Program Notes: The Russian Cello

Notes on the program by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

(Born September 12/25, 1906, St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975, Moscow)

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

Composed: 1934

First performance: December 25, 1934, Moscow

Other works from this period: *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District,* op. 29 (opera) (1930–1932); Piano Concerto no. 1 in c minor for Piano, Trumpet, and Strings, op. 35 (1933); *Love and Hate,* op. 38 (film score) (1934); Symphony no. 4 in c minor, op. 43 (1935–1936)

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

When Shostakovich undertook the composition of a cello sonata for his friend and supporter Viktor Kubatsky during the early months of 1934, he had just vaulted to the forefront of Soviet music on the enormous success of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Audiences in Moscow and Leningrad filled every available seat at the work's performances for nearly two years and confirmed the words of one critic that the opera "could only have been written by a Soviet composer brought up in the best traditions of Soviet culture" and of others that it was "a triumph for Soviet music" and "a brilliant opera." During one period in 1935, *Lady Macbeth* played in three Moscow theaters simultaneously. The condemnation of the opera ordered by Stalin, who was enraged when he experienced for himself the work's powerful modernity and lurid depictions of murder and adultery late in 1935, would not come until the following year.

The first important work that Shostakovich composed after the premiere of *Lady Macbeth* in Leningrad on January 22, 1934, was his Cello Sonata, begun in Moscow and completed during a holiday in the Crimea just before his twenty-eighth birthday. (Solomon Volkov, the Russian musicologist who transcribed and published *Testimony,* the composer's memoirs, claimed that much of the work was sketched in Shostakovich's empty apartment during two sleepless nights after he had quarreled with his wife, who stomped off to Leningrad.) The sonata is built on a large, nearly symphonic formal plan and exhibits the juxtaposition of lyricism and acidulousness that characterizes Shostakovich's best compositions. The two lyrical flights that serve as the first and second themes of the opening movement's exposition are among Shostakovich's most unabashedly romantic melodic inspirations. The center of the movement, however, is much concerned with a somewhat premonitory repeated-note rhythmic figure, which the piano posits as a challenge to the songful nature of the cello's part. The order of the earlier themes is reversed upon their return in the recapitulation, and the movement ends with a rumbling ghost of the repeated-note motive from the development section. The second movement is a volatile scherzo whose central trio is marked by wave-form cello **arpeggios** in icy **harmonics.** The *Largo* is a deeply felt lament, solemn, almost tragic, in its emotion and darkly introspective in its harmony and instrumental coloring. The finale is a typically Shostakovian blending of the traditional, in its brilliant, energetic nature, clear texture, and rondo form, and the modern, in its cheeky main theme and acerbic, nose-thumbing chordal constructions.

LERA AUERBACH

(Born October 21, 1973, Chelyabinsk, Russia)

Sonata no. 1 for Cello and Piano, op. 69

Composed: 2002

Other works from this period: Violin Concerto no. 1, op. 56 (2003); *Suite Concertante* for Violin, Piano, and Strings, op. 60 (2001); *Serenade for a Melancholic Sea* for Violin, Cello, Piano, and String Orchestra, op. 68 (2002)

Approximate duration: 25 minutes

Lera Auerbach, a young artist with breathtaking creative gifts, is forging impressive parallel careers as a composer, pianist, visual artist, and poet. Born in Chelyabinsk, Russia, in 1973, Auerbach first appeared in public at age six, performed on national television at eight, and wrote a full-length opera four years later that was performed in Moscow. She toured throughout the Soviet Union, won several international piano competitions, and in 1996 was not only named Poet of the Year by the International Pushkin Society but also received the Weinberg-Vainer Poetry Prize presented by *Novoye Russkoye Slovo,* the largest Russian-language daily newspaper in the West. She has been living in New York since 1991, when, despite her youth and the separation from her family, she defected during a concert tour of the United States; she was among the last artists to defect before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Auerbach attended the Juilliard School, where she earned degrees in piano and composition, and the Hannover Hochschule für Musik and also studied comparative literature at Columbia University; her teachers included Einar-Steen Nøkleberg, Nina Svetlanova, and Joseph Kalichstein in piano and Milton Babbitt and Robert Beaser in composition. In May 1998, Auerbach became a recipient of the first Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans, the only artist among the twenty people chosen for that major grant, which recognizes and assists some of the most accomplished and deserving young people among recent immigrants and children of immigrants. In 2002, she was invited to serve on the fellowship's selection panel. In 2000 and 2004, Auerbach was Composer-in-Residence for the Brahms International Society and Foundation at Baden-Baden, where she lived and worked in Brahms's house. She has also held residencies at Gidon Kremer's Lockenhaus Festival in Austria, Deutschlandfunk (German National Radio), the Bremen Music Festival, the Pacific Music Festival (Japan), Les Muséiques Festival (Basel), and the Orchestra Ensemble Kanazawa (Japan). She was Composer-in-Residence with the Staatskapelle Orchestra as well as the Semper Opera in Dresden in 2011. Her other distinctions include the Hindemith Prize from the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival, Deutschlandfunk's Förderpreis, and selection as a member of the Young Global Leaders Forum by the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Lera Auerbach has composed nearly one hundred works, including chamber music, concerti, symphonies, operas, and ballets. Among her recent projects are the full-length opera based on her original play *Gogol,* premiered at Vienna's historic Theater an der Wien in 2011, and the two-act ballet *Tatiana,* after Pushkin's *Evgeny Onégin,* commissioned in 2014 by the Hamburg State Theater and the Stanislavsky Theater of Moscow. As a pianist, Lera Auerbach has appeared to great acclaim in Germany, Austria, Italy, France, Norway, Bulgaria, Russia, Panama, Mexico, Israel, and Switzerland and throughout the United States, as well as at leading international music festivals. Her accomplishments as a poet have kept pace with her musical ones: her writings have appeared in over one hundred Russian-language literary newspapers and magazines worldwide, and her published works include two novels and five volumes of poetry and prose. She was President of the jury for the 2000 International Pushkin Poetry Competition. David Dubal, Vladimir Horowitz's biographer, wrote of Lera Auerbach, "I have been in a constant state of amazement at her actual genius. She is a young woman who is part of the great humanist tradition... In short, Ms. Auerbach is a Poly-Artist, one that is more needed than ever in a society which has become skeptical about anyone who sees expression in all things."

