



# Advance Program Notes

*Russian Reflections*

David Finckel and Wu Han

Sunday, November 17, 2014, 8 pm

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## *Russian Reflections*

David Finckel, cello  
Wu Han, piano

## *Program*

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

Andante grave

Moderato

Allegro ma non troppo

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in d minor, Op. 40 (1934)

Allegro non troppo

Allegro

Largo

Allegro

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

## *Intermission*

Five Preludes for Solo Piano, Op. 16 (1894–1895)

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872–1915)

Sonata for Piano and Cello in g minor, Op. 19 (1901)

Lento; Allegro moderato

Allegro scherzando

Andante

Allegro mosso

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

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*David Finckel and Wu Han appear by arrangement with David Rowe Artists, [www.davidroweartists.com](http://www.davidroweartists.com)*

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Artist website: [www.davidfinckelandwuhan.com](http://www.davidfinckelandwuhan.com)*

*Wu Han performs on the Steinway Piano*

# *Program Notes*

## **SERGEY PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)**

Sonata for Cello and Piano in c minor, op. 119 (1949)

In 1936, after nearly 15 years spent living in Paris and traveling worldwide, Sergey Prokofiev, admittedly “patriotic and homesick” and longing to “see the real winter again and hear the Russian language in my ears,” moved back to the Soviet Union with his non-Russian wife and two sons. Relocating during one of the most savage political and social periods in Russian history, Prokofiev was set on establishing himself as one of Russia’s greatest composers. Rachmaninov had his hold on America, Stravinsky claimed Europe, and Shostakovich had just been censored by Stalin. Prokofiev kept his passport to tour without having to petition, but upon routine inspection it was confiscated without return, grounding Prokofiev in Moscow for the remainder of his life. The late 1930s saw very few public debuts of Prokofiev’s works, save the Cello Concerto op. 58 (1938) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), both met with negative criticism.

In the years following World War II, seeking to recover the Soviet “socialist realism” ideal of art, Andrey Zhdanov, the leading Soviet cultural policy maker, passed a series of resolutions affecting literature, art, film, and finally, in 1948, music. This decree stunted artistic growth in the Soviet Union until Stalin’s death, lasting out the remaining years of Prokofiev’s life. The elderly composer grew ill and deeply insecure. Much of his work had been banned from public performance, and though still composing, he hardly was living the pampered lifestyle he had anticipated returning to Russia.

Prokofiev’s Sonata for Cello and Piano, remarkably, was permitted by the Committee of Artistic Affairs to receive a public premiere. It was debuted in 1950 by cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and pianist Sviatoslav Richter, with the first movement bearing the quote, “Mankind—that has a proud sound.”

Despite the sheer horror that besieged Prokofiev at the time of the work’s composition, the work remains remarkably expressive. The first movement, marked *Andante grave*, opens with a resounding call by the cello, followed by a short call-and-response folk melody between the cello and piano. A throbbing interlude brings the main theme, a cheery and flippant duet. The movement slows as the cello rings out a beautiful harmonic cadence, and the second theme enters much more heavily mechanically than the first.

The second movement, a playful Scherzo and Trio, follows suit. A percussive pizzicato entrance transmutes to a complacent romantic trio section. The final *Allegro ma non tanto* remains timid, with melodies and chordal structure based heavily on Russian folk music. The movement lacks not energy nor drive, yet each climax, rather than developing in timbre and expressive nature, actually becomes more simplistic; sometimes diminishing down to a single note piano melody. The coda recounts the opening resonant notes of the cello in a grand duet statement, marking a turbulent and virtuosic conclusion.

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## **DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)**

Sonata for Cello and Piano in d minor, op. 40 (1934)

While interpreting the events of a composer’s life as impetus for his creative work is always risky business, one important personal development from Shostakovich’s life around the time of his Cello Sonata nevertheless remains inescapable. In the summer of 1934, Shostakovich fell passionately in love with Yelena Konstaninovskaya, a 20-year-old translator. Much to the dismay of his wife, Nina (despite their mutual agreement to an open marriage), the composer spent the majority of their summer holiday writing letters to his young mistress. “There is nothing in you which fails to send a wave of joy and fierce passion inside me when I think of you,” he wrote. “Lyalya, I love you so, I love you so, as nobody ever loved before. My love, my gold, my dearest, I love you so; I lay down my love before you.”

