Recital 1 Arrangements for 12 Cellos**

<b>Suite del Ángel</b> (1965) Introducción al Ángel Milonga del Ángel La Muerte del Ángel Resurrección del Ángel	Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)
<b>My Fair Lady</b> (1914) Overture	Frederick Loewe (1901-1988)
<b>Apollon musagète</b> (1927-1928) Pas de deux Coda	Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)
<b>Variações brasileiras</b> (2000)	Wilhelm Kaiser-Lindemann (1940-2010)
<b>Moonlight Serenade</b> (1939)	Glenn Miller (1904-1944)
<b>Morgen! op. 27, no. 4</b> (1894)	Richard Strauss (1864-1949)
<b>Tea for Two</b> (1924)	Vincent Youmans (1898-194)

## **Recital 2 Program Notes**

The compilation of videos submitted for this Recital are part of a long term project that began during the onset of the Coronavirus Pandemic three years ago. Like many other performing artists, I found myself starved of fruitful artistic collaboration during this time. I turned to the online concept of virtual chamber music as a way of feeding the desire to create music greater than one person can make alone. I was inspired by the 12 Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic, a group that I have followed closely since discovering them over ten years ago, to make my own versions of their arrangements. I looked at the material they chose to arrange, and studied the compositional techniques they used to adequately portray both subtle and extreme varieties of sound, texture, timbre, and character. Compiling my own parts was an intense challenge that required active listening, and detailed analysis of both video and audio footage of the group performing.

After making a series of transcriptions directly from Die 12 Cellisten der Berliner Philharmoniker, I moved on to writing original arrangements. This was a self-taught process that continues to this day. The process of creating these videos is threefold:

i. Arrangement/Transcription

Arranging involves the aural skills of first detecting the inner and outer voices, the highest and lowest. This usually results in a musical draft for two instruments with a melody and a bass line. The inner voices are divided into two categories: countermelody and harmony. Countermelodies are more easily distinguished, and therefore transcribed first. From these three elements

(melody, countermelody, and bass line), one can analyze the harmonic progression of the work and subsequently fill in any missing harmonic notes to each chord. With the full harmonic and melodic material in writing, the next step is distribution.

Any number of cellos from 4 up could successfully perform renditions of all the arrangements I have made. However, 12 cellos provides a higher variety of sound qualities. With 8 cellos, for example, one can have 8 soloists, a quartet of duos, or an uneven division of some kind. However, with 12 cellos, one can have 12 soloists, 3 groups of quartets, 4 groups of trios, or a sextet of duos. This results in the sound ranging from intimate to orchestral. Smaller groups can divide amongst themselves larger chords, and in the biggest moments, all ranges of the instrument can be played simultaneously. The linear aspect of each instrumental part is also more feasible to play and more enjoyable with 12 cellists. Melodies can be divided into smaller sections that pass from cellist to cellist. This reflects one of the most engaging aspects of chamber music. Technically, it also allows for melodies that are extremely high in register, or difficult, to be successfully performed. The result of this process is 12 parts which equally flow between melody, harmony, and bass material, and which carry on a seamless dialogue with one another.

ii. Recording

The next step in the process of creating videos for 12 cellos is recording the parts individually. There are many different techniques one can use to start, such as designing a click track or playing with an already produced recording.

The route I have chosen is more involved perhaps, but results in optimal flexibility. From the 12 parts created, where each one slides from one melody fragment to harmony and so forth, I create a 13<sup>th</sup> part that consists of the melodic material condensed back to a straight linear form. In measures where melody is either nonexistent or ambiguous in direction and tempo, I instead insert either a countermelody fragment or a rhythmically clear accompanimental gesture. The 13<sup>th</sup> part is filled with consistent information of phrasing, tempo, pulse, and intonation in every bar. This is recorded first, on its own.

All of the original 12 parts are subsequently recorded over this track. Similarly to the process of making the arrangements, parts are recorded from the outer edges in, for ease of piecing the work together. This is perhaps the most strenuous of the three steps, as it is the only one that involves performing. The main reason I start with this 13<sup>th</sup> part, is to maintain, as much as possible, a sense of chamber music making throughout. Recording projects can easily become impersonal, robotic, and devoid of a feeling of musical freedom and artistry. By taking the steps mentioned here, my goal is to always be playing with another, to always be making phrases with flexibility, all the while with a clear sense of rhythm, pulse, and character.

### iii. Editing

The process of editing is done throughout the process of recording. For ease of working, audio files are extracted separately from video files, and combined in one track, before overlaying video footage at the very end.



