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# **STEVEN ISSERLIS | Cello**

# **CONNIE SHIH | Piano**

**Saturday, February 15, 2025 | 7:30pm**

Herbst Theatre

## **BEETHOVEN**

### **Sonata for Pianoforte and Cello in G Minor, Opus 5, No. 2**

*Adagio sostenuto ed espressivo; Allegro molto più tosto presto  
Allegro*

## **MARTINŮ**

### **Sonata No. 1 for Cello and Piano, H. 277**

*Poco Allegro  
Lento  
Allegro con brio*

**INTERMISSION**

## **N. BOULANGER**

### **Three Pieces for Cello and Piano**

*Modéré  
Sans vitesse et à l'aise  
Vite et nerveusement rythmé*

## **GRIEG**

### **Cello Sonata in A Minor, Opus 36**

*Allegro agitato  
Andante molto tranquillo  
Allegro; Allegro molto e marcato*

**This program is made possible in part by the generous support of  
David and Judy Preves Anderson.**

**Stephen Isserlis** is represented by Wittenberg Artists  
282 Cabrini Blvd. #1F, New York, NY 10040    [wittenbergartists.com](http://wittenbergartists.com)

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## ARTIST PROFILES

*San Francisco Performances presents Steven Isserlis for the tenth time. He made his SF Performances recital debut in January 1995.*

*Connie Shih returns for a third engagement. She made her SF Performances debut with Mr. Isserlis in April 2017.*



British cellist **Steven Isserlis** CBE enjoys an international career as a soloist, chamber musician, author, educator, and broadcaster. He performs with the world's greatest orchestras, from period to modern ensembles, and has given many world premieres, including Sir John Tavener *The Protecting Veil*, Thomas Adès *Lieux retrouvés*, four works for solo cello by György Kurtág, and pieces by Holliger, Widmann, Mustonen, and many others.

His vast award-winning discography includes the complete JS Bach Cello Suites (*Gramophone* Instrumental Album of the Year), Beethoven's complete works for cello and piano, the Brahms double concerto with Joshua Bell and the Academy of St-Martin-in-the-Fields, and Grammy-nominated recordings of Haydn and Martinů.

As an author, his latest book is a critically-acclaimed companion to the Bach cello suites, while his two books for children about music are among the genre's most popular and have been translated into many languages. He has also authored a commentary on Schumann's *Advice for Young Musicians*. As a broadcaster, he has written and presented in-depth documentaries for BBC Radio, on Robert Schumann, and Harpo Marx.

As an insightful musical explorer and curator, he has programmed imaginative series for London's Wigmore Hall, New York's 92nd

St Y, and the Salzburg Festival. Unusually he directs orchestras from the cello, including Luzerner Sinfonieorchester in 2019 with Radu Lupu in his final public performance.

He was awarded a CBE by Queen Elizabeth II in 1998, in recognition of his services to music. International recognition includes the Piatigorsky Prize (USA) and the Glashütte Original Music Festival Award (Germany). Since 1997, he has been Artistic Director of the International Musicians Seminar, Prussia Cove, Cornwall.

He plays the 1726 'Marquis de Corberon' Stradivarius, on loan from the Royal Academy of Music.



The Canadian pianist, **Connie Shih**, is repeatedly considered to be one of Canada's most outstanding artists. In 1993 she was awarded the Sylva Gelber Award for most outstanding classical artist under age 30. At the age of nine, she made her orchestral debut with Mendelssohn's first *Piano Concerto* with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. At the age of 12, she was the youngest ever protégé of György Sebők, and then continued her studies at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia with Claude Frank, himself a protégé of Arthur Schnabel. Later studies were undertaken with Fou Ts'ong in Europe.

As soloist, she has appeared extensively with orchestras throughout Canada, the U.S., and Europe. In a solo recital setting, she has made countless appearances in Canada, the U.S., Iceland, England, Spain, Italy, Germany, Japan, and China. Connie has given chamber music performances with many world-renowned musicians. To critical acclaim, she appears regularly in concert with her duo partner, cellist Steven Isserlis worldwide. Including chamber

music appearances at the Wigmore and Carnegie Halls, she performs at the prestigious Bath Music Festival, Aldeburgh, Cheltenham, Weill Hall (NY), Verbier, Luzern and at the Kronberg Festival. Her collaborations have included Sir Simon Keenlyside, Joshua Bell, Maxim Vengerov, Tabea Zimmermann, Manuel Fischer-Dieskau and Isabelle Faust.

