The program notes were written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfilment of the requirements of their course.

Ces notes de programme sont écrites par l'étudiant-interprète et sont présentées en tant que réalisation partielle des critères de leur cours.

12 Variations on a Theme from Judas Maccabeus by Handel “See the Conqu’ring hero comes.” by Ludwig Van Beethoven

I would like to dedicate this first piece to my mother and grandmother. The original theme by Handel is included in Suzuki Book 1 for beginner cello. My mother plays the cello and is the reason I have come this far as a cellist, and my grandmother, who was a piano teacher and still plays the piano, is the reason classical music training is so important to my family. This piece, and more importantly the original theme, holds a special place in my heart and great meaning to my life as a cellist.

Beethoven composed this piece in 1796 while he was visiting King Friedrich Wilhem II in Berlin. This visit inspired a number of notable pieces for cello and piano, one of the most notable being the 12 variations on a theme by Handel, along with his first to sonatas for cello and piano.1 King Friedrich not only had a fondness for the cello, but also was an amateur cellist and patron of the arts.

The original theme from the opera Judas Maccabeus by Handel, has a standard ABA 3-part form, where the B section moves briefly into the minor mode. Beethoven’s variations do not alter the overall form of the piece, however they do change the tempo and time signature from one variation to the next. In addition, Beethoven treats the cello and piano equally, allowing each to be showcased in turn from one variation to the next. In variation 1 and 11 we can truly see that Beethoven was writing for his own hand. The first variation casts the cello aside, as the piano plays solo. The cello is featured in variation 7 with virtuosic triplets, finishing with an arpeggiated figure in the highest register of the instrument. In variation 11 the melody switches between both parts, however it is the piano which opens the variation with a poised, elegant, highly improvised and ornamental solo. The cello introduces the B section with a soul bearing forte-piano, truly reminiscent of the operatic character of this piece.

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor by Claude Debussy

Debussy wrote this piece in 1915, destined to be part of a collection of 6 sonatas for different instruments. The cello sonata was the first of the six. Sonatas 2 and 3 were for flute, viola, harp and solo violin. Debussy’s death in 1918 sadly ended the sonata cycle’s composition. The other 3 sonatas were intended to be for various wind and piano ensembles, and one other chamber ensemble.2

Debussy implores many extended techniques throughout this sonata which were innovative at the time, and still pertinent today. In addition, Debussy’s extreme perfectionism is evident in this piece. Every dynamic detail, every phrase mark and articulation is indicated in the score. An interesting aspect are Debussy’s bowings. Many of the bow markings in the cello extend throughout a bar, or half a bar. These markings can be considered as phrase indications, and are usually re-arranged in a way that enhances Debussy’s phrasing. The movement opens with solo piano. The melody is rhythmically strict, simple yet beautiful. Here, the dominant triplet figure, reoccurring throughout the sonata, is introduced. After the short conversational introduction by the piano, the cello interrupts with a cadenza-like section. This first movement, titled Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto, consists of free virtuosic passages with intermittent more rhythmical, yet expressive, sections.

The second movement, titled Sérénade: Modérément animé, is more of a lollipping movement, seemingly drunk, yet playful. The movement opens with a pizzicato introduction in the cello. Here, Debussy marks slurred pizzicato (a marking usually indicated for the bow). This technique is played while sliding the left hand up the cello, adding to the uneven character in this movement. The most challenging aspect in this movement are the constant tempo and character changes. Ensemble, as always, is important in a sonata, and the tempo changes along with many rubato sections, indicated in the score, can be a challenge to coordinate. Once again we hear the importance of the triplet figure, when it is played fast as an effect, or towards the end of the movement where the cello is plays slow shimmering triplets starting from a high F.


The final movement is titled Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux. Debussy’s use of changing characters is prevalent once again. However, it is much more fluid in comparison to the previous movements. The movement opens with rumbling anticipation spectacularly enhanced by subito forte and pianissimo dynamics, eventually climaxing to a carefree melody first presented in the cello and then in the piano. The middle section abruptly stands still as the piano plays slow triplets over the cello’s slow ascending notes. The movement ends with a return to the opening theme from the first movement, followed by a unison between the cello and piano. Throughout this movement the cello plays many pizzicato arpeggiated chords. It is important to note that Debussy takes care to indicate the direction in which to pluck these chords, in almost every instance.

**Le Grand Tango by Astor Piazzolla**

Piazzolla is known as the composer who reinvented the tango within the classical world. His compositions lead to a movement which revitalized Argentinian tango. His compositional styles first gained recognition in the US and France. His teachers, Ginaastera and Boulanger, encouraged him to include art music in Piazzolla’s compositions. The Argentinian Accordion, called the Bandonéon is a driving inspiration, and lends a folk-like character to Piazzolla’s compositions. Piazzolla himself played this instrument. An example of inspiration in *Le Grand Tango* is a grace note melodic unison figure played by both the cello and the piano. This happens twice in the piece.

Piazzolla composed *Le Grand Tango* in 1982 for Mstislav Rostropovich which he premiered in 1990. The composition consists of a single movement divided into 3 principle sections. The first section is marked tempo di tango and opens with a stately tango melody in the cello while the piano repeats a rhythmic motive. The 16th note flourish which is played throughout many transitional sections in this piece is reminiscent of the stopping soles of tango dancers. The second section has a much more relaxed tempo, marked libero e cantabile, literally meaning “free and singing”. This singing quality is introduced by the piano’s sultry tango melodies with an improvisatory feeling. The final section is fast and virtuosic, marked Giocoso, meaning playful. The improvisatory aspect of the music continues in this section, however the improvisatory aspect continues, with a more virtuosic flare (quarter note at 120 bpm). The piece finishes with octaves and double stops in the cello, moving into an exciting unison of the duo.

**Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor, Op. 40 by Dmitri Shostakovich**

During the summer of 1934, Shostakovich fell madly in love with a young translator named Yelena Konstaninovskaya. Although Shostakovich was married, it was an open marriage, and the composer spent the summer writing love letters to his mistress. During this compositional period, it can be noted that Shostakovich’s music was more melodic and romantic. The cello sonata in D minor is a prime example of this fact. The piece premiered in Leningrad on Christmas of 1934, with Shostakovich performing himself on the piano from memory.

A long Allegro non troppo movement opens this piece. The first melody and theme is presented in the cello part, and it conveys a passionate dark quality. The middle section of this movement has many intense climaxes enhanced with accents along with duples and triplets in both the piano and cello part. One of the most romantic themes written by Shostakovich is present in the development and returns in the coda. Its sweet longing melody slowly ascends and dies away into a fermata. The movement ends with a repetition of the first theme, but at a much slower tempo, and more static character.

The second movement is short and fast. It conveys an anxious and angry character, as the cello opens with a repeated and accented eighth note figure. This movement also presents a section with glissando harmonics, an unusual effect, will be heard twice in the cello part.

The third movement is in complete contrast to the second movement. It slowly creeps forward in the cello part as the piano plays pulsing rhythms, like a heartbeat. The rich melodies presented give a dark and emotional quality to the piece.

The fourth and final movement is puckish and edgy, a more usual character from Shostakovich’s compositions, moving away from the more emotional preceding movements. The movement opens with a march like “toy-soldier” character. The end of the movement has a walking quality to it, as the cello part strums along and dying away, concluding with an eruptive surprise ending.

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