Starting with the 12<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> cello parts, over the 13<sup>th</sup> track mentioned before, a realistic sense of dynamic and registral range is discovered fairly quickly. Technical aspects involve mostly lining up the voices, in order ensure rhythmic clarity. This is fairly straightforward when listening. However, recognizing the delay in attack that often occurs in the lower registrar of the instrument can also lead to helpful micro adjustments. Balance is an active part of piecing together lines, as even very good recording microphones have difficulty picking up on dynamic range. With 12 voices, things can easily sound loud all the time or musically chaotic, so recognizing a hierarchy in aural material leads to the best result.

#### Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992): Suite del Ángel (1965)

Astor Piazzolla is one the most widely recognized composer of tango music, being credited with revolutionizing the traditional form of dance music. His approach, known as “nuevo tango” blended traditional Argentine rhythms with elements of both classical music and jazz. *Suite del Ángel* is a compelling example of Piazzolla’s distinctive style, offering a modern twist on the traditional tango that captures both the passion and complexity of this genre. Originally consisting of four movements ensemble with banoneón, Piazzolla’s signature virtuosic instrument, the work draws on inspiration from Piazzolla’s fascination with the idea of angels. Composed in 1965, in the later period of the composer’s life, *Suite del Ángel* is part of a larger body of work known as *Ángel Series*. Each movement in the suite is a self-contained musical narrative, exploring different facets of tango, from its sultry sensuality to its rhythmic and dynamic qualities.

The suite begins with *Introducción al Ángel*, setting the stage for the ethereal and mysterious world of angels. A gentle and melancholic melody unfolds like a prayer, and the ensemble joins in slowly, adding deep and dark harmonic quality, all the while maintaining a flautando texture. *Milonga del Ángel* follows, and although still slow, invites a sense of dance with its stronger rhythmic pulse. The music still maintains a muted quality, but opens to the extent that it can within these constraints. It creates a feeling of both pain and bliss, a dyad that culminates in passion. The Milonga is itself a dance closely related to the tango, and Piazzolla infuses it with harmonies that color it with both nostalgia and flair. The third movement, *La Muerte del Ángel* or *The Death of the Angel*, is a dramatic tragedy, with a dark and foreboding atmosphere portraying an angel's demise. Piazzolla's use of dissonance and rhythmic tension adds a powerful and poignant dimension to this movement. Piazzolla closes his suite with *Resurrección del Ángel*. Initially opening with a delicate and luminous texture, the work builds to a close with intensity and energy. The angel's ascension is celebrated with a more lively dance, leaving the listener with a sense of hope and catharsis.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971): *Apollon musagète* (1927-1928)

Igor Stravinsky is a rare composer in his continuous stylistic transformation throughout his career. Much of this change can be seen during the years the composer spent in Paris working with art patron and impresario Sergei Diaghilev and writing scores for the Ballet Russes. While initially recognized for works of luscious texture and romantic harmony, such as his ballet *The Firebird*, he soon after shocked audiences with his dissonant and avant-garde *Rite of Spring*. Following this, Stravinsky adopted a more neoclassical style, contrasting much of his previous output. During this period, Stravinsky wrote *Apollon musagète*, also simply known as *Apollo*, in the late 1920s. This marked a pivotal moment for

Stravinsky, as he embraced a return to the classical forms of his youth while infusing them with modern harmonic and rhythmic elements.

Stravinsky collaborated with choreographer George Balanchine on *Apollo*, creating a work that pays homage to classical Greek mythology and the artistic ideals of ancient Greece. The work is written for string orchestra and is motivically driven. Dotted rhythms that appear throughout, from the prologue until the epilogue, and reminiscent of the French baroque style, and of the balletic works of Jean-Baptiste Lully. Stravinsky employs dissonance and bitonality throughout the work, but leaves chords unfilled often, as to not weight the work down texturally. There is compositional elegance throughout, contrapuntally always making graceful shapes and lines in the music that inspire dance and movement of an equally beautiful style.

**Recital 3 Program**

**Anne Richardson, Cello**

**Narae Joo, Piano**

*Recorded Sunday, August 20, 2023 Earl  
V. Moore Building, McIntosh Theatre*

**Pohádka (1910)**

Con moto.

Con moto

Allegro

Leoš Janáček

(1854-1928)

**3 Pieces for Cello and Piano, op. 8 (1917-1919)**

Capriccio

Phantasiestück

Scherzo

Paul Hindemith

(1895-1963)

**Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 119 (1949)**

Andante grave

Moderato

Allegro, ma non troppo

Sergei Prokofiev

(1891-1953)

### Recital 3 Program notes

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928): *Pohádka* (1910)

Translated to mean “Fairy Tale,” Leoš Janáček creates an atmosphere of pure magic in his three-movement work for cello and piano. Originally composed in 1910, but later revised multiple times, Janáček based *Pohádka* loosely off of scenes from *The Tale of Tsar Berendey* by the Russian poet Vasily Zhukovsky (1783-1852). Janáček leaves it unclear to what degree the work is programmatic. In the story by Zhukovsky, the Tsar’s son Ivan falls in love with the beautiful princess Maria at a magical lake, whose father, Kaschei, is the King of the Underworld. When Kaschei objects over the pairing, the couple are forced to flee on horseback. They are separated in the journey, and Maria falls depressed, transforming from a princess into a blue, withering flower. However, after a wise magician appears and breaks the spell separating the couple, Maria and Ivan are reunited and marry in harmony. The cello part is often associated with the voice of the young Prince Ivan, while the piano melodies fit the voice of Princess Maria. However, it is ambiguous whether the work portrays the events of this story, or instead paints pictures of the general scenery and magic of Zhukovsky’s literary world.

