

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

May 20, 2024 6:00 p.m.

*Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall*



Aaron Wolff, cello  
Ryan Jung, piano

Sonata No. 2 in G minor, Op. 5, No. 2 (1796) Ludwig van Beethoven  
*Adagio sostenuto e espressivo – Allegro molto più tosto presto* (1770–1827)  
*Rondo. Allegro*

Three Romances for Violin and Piano, Op. 22 (1853) Clara Schumann  
*Andante molto* (1819–96)  
*Allegretto: Mit zarterm vortrage*  
*Leidenschaftlich schnell*

INTERMISSION

*Aşk Havası* (2001) Franghiz Ali-Zadeh  
(b. 1947)

Cello Sonata, Op. 65 (1961) Benjamin Britten  
*Dialogo* (1913–76)  
*Scherzo-pizzicato*  
*Elegia*  
*Marcia*  
*Moto Perpetuo*

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

Singing, sighing, crying, trying – this might be the darkest program I’ve put together. While much of it is in minor with lamenting or questioning motives, all of these works are tied together by their common struggle to find the “right notes.” These composers are not cluelessly groping in the dark, though. They’re grappling with a complex thought or feeling in its totality and fumbling along the way. I believe this is an unusually immediate listen because that search happens on the surface; not much decoding is required. My hope is that you have a sense of hearing these composers solve their compositional – and emotional – riddles in real time.

### **Ludwig van Beethoven: Sonata No. 2 in G minor, Op. 5, No. 2**

Ludwig van Beethoven was just shy of 25 years old when he composed his first two cello sonatas. Better known then as a virtuoso pianist, Beethoven clearly imagined himself at the keyboard for these pieces, and it shows: many have argued them to be piano sonatas with cello *obligato*. In contrast to the ebullient Sonata No. 1 in F Major, Op. 5, No. 1, the first movement of this Sonata is unambiguously forlorn, even tragic. Perhaps Beethoven was trying to flex his compositional acumen, proving he could do feverish pathos just as well as his famous flights of fancy.

An extraordinary 44-bar “Adagio sostenuto e espressivo” introduction is framed by high drama, cracking open with a bald g minor chord and concluding with a series of increasingly pregnant pauses in which the tension becomes almost unbearable. The following 500-bar “Allegro molto più tosto presto” is in gargantuan sonata form and visits a few different key centers. Like much of this program, the thematic content is largely scalar: hear the plangent falling line throughout the Adagio and the uneasy major rise-minor fall of the Allegro. The bombastic end of the movement finishes with a fermata bar of rest, asking the performers to hold the tension again. There are no uncertain terms here: this is serious business.

The cheeky opening of the “Rondo: Allegro” almost feels like amnesia, then. This movement full of arpeggiation in both instruments, but its primary thematic material also outlines scales, now with childlike excitement. As a rondo, it departs from the primary theme multiple times, always returning. It’s as though, having waded through murky waters of g minor in the first movement to no real avail, Beethoven decides that optimism is a choice, then assures himself of this through increasingly enthusiastic repetitions of the primary theme. An especially unbridled G major coda underscores this affirmation.

### **Clara Schumann: Three Romances, Op. 22**

Clara Schuman’s Three Romances, Op. 22 were some of her final works. Composed in the summer of 1853, their ideation collided with her husband Robert’s mental decline, who penned his own final works that year. Clara did not publish any original work after Robert’s passing a few years later, but she continued performing her contemporaries well into her 70s and kept his music alive through its performance, arrangement and preservation.

These musical vignettes are fundamentally tender in character, with each more urgent than the last. As a cellist, it’s hard not to notice a parallel narrative to Robert’s 1849 *Fantasiestücke*, which, despite the popularity of his cello arrangement, was also originally written for a different instrument: the clarinet. And while Clara’s Three Romances sparkle on the violin for which they were written, the additional depth from the cello gives body to her themes and their extrapolations.