William T. Vollman dedicates a chapter of his epic novel *Europe Central* to the tempting—albeit improbable—influence of the affair with Konstaninovskaya on the music of the Cello Sonata. Though rooted in fancy, Vollman’s poetic assessment of the work nevertheless speaks to its lyrical pathos and sense of romantic abandon:

## ***Program Notes (continued)***

Each of Shostakovich's symphonies I consider to be a multiply broken bridge, an archipelago of steel trailing off into the river. Opus 40, however, is a house with four rooms...

...[He] built Opus 40 for her and him to dwell in, and she led him inside. They were going to have an apartment with a dark passageway, then steps and halfsteps. They'd live there, deep below the piano keys in Moscow. Nina could stay in Leningrad... Therefore, Opus 40, and in particular the first movement, composed of firelight and kisses, remains the most romantic thing that Shostakovich ever wrote.

Shostakovich and Nina separated, and the composer, as Vollman alludes, remained in Moscow with no definite plans to follow his wife back to Leningrad. It was during this time that work on the Cello Sonata began. By 1935, however, Nina was pregnant with the Shostakoviches' first child, and the marriage essentially righted itself (which did not preclude later extramarital affairs by both Dmitry and Nina). Shortly after the affair ended, Konstaninovskaya received an anonymous political denunciation and spent roughly a year in prison.

Shostakovich composed the Cello Sonata for the cellist Viktor Kubatsky, an esteemed cellist and one-time principal at the Bolshoi Theater. Shostakovich, also an able pianist, subsequently toured with Kubatsky, premiering his Cello Sonata in Leningrad on Christmas Day, 1934, alongside the cello sonatas of Grieg and Rachmaninov. The composer reportedly performed the piano parts to all three works from memory.

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### **ALEKSANDR SKRYABIN (1872–1915)**

Five Preludes for Solo Piano, op. 16 (1894–1895)

A student of the Moscow Conservatory alongside the likes of Sergei Rachmaninov and Aleksandr Goldenweiser, the pianist and composer Aleksandr Skryabin struggled greatly to compose, enduring massive anxiety attacks for much of the 1890s. With the support of the conservatory's director, Vasily Safonov, Skryabin was permitted to graduate early (in the same year as Rachmaninov), although his mentor, Anton Arensky, who had been working closely with Skryabin on counterpoint and fugue, was adamantly against his departure. Nevertheless, Skryabin graduated from the conservatory, and through Safonov's support was soon contacted by Mitrofan Belyayev, an Imperial Russian music publisher in Moscow.

Through Belyayev's connections, Skryabin was given opportunity to tour Russia in 1894, and was sent to Paris in 1895. Compositionally, during this period, Skryabin devoted himself almost entirely to composing preludes towards an outstanding bet he had made with Belyayev that he could compose 48 preludes before departing for Paris; it was to fulfill this bet that Skryabin composed his Twenty-Four Preludes, op. 11, and Five Preludes, op. 16.

The first of the Opus 16 Preludes paints a heavily romantic dreamscape. Like a wind-up music box, it is as if Skryabin leads us to question whether the next note will actually come, or whether it will leave us in an airy suspense. Far more decisive than is the following prelude, in g-sharp minor: the work carries a depth in the left hand reminiscent of Franz Liszt, whom Skryabin deeply admired. The third and fourth preludes alternate between a hymn-like chordal melody and a dainty right-hand melody, which recalls the first prelude's sensibility. The set concludes with a brief, yet fulfilling Allegretto in f-sharp minor.

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### **SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)**

Sonata for Cello and Piano in g minor, op. 19

In the wake of the successful completion of his Second Piano Concerto, Rachmaninov spent the summer of 1901 on the family's country estate Ivanovka in the Tambov region, several days' travel to the south of Moscow.

## ***Program Notes (continued)***

To judge by his letters, it was only after he returned to Moscow in late September that he began to work on the sonata, the performance of which was already planned. The Sonata for Cello and Piano, op. 19, was composed in the fall and early winter of 1901 for the cellist Anatoly Brandukov. Towards the end of the last movement, Rachmaninov wrote the date "November 20th." At the very end he wrote "December 12th," showing that he revised the ending immediately after the first performance. The work debuted in Moscow, on December 2, 1901, by Anatoly Brandukov, with the composer at the piano.

By mid-November he was crying off social engagements, complaining that "my work's going badly, and there's not much time left. I'm depressed..." On November 30th, however, he sent a message to the composer Taneyev inviting him to a rehearsal at 11:30 that morning. By the following January 15th, he was hard at work on the final proofs of the piece: "I've found almost no mistakes."