Janáček writes in a more melodically fragmented fashion. Instead, the short accompanimental motifs carry the importance of continually pulling and pushing the music forward. These motifs rhythmically reflect the dialect of Janáček’s native Czech language. The composer was deeply connected to his eastern European and Moravian heritage, even being one of the first composers to write operas in Czech. The motifs pass from cello and

piano, oftentimes in the absence of a clear melody. However, Janáček uses a musical technique akin to pointillism, where these small gestures up close, seem short and fragmented, but over the larger musical phrase form in their combination a long singing line. This is especially present in the first and second movement of the work. The third movement sounds more traditional in its dancelike form, with a strong rhythmic pulse throughout.

Paul Hindemith (1895-1963): 3 Pieces for Cello and Piano, Op. 8 (1917-1919)

Paul Hindemith wrote *3 Pieces for Cello and Piano* early in his career, at a time when the composer was still exploring his compositional voice. During this period, Hindemith was working as a violinist, concertmaster of the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra, and had not yet switched over to the viola, the instrument which would most influence both his performance and compositional career. The 3 pieces are individually unique in style, length, and character, making the work less of a 3 movement piece, and more of a compilation of three separate compositions. The first, *Capriccio*, is a short and light-hearted work. It's tonality results in a Prokofiev-like harmonic sound stage, with the piano playing a romantically-rich series of accompanimental chords, all the while in a short and dry manner. The melody is simple and folk-like, with a muted sound to dampen the short staccato attacks and give it a child-like softness.

The second movement, *Phantasiestück* is stark contrast in texture. The luscious middle register of the cello is deeply explored in the opening, subsequently expanding into the higher range of the instrument in an operatic and grand fashion. All the while, the piano pulls against the cello melody with contrapuntally intricate triplets, creating a polyrhythmic dialogue to define the work throughout. Hindemith clearly draws inspiration

from the sound world of Schumann, with sensitive melodies and intimate melodic dialogue. His use of bitonality enriches this lieder-like composition with a modern harmonic color.

The last movement of this work, entitled *Scherzo*, is perhaps the most complicated in form, yet humorous all the while. While the previous movement centered on the use of polyrhythms, this movement instead focuses on both the rhythmic strictness and flexibility one can achieve through hemiolas. While the cello remains clearly in three, and waltz-like in the opening section, the piano plays in a square two beat scalar fashion. When pitted against each other, the rhythmic pulse is harsh and unchanging. However, when teases the audience by leaving out an expected beat or diverging from its dance meter, the result is a comical sense of rhythmic freedom and musical fluidity. Hindemith revisits the more romantic style of *Phantasiestück* in the middle trio section of this scherzo, before returning to a reprise of the first section, which spins out of control and descends into eventual deep silence in the end.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, Op. 119 (1949)

Prokofiev's *Sonata for Cello and Piano* was written during a difficult time in the composer's life. In the year preceding, The Zhdanov Decree accused a slew of Russian composers of formalism and musical elitism. The idea of formalism centered on paying tribute to formal conventions of the capitalist West, which contrasted to native musical tradition. Because of this setback, the works of Prokofiev were banned from being published or performed without rigorous hoops to jump through. However, it was a feat that Prokofiev, along with cellist and dedicatee Mstislav Rostropovich and pianist Sviatoslav Richter were able to pull off for the works premier in 1950.

The successful and fruitful partnership of Prokofiev and Rostropovich led to this successful composition. Having heard Rostropovich perform for the first time only the year prior, the composer vowed to work on cello repertoire with the musician, resulting in both the sonata and later a reworking of Prokofiev's cello concerto, into the now well-known and formidable *Symphony Concertante*. Perhaps it was the clear influence of traditional folk music, most prevalent in the final movement of the work, that allowed the cello sonata to pass censorship. The apparent simplicity and favoring of the bass register may have won favor with critics, but the work is anything plain and easy. The work evokes the grace and grand orchestral elegance of Prokofiev's orchestral and balletic works, most notably *Cinderella*. The resemblance is such that even Rostropovich chose to arrange the second act *pas de deux* from the ballet for cello and piano, and add it occasionally in concert as a fourth movement and encore to the sonata.