

Nicolas Altstaedt with Fazıl Say

Friday, March 2, 2018 at 8:00 pm

This is the 807th concert in Koerner Hall

Nicolas Altstaedt, cello

Fazıl Say, piano

PROGRAM

Claude Debussy: Cello Sonata in D Minor, L. 135

- I. Prologue: Lent
- II. Sérénade: Modérement animé –
- III. Finale: Animé

Fazıl Say: *Dört Şehir (Four Cities)*: Sonata for cello and piano

Sivas
Hopa
Ankara
Bodrum

Leoš Janáček: *Pohádka (Fairy-tale)* for cello and piano, JW VII/5

- I. Con moto
- II. Con moto
- III. Allegro

Dmitri Shostakovich: Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Minor, op. 40

- I. Allegro non troppo
- II. Allegro
- III. Largo
- IV. Allegro

Claude Debussy

Born in St. Germain-en-Laye, France, August 22, 1862; died in Paris, France, March 25, 1918

Cello Sonata in D Minor, L. 135 (1915)

The First World War was a miserable time for Debussy. He was in his early fifties, weakened by cancer, and anxious about his son and other family members who were on the battlefield. For a year he was unable to compose. Then, in the summer of 1915, staying in Pourville, by the sea, he began again to ‘think in music’ and composed ‘like a madman.’ “I have finished *Douze Études* for piano, a cello sonata, and another sonata for flute, viola, and harp in the

ancient, flexible mold with none of the grandiloquence of modern sonatas,” he wrote to a friend. “There are going to be six of them for different groups of instruments.”

Of these six planned sonatas, only three were completed. All consciously reject the Austro-German romanticism that Debussy found so distasteful during the war. In them, he discovered his heritage in the music of the French keyboard composers of the 18th century. To emphasize the connection with tradition, he signed the sonatas, with national pride, ‘Claude Debussy, Musicien Français.’ The connection with the past is, perhaps, most apparent in the Prologue of the Cello Sonata, composed in a few days during late July and early August 1915. Melancholy at the outset, the music progresses with increasing nobility and eloquence; it is improvisatory in mood, with a constantly fluctuating time signature. In the *Sérénade*, marked *fantasque et léger*, ideas dart across the landscape, rather than be ‘developed’ in a traditional (Germanic) way. The finale follows without break, opening with the fiery bravura and passion of the Spanish *corrida* style. But not for long, as the mercurial changes of mood and image soon bring back the stately neo-baroque world of the opening. Debussy himself said that he liked the proportions and form of the sonata, “which is almost classical in the true sense of the word.”

Fazıl Say

Born in Ankara, Turkey, January 14, 1970

Dört Şehir (Four Cities): Sonata for cello and piano (2012)

Turkish composer and pianist Fazıl Say wrote this four-movement sonata to a *BBC* commission in 2012. In it, he explores personal memories and connections with four cities across Anatolia (Asia Minor), the Asian portion of present-day Turkey. Sivas in central Turkey, about 400 KM East of Ankara, is represented by Say’s variations on the song *Sazım* by the blind poet and songwriter Âşık Veysel, who died in 1973. Initially inward-looking and melancholy, the music becomes increasingly impassioned before culminating in muted, breathy sounds representing Veysel’s instrument, the lute-like *bağlama*. Hopa is the easternmost of the four cities, bordering Georgia and the Black Sea. Here, Say carries us to the exuberant, rhythmically-driven sounds of a wedding celebration dance known as a *Horon*, in 7/16 time. Ankara, Say’s own city, where he grew up until leaving for studies in Germany at 17, is the longest of the movements, at once nocturnal, mysterious, even ominous, with its percussive, recurring rhythmic ostinato. Its central section introduces a nostalgic reminiscence of the First World War protest song *Ankara’nın Taşına Bak*. For the finale, Say portrays the present-day tourist cacophony of Bar Street in Bodrum, on Turkey’s south-eastern Aegean coast. Wandering from *meyhane* to *taverna*, Say weaves in references to popular songs, culminating, as a note in the preface to the score indicates, “in an abrupt and absurd conclusion in its depiction of a pub brawl, as frequently experienced in this city.”

Leoš Janáček

Born in Hukvaldy, Moravia, July 3, 1854; died in Moravská Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, August 12, 1928

Pohádka (Fairy-tale) for cello and piano, JW VII/5 (1910 rev. to 1924)

Janáček wrote the first version of this short, attractive work in 1910. It is based on an epic folk poem by the 19th century Russian poet Vasili Zhukovksy, with the title *The Tale of Czar Berendey*. The traditional Russian fairy story also inspired Stravinsky’s ballet *The Firebird* in the same year. In a later version of the work, Janáček dropped the title and any attempt to portray the narrative. *Pohádka* is a modest programmatic sonatina without a program in which our interest is directed towards the mood of the story, its love and sorrow, passion and romance. The gently flowing piano phrases and pizzicato cello questioning that open the first movement portray the young lovers. A similar characterisation continues throughout, with the two instruments alternately circling and pursuing one another. The three movements are rhapsodic, full of echoes of Moravian folksong and the rhythmic patterns of Czech speech that so characterise Janáček’s mature music.

Dmitri Shostakovich

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

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Minor, op. 40 (1934)

Shostakovich wrote his Cello Sonata in the calm before the storm. He was just 27 when he began the work in August 1934, having already introduced audiences to his sardonic, effervescent humour, particularly with the First Piano Concerto. His opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* had begun a hugely popular, two-year run in theatres in both

Leningrad and Moscow, at one point playing simultaneously in three theatres in Moscow. When touring the completed sonata with cellist Victor Kubatsky, however, Shostakovich confronted Soviet officialdom head-on. After buying a copy of the state newspaper *Pravda* at a railway station, he read a long editorial denouncing *Lady Macbeth*. It was headed 'Chaos instead of Music' and Stalin's displeasure lay behind its savage denunciation of the composer. From this point on, Shostakovich's life was to change profoundly.

The cello introduces the long, seamless lines of the opening theme, while the second theme, initially presented by the piano, has an appealing melancholy. Both are tempered throughout by passionate development, with sufficient mystery and ominous repeated figures to let us know that Shostakovich has not quite let down his guard. The second movement is a volatile scherzo, with an earthy folk element – located a few degrees east of Mahler, perhaps. It is possible to hear premonitions of the composer's caustic wit in this music – though, today, it is hard not to view early Shostakovich through the lens of the persecution of the composer that lay ahead. The slow movement, the emotional core of the sonata, is a lament that reaches deep. Its music is sombre and introspective, brooding rather than tragic. When he wrote it, his wife Nina had taken off after a violent argument. He himself was involved in an affair with a translator who had been teaching him English. He had time to ponder events, both personal and political, as he worked on his sonata, first in a friend's vacant apartment in Moscow, then in the Crimea. The brief finale is more ambivalent. It juxtaposes the lyrical with the turbulent and its humour has an astringent edge.

- Program notes © 2018 Keith Horner

[Nicolas Altstaedt](#)

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Nicolas Altstaedt and Fazıl Say are making their Royal Conservatory debuts tonight.