Connie's performances are frequently broadcast via television and radio on CBC (Canada), BBC (U.K.), SWR, NDR, and WDR (Germany) as well as on other various television and radio stations in North America, Asia, and Europe.

Connie was adjunct faculty at the Hochschule für Musik Mainz and presently at the Hochschule für Musik Freiburg. In addition, she has given master classes at renowned music institutions and was on the faculty at the Casalmaggiore International Festival in Italy.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### Sonata for Pianoforte and Cello in G Minor, Opus 5, No. 2

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**  
(1770-1827)

Beethoven wrote the two sonatas of his Opus 5 early in 1796, shortly after his twenty-fifth birthday. These were his first sonatas for an instrument other than solo piano and were in fact the first significant sonatas for cello and keyboard (Vivaldi had written some small-scale sonatas for cello and harpsichord, but neither Haydn nor Mozart wrote cello sonatas). From February through July 1796, Beethoven made a concert tour to Prague, Dresden, Leipzig, and finally Berlin. There he and the court cellist, Jean-Louis Duport, performed these two sonatas before King Friedrich Wilhelm II, himself an amateur cellist. Also performed on this occasion was Beethoven's set of 12 variations on the theme from Handel's "*See, the conquering hero comes.*" The king, who surely understood the compliment implicit in the title, was delighted with the music and presented Beethoven with a golden snuffbox full of golden louis d'or. Now it was Beethoven's turn to be delighted. He enthused to a friend that this snuffbox was no ordinary one, "but such a one as it might have been customary to give an ambassador."

The second of the two sonatas, in G minor begins with a 44-measure introduction marked *Adagio sostenuto ed espressivo*. This truly is an expressive opening—and long enough that it might almost be considered a movement of its own rather than simply an introduction to something else. It leads without pause to the *Allegro molto più tosto presto*, a sonata-form movement based largely on the opening subject, here initially stated by the cello. A second theme is heard high in the piano, and the development treats both these ideas across this unusually long movement (509 measures). There is no slow movement—the lengthy slow introduction having in effect been a slow movement of its own—and the sonata concludes with an energetic rondo marked simply *Allegro*.

## Sonata No. 1 for Cello and Piano, H. 277

**BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ**  
(1890–1959)

Martinů learned to play the violin as a boy, and he was good enough that he played in the Czech Philharmonic for five years before World War I. But the young man wanted to be a composer, so in 1923 he left his homeland and moved to Paris, which was then the musical capital of the world. There he studied with Roussel and established himself as a composer, and Martinů might well have remained in Paris for the rest of his life, were it not for the rise of Hitler. The Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in March 1939, a fact that agonized Martinů, and 15 months later they marched into Paris. Martinů and his wife fled just ahead of the German army and eventually made it to the United States in March 1941. Life in the New World would prove difficult for Martinů, but it would also be a very productive time for him musically. He would not return to Europe until 1953, and—despite his longing for his Czech homeland—the communist takeover meant that he could never return home.

Martinů wrote his *First Cello Sonata* in Paris as war clouds gathered over Europe: the sonata was completed in May 1939, just two months after the occupation of Czechoslovakia and four months before the outbreak of war. These were difficult times for Martinů, though we need to be wary of searching for signs of contemporary events in the music he was writing at the time: this cello sonata may be a dark and dramatic work, but it is in no sense program music, and Martinů would have wanted it to be heard as absolute music.

The dramatic *Poco allegro* takes the general shape of sonata form, built on the cello's powerful opening statement and somewhat more relaxed secondary material. But the principal impression this music makes is of turbulent energy: that first theme dominates this movement, which eventually drives to a forceful close. The opening of the *Lento* can be misleading: all alone, the piano has a long, eerie introduction, but once the cello enters, the movement belongs to that instrument—this passionate, singing movement has been compared to a recitative, and the piano often offers only the barest chordal accompaniment. The concluding *Allegro con brio* returns to the driving energy of the first movement: it is built on its fierce opening statement and a sharply-syncopated second theme-group. In its non-stop energy, the movement has some of the feel of a perpetual motion, and eventually the sonata drives to a shining close in D major.

It may be tempting to make a connection between the turbulence of this music and the moment at which it was written, and perhaps we can, but Martinů saw this sonata in quite a different way. It waited a year for its first performance: Pierre Fournier and Rudolf Firkusny gave the premiere in Paris on May 19, 1940, at a concert sponsored by the Société de la Musique Contemporaine. Three weeks later, the Nazis marched into Paris, and Martinů fled the life he had known for nearly 20 years. Looking back many years later on the premiere of his *First Cello Sonata*, Martinů remembered it fondly: “The view of those present was that it was the last greeting, the last ray, from a better world. For some few moments we grasped what music can give and how it can make us forget reality.”