In later years Rachmaninov remembered his cello sonata as one of a series of pieces through which, with the help of Dr. Nikolai Dahl, after a long period of depression and inability to create, he was born again as a composer: "I felt that Dr. Dahl's treatment had strengthened my nervous system to a miraculous degree... The joy of creating lasted the next two years, and I wrote a number of large and small pieces including the Sonata for Cello..."

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## ***About the Artists***

### **DAVID FINCKEL & WU HAN**

Musical America's 2012 Musicians of the Year, cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han rank among the most esteemed and influential classical musicians in the world today. The talent, energy, imagination, and dedication they bring to their multifaceted endeavors as concert performers, recording artists, educators, artistic administrators, and cultural entrepreneurs go unmatched. Their duo performances have garnered superlatives from the press, public, and presenters alike.

In high demand year after year among chamber music audiences worldwide, the duo has appeared each season at the most prestigious venues and concert series across the United States, Mexico, Canada, the Far East, and Europe to unanimous critical acclaim. Recent highlights include performances at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, and Aspen's Harris Concert Hall; recitals in Korea and at Germany's Mecklenburg Festival; and their presentation of the Britten Concerto at Aspen Music Festival. They have also been frequent guests on American Public Media's *Performance Today*, *Saint Paul Sunday*, and other popular classical radio programs. For 34 years, David Finckel served as cellist of the Emerson String Quartet in addition to his duo work, during which he garnered eight Grammy Awards including two honors for "Best Classical Album," three *Gramophone Magazine* Awards, and the prestigious Avery Fisher Prize, awarded in 2004 for the first time to a chamber ensemble.

In addition to their distinction as world-class performers, the duo has established a reputation for their dynamic and innovative approach to the recording studio. In 1997, David Finckel and Wu Han launched ArtistLed, classical music's first musician-directed and Internet-based recording company, which has served as a model for numerous independent labels. All 16 ArtistLed recordings, including the most recent Dvorák Piano Trios, have met with critical acclaim and are available via the company's website at [www.artistled.com](http://www.artistled.com).

David Finckel and Wu Han have served as artistic directors of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center since 2004. They are also the founders and artistic directors of Music@Menlo, a chamber music festival and institute in Silicon Valley now celebrating its 11th season. In these capacities, they have overseen the establishment and design of The Chamber Music Society's CMS Studio Recordings label, as well as the Society's recording partnership with Deutsche Grammophon (which includes CMS concert downloads

made available through the Digital DG Concerts Series); and Music@Menlo LIVE, Music@Menlo's exclusive recording label, which has been praised as a "breakthrough" (*Billboard*) and "probably the most ambitious recording project of any classical music festival in the world" (*San Jose Mercury News*). In 2011, David Finckel and Wu Han were named artistic directors of Chamber Music Today, an annual festival held in Korea.

The duo's repertoire spans virtually the entire literature for cello and piano, with an equal emphasis on the classics and the contemporaries. Their modern repertoire includes all the significant works, from Prokofiev and Britten to Alfred Schnittke and André Previn. Their commitment to new music has brought commissioned works by Bruce Adolphe, Lera Auerbach, Gabriela Lena Frank, Pierre Jalbert, Augusta Read Thomas, and George Tsontakis to audiences around the world. In 2010, the duo released *For David and Wu Han* (ArtistLed), an album of four contemporary works for cello and piano expressly composed for them. In 2011, Summit Records released a recording of the duo performing Gabriela Lena Frank's concerto, *Compadrazgo*, with the ProMusica Columbus Chamber Orchestra.

David Finckel and Wu Han have achieved universal renown for their passionate commitment to nurturing the careers of countless young artists through a wide array of education initiatives. For many years, the duo taught alongside the late Isaac Stern at Carnegie Hall and the Jerusalem Music Center. They appeared annually on the Aspen Music Festival's Distinguished Artist Master Class series and in various educational outreach programs across the country. This season, David Finckel and Wu Han will launch a chamber music studio at Aspen Music Festival. Under the auspices of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, David Finckel and Wu Han have established the LG Chamber Music School, which provides workshops to young artists in Korea and Taiwan. David Finckel was named honoree and artistic director of the Mendelssohn Fellowship in 2012, a program established to identify young Korean musicians and promote chamber music in South Korea. David Finckel and Wu Han reside in New York with their 19-year-old daughter, Lilian.