

The Ph.D./D.M.A. Programs in Music

May 5, 2023 12:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall



Isabel Fairbanks, cello Zach Mo, piano

Sonata for Cello and Piano, L. 35 (1915)

Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto

Sérénade: Modérément animé

Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux

Claude Debussy

(1862–1918)

24 Preludes for Cello and Piano (1999/2008)

Andante

Allegro

Andante misterioso

Allegro ossessivo

Moderato

Andante tragico

Vivo ma non troppo e poco agitato

Grave

Vivace

Adagio sognando

Allegro

Adagio

Lera Auerbach

(b. 1973)

INTERMISSION

Cello Sonata in G Minor, Op. 65 (1847)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo

Largo

Finale: Allegro

Frédéric Chopin

(1810–49)

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the D.M.A. degree.

Please switch off your cell phones and refrain from taking flash pictures.

Notes on the Program

Claude Debussy, *Sonata for Cello and Piano, L. 35*

“The maturity of the late works does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are for the most part not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation.”

-Theodor Adorno on “Lateness”

Reeling from the devastation of WWI and the trials of his own ongoing battle with cancer, the first half of 1915 was challenging for Debussy. A taxing operation to treat his illness left him physically weak and the upheaval of war had stifled his inspiration. A devoted patriot to his native France, Debussy wrote to his publisher, Jacques Durand, “I have suffered much from the long drought forced upon my brain by the war.” But by the summer of 1915, his strength had returned and the drought he described had been replaced with an abundance of ideas and motivation. While on a summer vacation in Normandy, he embarked on a highly ambitious enterprise: a set of six sonatas of varying instrument combinations, the final of which would unite these instruments.

Dedicated to his wife, the set bore the inscription, “*Les Six Sonates pour divers instruments sont offertes en hommage à Emma-Claude Debussy (p.m.) Son mari Claude Debussy*” (“The Six Sonatas for various instruments are offered to honor Emma-Claude Debussy. Her husband Claude Debussy.”) Ultimately, he would only complete three of these six sonatas: the Sonata for Cello and Piano; the Sonata for Flute, Cello, and Harp; and the Sonata for Violin and Piano. He died of cancer in 1918 before he was able to realize the project, just one year after he premiered the cello sonata.

Of the cello sonata, Debussy wrote to Durand that the work was “almost classical, in the good sense of the word.” The key word here might be “almost.” The work certainly gives a generous nod to the elegant French textures and forms of Couperin and Rameau, as well as the charm and energy of Debussy’s earlier works. But we are confronted with the distinct feeling that this is a late work of a composer coming face-to-face with his own mortality, not necessarily paying homage to older traditions. Debussy unabashedly explores new sounds and unusual harmonies with the adventurous abandon that we expect of an artist sensing the end of his life. The result is a work filled with whimsy, humor, and charm, but also rife with elements of the absurd and the fantastic, at times shirking beauty for something a bit strange.

The first movement, *Prologue*, begins with a spacious theme passed from piano to cello. It has a brightness, despite its minor mode and, marked *risoluto*, is characterized by its melismatic flourishes that evoke the Spanish rhythms of flamenco music. The second theme, a gossamer lament from the cello, leads to a brief and increasingly frenzied middle section, before the first, then second themes return, and settle serenely in a major tonality to finish the movement. The unconventional title, *Prologue*, quietly invites the performer and audience to consider the function of this movement within the narrative of the piece; to consider that perhaps this harmonic landscape may be setting the stage for subsequent movements.

Marked *léger et fantasque* (light and fantastic), the *Sérénade* exploits the full spectrum of possible tonal colors the cello can achieve. Like drunken footsteps, the movement begins with an unsteady pizzicato from the cello, followed by a guitar-like strummed motive. These figures are answered by a diaphanous harmonic in the stratosphere of the cello’s range, evoking the translucency of a flute. These textures

remain in conversation throughout the movement, flitting quickly between one another before moving *attacca* (without pause) into the final movement.

A capricious flight of fancy, Debussy marks the *Finale, léger et nerveux* (light and nervous). Debussy's sudden and frequent dynamic, tempo, and color changes leave the listener feeling a bit like a rag doll. The cello soars through a melody in the instrument's highest register before a lively, scampering theme takes over, and then a sultry return to the Spanish guitar of the previous movement. At the heart of the movement is a humid and hazy *lento*, marked delicate, sweet, and sustained. A snap back to the original tempo with frenetic sixteenth notes triggers a mad dash to the coda, an impassioned soliloquy from the cello, before the piece concludes with percussive chords from both instruments.

Lera Auerbach, *Twenty-Four Preludes for Cello and Piano*

Born in 1973, Lera Auerbach grew up in the Ural Mountains in the industrial city of Chelyabinsk, Soviet Union. At the age of seventeen, Auerbach traveled to the United States for a concert tour, ultimately deciding not to return home but instead to settle in New York City.