Auerbach's Sonata no. 1 for Cello and Piano was composed during the summer of 2002 on a co-commission from Hancher Auditorium/the

**Bolded terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.*

University of Iowa and the Music in the Park Series, St. Paul, Minnesota, and dedicated to David Finckel and Wu Han. She writes:

> I was happy when David Finckel and Wu Han asked me to write a large-scale work for them. They form a very dramatic union, capable of captivating audiences with magnetic intensity and powerful interpretations. I was well aware of these qualities while writing the sonata.
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> In any performance there is an element of theater and drama. In this work, the instruments often play different roles and embody different characters even though they might be playing simultaneously. At times this coexistence is a dialogue, at times—a struggle or an attempt to solve inner questions.
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> I began working on the piece while reading Hermann Hesse's novel *Demian*. Although there is no direct connection and the work is not programmatic, perhaps some of the imagery from Hesse's novel may have infiltrated the writing, especially in the first movement—*Allegro moderato*—where I thought of a dance of Abraxas, a mysterious god who combines in himself both good and evil. The sonata starts with a violent and terrifying statement in the piano, full of inner tension. The cello's response is more human, desperate and questioning. The very first "calling" statement of the cello becomes a **leitmotif** throughout the piece. This introduction leads to a dark and strange waltz in 5/4—as if from the depths of the past, shadows have emerged. The second theme is both dreamy and passionate and leads to a fugal development with its dry twists.
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> In the second movement—*Lament (Adagio)*—the juxtaposition of characters is also present. The piano carries an inescapable, column-like chordal progression, while the cello's lamenting monologue is free and deeply human.
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> The third movement—*Allegro assai*—is a **toccata** with fiery syncopations and obsessive energy.
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> The last movement—*With extreme intensity*—may be one of the most tragic pieces I have written. It begins with the cello playing quarter-tone trills. The image I had in mind was of reaching a point in life where one stands at the very edge of the abyss, when nothing is left of the past or of the future and one is completely alone with one's trembling soul. Sometimes it is possible, through pain and tragedy, to find lost beauty and meaning—as it may release something in the soul that was aching to be freed. At the end, both instruments rise beyond the limits of their registers, as if entering a different kind of existence.

ALEKSANDR GLAZUNOV

(Born August 10, 1865, St. Petersburg; died March 21, 1936, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France)

***Chant du ménéstrel (Minstrel's Song)* for Cello and Piano, op. 71**

Composed: 1900

Other works from this period: *Romantic Intermezzo* in D Major for Orchestra, op. 69 (1900); Theme and Variations in f-sharp minor for Solo Piano, op. 72 (1900); Piano Sonata no. 1 in b-flat minor, op. 74 (1901); *March on a Russian Theme* in E-flat Major, op. 76 (1901); Symphony no. 7 in F Major, op. 77, *Pastoral'naya* (1902)