In the first romance, “Andante molto,” light and dark cohabit. The piano’s inflects a Db major scale with a tritone and an Eb minor scale follows suit. The violin responds with an upward scale, tinged with chromaticism, before returning home to Db via half-step inflections. Minor and major are fully embraced as two sides of the same coin here, facilitating seamless slippages into neighboring keys. World-weary but good-hearted and conversational in nature, one could imagine Clara painting a scene in the living room with Robert. The second, “Allegretto: mit zartem vortage” opens in darkness, with a stubborn sense of hesitation. Before long though, it turns playful. This movement is similarly conversational and two-sided in nature, but on a larger scale than the first movement: instead of a continuously developing tonal world, it follows a clear A-B-A form with a major middle section.

By the third, “Leidenschaftlich schnell,” all inhibition has dissolved: Clara lays her heart on its sleeve. While the opening swirls with forward energy, a middle section is briefly grounded, even proud, before being carried away with lifted, ecstatic energy. At its close, the violin nearly trills into yet another key, but is brought back down to earth: while the flame of romance might keep burning, love – the choice of shared company – is content, peaceful. The piece closes with the simplest of cadences in the home key of Bb.

### **Franghiz Ali-Zadeh: *Aşk Havası***

Clara Schumann and Azerbaijani composer Franghiz Ali-Zadeh’s musical worlds are joined by their deep sense of yearning, and both composers worked as pianists and producers as much as composers. Clara Schumann was a famous prodigy whose seven-decade performing career shaped the modern piano recital, while Ali-Zadeh is responsible for bringing Western modernism to Azerbaijan, premiering work of not just Soviet composers like Schnittke and Gubaidulina but also Berg, Cage, Crumb, Messiaen and Schönberg.

Little has been written on Ali-Zadeh, whose music unfurls in repeated cells of dovetailing, ornamented themes. Her focus on small, repeated units of music is at once a Western contemporary trope as well as a hallmark of *mugham*, an improvisational musical form considered spiritual by Azeris. After completing her training in the Soviet conservatory system, Ali-Zadeh found her compositional voice at the intersection of Western and Azeri art music traditions.

*Aşk Havası* for solo cello is a lyrical and spacious exploration of the interval of the third: a question when rising; a sigh when falling. Its lyricism is underscored by vocalization – in several moments, Ali-Zadeh instructs the performer to sigh or hum. The gradual uncoiling of this work is a trademark of her style, indebted to the mugham tradition wherein songs build, slowly and improvisatorially, to a climax, through rising pitches and dynamics. It doesn’t finish so much as it evaporates into the atmosphere.

### **Benjamin Britten: Cello Sonata, Op. 65**

Benjamin Britten’s Cello Sonata opens with a series of attempts to find the right notes, before bursting into a bombastic *bariolage* – a combination of open strings and stopped notes to produce what translates as an “odd mixture of colors.” The closing theme of the exposition is polytonal: while the cello rises in B major, the piano descends in D major. Then they trade roles, with the piano ascending in D and the cello falling along the whole-tone scale. In their cyclicity, these two statements feel like Britten trying to steady the ship: there’s an underlying impatience and disorientation to this “Dialogo” from the off. The development sees the primary theme toughened with gruff outbursts before the piano takes a more melodic role, and the end of the recapitulation gives way to the phantasmal harmonic series of the cello’s open C string.

The second movement is entirely plucked: this “Scherzo pizzicato”, though playful on the surface, is unstable and prone to outbursts. Britten controls the texture remarkably well, featuring an especially charming passage with double-hand pizzicato on all four strings while the piano skirts around scale figurations. The closing theme from the first movement returns, making further case for it as a recalibrating figure. Other highlights include an unusual pizzicato phasing technique, and a Britten “cuckoo” – a birdlike falling third motive found elsewhere in his output.

Then, the dialogues and games stop yield to the first unbroken melody. Reminiscent of the Britten’s celebrated vocal music, the third movement is an “Elegia” with no known dedicatee. Given the five-movement structure of the Sonata and this movement’s gravity, it functions as the heart of the piece. Largely restrained, this line eventually boils over at a *largamente* climax. Continuing its stepwise motion, the cello jumps the octave to let out one of the purest pleas in Britten’s instrumental output.

This Sonata is in traditional four-movement sonata form, barring the inclusion of the “Marcia.” Born during the First World War and writing largely in the shadow of the Second, Britten was no stranger to military music. A self-proclaimed pacifist, most of his marches are ironic or parody, and this is no exception. The quintuplets that gently spur the Elegia into motion are now self-obsessed, warped, demented: there is an absurdism on display. Perhaps the Elegie is for a friend lost to the war, triggering an unwanted march scene in Britten’s mind. But again he steadies the ship: before long, the cello slips into the upper limits of its register, framing all as memory. Sliding harmonics and cascades of modal piano vanish into oblivion.

The final movement transforms the rhythmic march figure into the central, slithering beat of an uneven 7/8 pulse. This “Moto perpetuo” foreshadows the finale of his Suite No. 1 for Solo Cello, composed four years later, also for Rostropovich. Britten first met Rostropovich after a performance of Shostakovich’s Cello Concerto No. 1 where he was sat in a box with the composer. The DSCH musical cryptogram coursing through this movement is a nod to their matchmaker, most clearly heard at the end, where the cello and piano engage in a three-legged sprint to the finish line: a surprise C major chord. Perhaps it’s not the right notes, but the inevitable ones that win out in the end.

## About the Artists

Described by the Chicago Tribune as “a musician of quicksilver brilliance,” **Aaron Wolff** is a New York City-based cellist and performer active in solo, collaborative, and cross-disciplinary capacities. Aaron gave his Carnegie Hall debut in Weill Recital Hall as the winner of the 2023 Leo B. Ruiz Memorial recital. Other recent performances include collaboration with eighth blackbird, Beethoven’s Cello Sonata in A Major at Ravinia’s Steans Music Institute, and the premiere of Eric Montalbeti’s Quartettsatz at IMS Prussia Cove Open Chamber Music.

As a high school student of Natasha Brofsky, Aaron won First Prize in the Boston Symphony Concerto Competition, and as a college student of Darrett Adkins was winner of the Oberlin Concerto Competition. He has also been a prizewinner at the Schadt String Competition, Lillian and Maurice Barbash Bach Competition and Cleveland Cello Society Competition. He was a finalist in the 2021 Young Concert Artist International Auditions, and was one of four American candidates at the 2021 Geneva International Cello Competition.

Equally at home in chamber music, he has collaborated with A Far Cry, The Argus Quartet and the Boston Trio, and has spent return summers at Yellow Barn, the Perlman Music Program, and Lucerne Festival Academy. Aaron has also found creative outlets in acting – most notably in a lead role in the Coen brothers’ film *A Serious Man* – and in arranging and writing about music: he has provided string arrangements for Comedy Central’s *Broad City* and covered New York’s new music scene for the online journal *I Care If You Listen*.

Aaron received a B.A. in comparative literature and B.M. in cello performance from Oberlin College & Conservatory. He then completed Master’s degree at Juilliard, where he was a Kovner Fellow under Joel Krosnick, and an Artist Diploma under Tim Eddy and Fred Sherry. He is now pursuing a Doctorate of Musical Arts at CUNY: The Graduate Center, studying with violinist Mark Steinberg of the Brentano Quartet. Aaron plays an 1813 Thomas Kennedy cello made in London.

American Pianist **Ryan Jung** is a passionate soloist and chamber musician with a powerful commitment to new music. He has closely collaborated with renowned composers such as Tyshawn Sorey, Nico Muhly, Thomas Ades, Salvatore Sciarrino, Eric Tanguy, Yan Maresz, and Betsy Jolas. He has also worked with notable artists such as Richard Goode, Sō Percussion, and the Emerson String Quartet, and The Aeolus String Quartet. A recent prize winner of the 2022 Wadsworth International Piano Competition in Georgia, he also made his Lincoln Center solo debut in Alice Tully Hall performing Messaien’s *Sept Haikai* in 2021. He has performed at the world’s most prestigious festivals, including the Lucerne Festival in Switzerland, Music Academy in Santa Barbara, Prussia Cove in the UK, Aspen Music Festival, among many others.

Mr. Jung holds a Master’s degree from the Juilliard School, and a Bachelor’s from the New England Conservatory. He is currently pursuing his DMA at the Graduate Center at CUNY, studying with Jeremy Denk and Conor Hanick. Previous teachers include Hae-sun Paik, Hung-Kuan Chen, and Jerome Lowenthal. He currently resides in New York City and enjoys watching films, running, and playing competitive chess.