Auerbach's artistry seems to exist on a multitude of planes and, as a writer, composer, sculptor, and visual artist, she is not bound by any one medium. What is most striking about her creativity is how purpose-driven it feels. There is a satisfaction to be gotten from experiencing how she uses each of her works, regardless of medium, to express a concept that is of importance to her psyche. In other words, one gets the sense that there is always artistic intent behind her work before pen or brush is put to paper. Auerbach comments that she draws her inspiration from music heard in a dream, themes of memory, perception of time, and as she calls it, our "age of decay," and "post-apocalyptic ruins of human vocabulary."

Initially conceived in 1999 and completed and published in 2008, Auerbach's *Twenty-Four Preludes for Violoncello and Piano*, continues a long tradition of this important form. Bach, Chopin, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and Shostakovich all wrote sets of twenty-four preludes that cycle through the circle of fifths, thus allowing the composer to devote one prelude to each of the twenty-four keys of our western tonal system.

Auerbach writes of this work:

By writing this work, I wished to create a continuum that would allow these short movements to be united as one single composition. Looking at something familiar yet from an unexpected perspective is one of the peculiar characteristics of these pieces - they are often not what they appear to be at first glance.

When I think of these violoncello and piano preludes, I compare them to the lake Inyshka in the Urals Mountains, where my family would vacation during the summers of my childhood. The lake looked peaceful, but I knew it was dangerous as it had a double bottom. According to the legend, Emelian Pugachev buried his treasures in this lake, but everything was lost, as the treasures sank into the deep hidden level below the visible ground.

A musical gesture that may seem simple - becomes multi-layered, not quite real or even grotesque because of its surrounding. I employ different musical styles, but this poly-stylism is not a goal in itself but rather an attempt to explore our own kaleidoscopic time full of contradictions, with its madness, loneliness, brutality and aching nostalgia for lost innocence.

Indeed, each of Auerbach's Preludes is a succinct sliver with its own distinct key, color, texture, and character. Together these slivers coalesce to create a kaleidoscope of fragments that reflect, one upon another, to create a cohesive whole. The way Auerbach juxtaposes the beautiful, peaceful, and safe with the grotesque, dangerous, and apocalyptic is what is most intriguing about these preludes.

No. 1, an eerie lament in the cello is cushioned by unsettling chords in the piano before the spell is broken by the violence of No. 2 – a *molto-perpetuo* marked *con ossessione, scuro* (with obsession, dark.) Nos. 3 and 4 behave in a similar manner, No. 3, marked *dolce sognando* (sweet, dreaming), ends with rising microtonal trills, while No. 4 awakens us with scurrying, surging sixteenth notes, again marked *ossessivo* (obsessive.)

The next four preludes also seem to work as their own miniature set, all using the lyrical possibilities of the cello's timbre—the rising line of the cello asks questions in No. 5, then, in No. 6, sings a mournful melody while soft notes in the piano's lowest register remind us perhaps of bombs dropping in the distance. No. 7 brings us a soaring melody which leads to glissando harmonics accompanied by a music box theme in the piano, and No. 8, sings the blues with a walking bass in the piano so elongated that it is not immediately recognizable.

Nos. 9-12 also seem to work in tandem. No. 9, tips its hat to a sprightly gigue of Bach but octaves at the lowest register of the piano lead maniacally to a cluster chord marked *fff*. From the ashes of the monstrous chord comes No. 10, the music box we heard earlier returns, and a macabre nursery rhyme is played *pizzicato* by the cello. Brief, but full of energy and heft, No. 11 acts as a buffer before No. 12, the final prelude of the sharp keys. Marked *legato, nostalgico*, the melody of No. 12 is exquisitely beautiful and fully exploits the vocal capabilities of the cello. Divided in two halves, the cello sings this melody first in the lower register, then in the highest register of the instrument. The second half repeats the melody, but Auerbach now directs the cellist to play *with a disturbing sound*. This timbral direction, as well as increasing chromaticism in the piano turn something that had been sweetly nostalgic into something uncanny and disconcerting.

Today's concert will present the first twelve of Auerbach's twenty-four preludes.

Frédéric Chopin, Cello Sonata in G Minor, Op. 65

Frédéric Chopin's Cello Sonata in G Minor underwent numerous revisions between 1846 and 1847. He was suffering from advancing tuberculosis and in the midst of a painful breakup with novelist, George Sand. But, despite his health and personal problems, or perhaps because of them, he wholeheartedly dedicated himself to shaping the work into something great. He wrote in a letter, "With my cello sonata I am now contented, now discontented. I discard it then pick it up again." Sketches show the extraordinary pains Chopin took in order to find the proper balance between the two instruments, as well as his commitment to mastering a genre he had not yet attempted for this instrumentation. Though the piano undoubtedly held the most important place in Chopin's heart, the cello was arguably a close second—of the mere five chamber works he wrote, three of them were written for cello and piano. This sonata was the last work published in Chopin's lifetime, and its premiere his last public performance before he died of tuberculosis in 1849.

The first movement, *Allegro Moderato*, is tempestuous and unabashedly romantic. Both piano and cello parts are meaty and virtuosic with significant technical demands for both performers. The piano begins the movement with a fragment of the first theme—a regal, solemn melody—but interrupts itself with a dazzling flourish before the cello takes over with a full statement of the first theme. A passionate

exchange between the instruments explores this first theme before a simple, hymn-like second theme quietly pulls the reins. Chopin's melodic writing in this movement is highly complex. Two, sometimes three melodies are played simultaneously, and the result is a texture that is full of color and sonority.

The triple meter and accented third beats of Chopin's *Scherzo*, give a subtle nod to the mazurka. A traditional folk dance from Chopin's native Poland. Chopin was well-acquainted with the dance—he composed fifty-eight of them. The trio section is a cantabile daydream which returns impishly back to the original mazurka.

At the core of the work lies the heartbreakingly tender *Lento*. For cellists, this movement is the true treasure of Chopin's sonata. An exquisitely beautiful melody is traded between the two instruments while a supportive cushion of harmony is provided by the accompanying instrument. Though it is too brief, the movement provides a welcome dose of sincerity and peace nestled among the tumult of the other movements.

Chopin's *Finale* brings to mind the excited agitation of a *tarantella*. There is an energy and seriousness to its first theme where stormy triplets seem at odds with the martial dotted rhythms and accompaniment. This theme turns into a lilting legato dance, and then we are greeted by a jovial melody of repeated dotted rhythms. It is this melody that will introduce the coda. Marked *dolce* at the outset, the coda escalates then calms before the final energetic phrase, marked *ff*, catapults us triumphantly to the end.

About the Artists

Cellist **Isabel Fairbanks** has performed as a chamber and orchestral musician throughout the United States, Canada, and Asia. Based in New York City, her most recent appearances have been at the 92nd Street Y, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, Merkin Hall, Boston's Jordan Hall, Le Poisson Rouge, as well as at the United Nations Friendship Summit.

Festival appearances include the Banff Centre Music Festival, Roundtop Music Festival, Tanglewood, Bowdoin International Music Festival, and the Orpheus Institute. Ms. Fairbanks is currently a doctoral student studying with Marcy Rosen at the CUNY Graduate Center and other primary teachers have included David Geber, David Soyer, George Neikrug, Mary Lou Rylands, and Andres Diaz.

Ms. Fairbanks has performed as a chamber and orchestral musician with many New York and Boston-based ensembles, including the Circe Ensemble, Philharmonic Orchestra of the Americas, the Salome Chamber Orchestra, Distinguished Concert Artists Orchestra, the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra, the Tertulia Chamber Music Series, and with members of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. She has been a finalist and prizewinner at the Montpelier Arts Center Competition as part of the Circe Ensemble, the New England Chamber Music Competition, and the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition. A passionate educator, Ms. Fairbanks teaches at the 92nd Street Y, the Point Counterpoint Chamber Music Camp, and the Artists' Program Chamber Music Festival.

Ms. Fairbanks received her B.M. from Boston University as a student of David Soyer and George Neikrug, and her M.M. from the Manhattan School of Music as a student of David Geber. She plays a cello made by Carlo Carletti in 1910.

Pianist **Zach Mo**'s wide-ranging performing and teaching engagements have taken him around the globe to Europe, Asia, as well as throughout the United States. He performs as solo recitalist, chamber musician, choral accompanist, and orchestral pianist. An avid teacher, Zach has served as faculty for music schools, festivals, and competitions, including the 92NY School of Music, Point Counterpoint, the Weill Institute of Music at Carnegie Hall, and the Fine and Performing Arts Department at Baruch College.

As a teacher, Zach Mo has instructed students of all ages and skill levels, from pupils of age three becoming newly acquainted with music to advanced pianists preparing for auditions and competitions. He has been invited to China as a guest instructor at the Piano Arts School in his home province of Hunan, teaching students and presenting recitals in Yueyang city's only music school. Zach has been teaching over 20 years and considers education the greatest gift a person can give. He views music as a medium through which a person can engage with an ever-deepening understanding of the mind, body, and the relationship between the two.

Mr. Mo is currently a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, studying under Alan Feinberg. He received his Master of Music degree from the Manhattan School of Music in 2008 under the tutelage of Daniel Epstein. He has also studied at Northwestern University, the Rimsky-Korsakov St. Petersburg State Conservatory, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he is the recipient of the Lucille Kimball Scholarship.