Approximate duration: 4 minutes

Aleksandr Glazunov was gifted with an exceptional ear and musical memory (after Borodin's death, he completely reconstructed the overture to *Prince Igor* from recollections of Borodin's piano performance of the piece), and he early demonstrated his gifts in his native St. Petersburg. By age nineteen, he had traveled to Western Europe for a performance of his First Symphony. During the 1890s, he established a wide reputation as a composer and a conductor of his own works, journeying to Paris in 1889 to direct his Second Symphony at the World Exhibition. In 1899, he was engaged as instructor of composition and orchestration at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. When his teacher, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, was dismissed from the conservatory staff in the wake of the 1905 revolutionary turmoil, Glazunov resigned in protest in April and did not return until December 14, by which time most of the demands by the faculty for the school's autonomy had been granted. Two days later he was elected Director of the conservatory. He worked ceaselessly to improve the school's curriculum and standards and made a successful effort to preserve its independence following the 1917 Revolution. In the final years of his tenure, which lasted officially until 1930, Glazunov was criticized for his conservatism (Shostakovich, one of his students, devoted many admiring but frustrated pages to him in his purported memoirs, *Testimony*) and spent much of his time abroad. In 1929, he visited the United States to conduct the orchestras of Boston and Detroit in concerts of his music. When his health broke, in 1932, he settled with his wife in Paris; he died there in 1936. In 1972, his remains were transferred to Leningrad and reinterred in an honored grave. A research institute devoted to him in Munich and an archive in Paris were established in his memory.

Among Glazunov's friends early in his career was the brilliant cellist Aleksandr Verzhbilovich (1850–1911), a graduate and later faculty member of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Principal Cellist of the Russian Imperial Opera Orchestra, and a member of the St. Petersburg String Quartet. He was also Tchaikovsky's confidant and performed with late-nineteenth-century Russia's finest musicians, including Leopold Auer, Anton Rubinstein, and Sergei Rachmaninov. In 1902 in St. Petersburg, Verzhbilovich became the first artist to make a commercial recording of any music by Bach with an arrangement for cello and piano of the *Air* from the Orchestral Suite no. 3 in D Major (**BWV** 1068). Glazunov wrote for Verzhbilovich the *Elégie in Memory of Liszt* (Opus 17) in 1887, the Two Pieces (*Mélodie* and *Sérénade espagnole*) in 1888, and the poignant *Chant du ménéstrel (Minstrel's Song)* in 1900.

SERGEI RACHMANINOV

(Born March 20/April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia; died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California)

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

Composed: 1901

Published: 1902

Dedication: Anatoly Brandukov

First performance: December 15, 1901, Moscow

Other works from this period: Suite no. 2 for Two Pianos, op. 17 (1900–1901); Piano Concerto no. 2 in c minor, op. 18 (1900–1901); *Variations on a Theme of Chopin,* op. 22 (transcription) (1902–1903); *The Miserly Knight,* op. 24 (opera) (1903–1905)

Approximate duration: 32 minutes

The absolute failure of Sergei Rachmaninov's First Symphony at its premiere in 1897 thrust the young composer into such a mental depression that he suffered a complete nervous collapse. His family, alarmed at the prospect of Sergei wasting his prodigious talent, sought professional psychiatric help. Rachmaninov's aunt, Varvara Satina, had some time before been successfully treated for an emotional disturbance by one Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a Moscow physician familiar with the latest psychiatric advances in France and Vienna, and she suggested the family consult him. Rachmaninov, who began treatments in January 1900, recalled years later:

> My relatives had informed Dr. Dahl that he must by all means cure me of my apathetic condition and bring about such results that I would again be able to compose. Dahl had inquired what kind of composition was desired of me, and he was informed

> "a concerto for pianoforte," which I had given up in despair of ever writing. In consequence, I heard repeated, day after day, the same hypnotic formula, as I lay half somnolent in an armchair in Dr. Dahl's consulting room: "You will start to compose a concerto—You will work with the greatest of ease—The composition will be of excellent quality." Always it was the same, without interruption. Although it may seem impossible to believe, this treatment really helped me. I began to compose again at the beginning of the summer.

The Second Piano Concerto was completed and launched with enormous success within a year; it was the first music to carry Rachmaninov's name to an international audience. In gratitude, the new work was dedicated to Nicholas Dahl. Full of confidence and pride, Rachmaninov immediately followed the concerto with a Sonata for Cello and Piano, written during the summer of 1901 for his longtime friend Anatoly Brandukov. Composer and cellist gave the first performance of the new sonata on December 2, 1901, in Moscow.

Rachmaninov's Cello Sonata is symphonic in its scope and its expressive ambition. The work opens with a large movement in sonata form prefaced by a dreamy, slow introduction. The cello states the lyrical main theme over a busy accompaniment, while the complementary melody, a simple, almost chant-like theme of touching simplicity, is initiated by the piano. Much of the development section is ingeniously extrapolated from a half-step motive first heard in the introduction. As is characteristic of several of Rachmaninov's large formal structures, the recapitulation emerges without pause or strong demarcation from the climax of the development. The whirling scherzo that follows presents some extremely challenging problems of bowing to the cellist, who, in compensation, is rewarded with two superb melodies—one serving as the second theme of the scherzo and the other as the principal theme of the central trio. The *Andante* is a wonderful, moonlit song of great warmth and nostalgia. The finale is another fully realized sonata form, with a second theme even more melodically ingratiating than that of the opening movement and a robust, invigorating coda.