## Three Pieces for Cello and Piano

**NADIA BOULANGER**  
(1887–1979)

When we think of the Boulanger sisters, we usually think of Lily as the phenomenally talented composer who died at 24 and of Nadia as the supremely influential teacher who lived into her nineties. Yet Nadia was also a composer. At the age of nine, she entered the Paris Conservatory, where she studied with Fauré, Widor, and Vierne. In 1913, at the age of 26, she became the first woman to win the Prix de Rome, though World War I put her musical activities on pause. She resumed composing after the

war, but only briefly, and thereafter she devoted herself to teaching and to performing: she was the first woman ever to conduct an orchestra in London and the first woman to conduct the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, and Philadelphia Orchestra. She also led the premiere of Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto* in 1938 in Washington, D.C.

The *Three Pieces for Cello and Piano* were among Nadia's final compositions. She originally wrote them for organ in 1911 and then transcribed them for cello and piano in 1914. Each piece is a miniature: the entire work spans only about seven minutes. The opening movement, marked simply *Moderato*, begins with a subdued melody for muted cello over shimmering piano accompaniment. Boulanger marks the piano part “Gentle and vague” and specifies that the cello's singing line should be “Expressive and simple.” The music rises to an animated climax, then falls away to a quiet conclusion. The brief central movement is a canon, with the piano following the cello. Boulanger notes that the performance here should be “Without speed and with ease.” The last movement is the most animated of the three—Boulanger marks it “Fast and with nervous rhythm.” It gets off to a spiky beginning, with the staccato piano exchanging lines with the pizzicato cello. The flowing central episode is in 5/8, and the music gradually makes its way back to the opening material and a brusque finish.

## Cello Sonata in A Minor, Opus 36

**EDVARD GRIEG**  
(1843–1907)

Edvard Grieg will be forever identified as a “nationalist” composer, dedicated to evoking his Norwegian heritage and to advancing the cause of Norwegian music, and the popularity of works like the *Peer Gynt Suite* or *Wedding Day at Troldhaugen* will probably be eternal. And justly so. Yet Grieg felt the pull of “classical” music throughout his life, and he returned continually to the classical forms, forms that were still being used by Grieg's good friend Johannes Brahms. Among the works of this supposedly nationalist composer are a symphony, one of the most popular piano concertos ever written, a string quartet, three violin sonatas, a piano sonata, and the present *Cello Sonata in A Minor*, composed in 1882–83, just as Grieg was approaching his fortieth birthday. The *Cello*

*Sonata* fuses standard three-movement classical form with some of the characteristics of Grieg's specifically "Norwegian" music: short and repetitive phrases, sudden major-minor alternations, and dance rhythms. It is a big, passionate work, full of good tunes and fire, and today it is acknowledged as a masterpiece of the genre.

Grieg marks the first movement *Allegro agitato*, and the very beginning is certainly dramatic. The agitation here comes largely from the piano, whose swirling accompaniment and sudden outbursts give the opening much of its character; all this energy sets the cello's lovely second subject in high relief. The turbulent development is once again energized by the piano, though Grieg pauses briefly at one point to give the cello a cadenza of its own. The conclusion of this movement is faintly

reminiscent, in its rhythms and gestures, of the opening theme of Grieg's own *Piano Concerto*.

The *Andante molto tranquillo* contains a much more direct reminiscence: its gentle main idea is a variant of the *Huldigungs-marsch* ("Homage March") of Grieg's incidental music to *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, composed in 1872. Here this noble tune is driven to an animated climax before subsiding to the quiet close. A brief introduction leads directly to the main theme of the *Allegro molto e marcato*, very much in the manner of the elf-dances of Grieg's nationalistic music. The piano introduces the symmetric little main tune, full of repetitive rhythms and surprising harmonic colors; the piano also has the soaring second subject, and both these ideas are treated at some length before the exciting close.

Grieg developed a comfortable calendar for his creative work and stuck with it throughout his career. He composed in the spring and early summer, then used the fall and winter to tour Europe, conducting concerts and presenting his music (and the music of other Norwegian composers). It was on a European tour in the fall of 1883 that Grieg played the piano in the first performances of the *Cello Sonata*; the cellists on those occasions were the distinguished German virtuosos Friedrich Grutzmacher and Julius Klengel. Late in his life, Grieg performed this sonata with one of the greatest of cellists: in Amsterdam on May 2, 1906, he played it with the young Pablo Casals.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger