

# THEMES & VARIATIONS

## ISIS TSE - CELLO

with Mathew Walton, piano  
&  
Etelka Nyilasi, violin | Abigail Spencer, piano

APR 10, 2015  
FRIDAY - 5 PM  
RECEPTION TO FOLLOW

STUDIO 2-7  
FINE ARTS BUILDING  
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA



## PROGRAMME

### Piano Trio in G Major

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

I. Andante con molto allegro

*with Abigail Spencer (piano) and Etelka Nyilasi (violin)*

### Cello Suite No. 2 in D Minor

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Prelude  
Allemande  
Sarabande  
Gigue

## INTERMISSION

### Variations on a Rococo Theme

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Thema. Moderato assai quasi Andante–Moderato semplice  
Var I. Tempo della Thema  
Var II. Tempo della Thema  
Var III. Andante sostenuto  
Var IV. Andante grazioso  
Var V. Allegro moderato  
Cadenza

*with Mathew Walton, piano*

### Cello Sonata No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 38

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

I. Allegro non troppo  
II. Allegretto quasi Menuetto  
III. Allegro

*with Mathew Walton, piano*

Born and raised in Edmonton, Isis Tse began her cello and piano studies at the age of seven. Isis is in her third year of the Bachelor of Music program at the University of Alberta, where she is currently studying cello with Colin Ryan. Performance scholarships received from the University of Alberta include the Peace River Pioneer Memorial Scholarship (2014, 2013), Frantisek Cikanek Memorial Award (2014, 2013, 2012), Margarita Heron Pine Lake String Award (2014), Beryl Barns Memorial Award (2014, 2012), and Hrapko Family Scholarship in Music (2012).

*This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Music degree in cello performance for Isis Tse.*

## **Mathew Walton, piano**

A doctoral candidate at the University of Alberta, Ontario native Mathew Walton completed his undergraduate studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, and graduate degrees in performance and musicology at the University of Ottawa. In 2013, he studied the performance of German lieder at the Franz-Schubert-Institut in Baden bei Wien, Austria. His areas of interest include the works of Franz Liszt, Frederic Rzewski, and Canadian composer John Burge. The winner of the University of Alberta's 2013 concerto competition, he performed John Burge's Prelude Variations with the University Symphony Orchestra in February, 2014. In addition to his solo work, Mathew is active as a collaborative pianist, and enjoys working with vocalists, instrumentalists, and choirs.

## **Abigail Spencer, piano**

Abigail Spencer grew up in the small town of Fairview, Alberta and then went on to complete an Associate of Arts at Pacific Life College in Surrey, British Columbia. She is currently in her third year at the University of Alberta where she is studying with Dr. Jacques Després for her Bachelor of Music in piano performance.

## **Etelka Nyilasi, violin**

Etelka Nyilasi is in her third year of the DMus program in Composition at the University of Alberta. She did her BMus at Wilfrid Laurier University, studying composition with Glenn Buhr and Linda C. Smith, and violin with Jeremy Bell. She then spent six years in the UK, where she achieved two MMus degrees, the first in Composition at the Birmingham Conservatoire, and the second in Middle Eastern Music Performance at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Etelka is also an avid violinist, violist and instrumental teacher.

## Piano Trio in G Major

Claude Debussy

Debussy composed this work in the summer of 1880 in Fiesole, Italy when he was eighteen years old. At the time, he was the musical traveling companion of Nadescha von Meck, Tchaikovsky's famous patroness. Most of the autograph material was thought to have been lost and was only discovered over a hundred years later, in 1982.

Even at this early stage in Debussy's life, his disdain for set structures is apparent. In most chamber works of the period, sonata form comprised at least one of the movements. However, none of the movements in this trio bear much resemblance to sonata form; the first movement alone contains four distinct themes. While the Trio sounds unlike the beloved music of his later period, it contains moments of melodic Romantic passion and the beginnings of his imaginative use of harmony and form.

However, in 1984, in a review of the first recording of the relatively obscure work, Harold Schonberg, music critic for *The New York Times*, offered this perspective: "The Debussy piece is juvenilia. You can have a lot of fun putting it on the turntable and asking your learned friends who the composer is. Nothing in the music suggests Debussy. It is sweet, sentimental, and sugared; it verges on the salon..." Its importance, he concludes, lies in the fact that it "demonstrate[s] that the great Debussy did not arrive on the scene fully formed."

## Cello Suite No. 2 in D Minor

Johann Sebastian Bach

Although the exact date of composition of the six Cello Suites is unknown, scholars believe that the suites were written around 1720, in the period when Bach was focused on instrumental music. Today, the suites are among the most familiar and beloved of Bach's works; however, the suites were not widely known before the 20th century and were generally believed to be merely technical exercises.

In 1939, Pablo Casals began the first-ever studio recording of the Suites, bringing them into mainstream cello repertoire. Each of the six suites contains seven movements: a prelude, followed by six dance movements – an allemande, courante, sarabande, either a pair of minuets, bourrées

or gavottes, and finally, a gigue. Casals' one-word characterization of Suite No. 2 was "tragic."

**Prelude:** as the only non-dance movement in the suite, the Prelude was traditionally used by performers to show their skills and improvise, as well as to establish the tonality of the ensuing movements. Bach goes far beyond merely establishing tonality; the Prelude, from its first phrase, establishes the mood of the entire suite that follows.

**Allemande:** originating in Germany but taken over by the French, the Allemande is a dance of moderate tempo. In these suites, the Allemandes are the most complex and highly developed of the dance movements; a short upbeat introduces a pattern of strong first beat, with weak second, and third and fourth beats leading back to the first.

**Sarabande:** originally a lively dance, popular in Spain, it evolved to become a slow court dance with its spread to France in the 17th century. The signature characteristic of the Sarabande is the strong second beat in triple meter. As the heart of each suite (fourth movement of a total of seven), Sarabandes are often played as the most introspective and expressive of the movements.

**Gigue:** originating from the British jig, it was imported into France in the mid-17th century. It was probably not used as a court dance; rather, it is a lively folk dance. Despite the darkness associated with the key of d minor, the Gigue brings the Suite to an uplifting, confident close.

## Variations on a Rococo Theme

## Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Though one would never infer it from the music itself, Tchaikovsky wrote the Rococo Variations during a time of grievous depression. His fourth opera had been what the composer called "a brilliant failure". Moreover, Eduard Hanslick had just published his notoriously vicious review of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto: "[it] confronts us, for the first time, with the hideous idea that there may be compositions whose stink one can hear."

The Rococo theme was composed by Tchaikovsky himself. Rather than

recreating the musical style of the Rococo period of the 18th century, Tchaikovsky seems to draw on its courtly charm. The term “Rococo” in the title of these variations may refer to its 19th-century meaning of “old-fashioned.”

A brief introduction prepares the presentation of the theme by the soloist, a tune of immaculate symmetry. The orchestra appends a coda in a more personal, chromatic style that is to be a regular feature of each variation.

**Variation 1** builds features using decorative triplet elaboration and is accompanied by the theme in the orchestra.

**Variation 2** introduces a faster motion and shorter phrases in dialogue. The chromatic bridging tune is drawn out.

**Variation 3** brings us to familiar Tchaikovsky territory: expressive, lyrical and quintessentially Romantic.

**Variation 4** returns to the original key for a *grazioso* version of the theme; the cello plunges into its low register for a series of trills, only to skip up to its highest range and slip back into the theme again.

The flute introduces **Variation 5**, which gives the soloist a stream of trills and brilliant passages before leading into the cadenza.

## **Cello Sonata No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 38**

**Johannes Brahms**

When the Sonata was published in 1866, it was the first of the secretive composer’s duo sonatas that he made public.

“Hardly ever again did Brahms write such a movement as the first,” wrote Walter Neumann, “so rich and fervent in its inspiration, both human and spiritual, or such an unalloyed record of intimate emotion.” The first movement, written in sonata form, begins with a mournful theme in the cello. A figure of interest in this opening theme is the minor sixth figure in the second bar, with its semitone rise and fall (B-C-B) - a figure that, as H.C. Colles writes, “practically all the development of the idea dwells on.” The movement ends with a “sunset” E major coda that transports us

away from the mournful minor key of the beginning.

The associations between the two themes of the movement are founded on varied repetitions of shared motivic elements, in which certain features of the first theme remain in the second theme, while others do not. This relationship emerges as part of a gradual process of “developing variations”. Developing variations is a term by Arnold Schönberg, who used the term to analyze the music of Brahms; Schönberg described it as the constant modification of motives and ideas in a theme.

The first movement is linked to the other two movements chiefly through the dominance of the expressive minor sixth that makes its first appearance in the second bar of the work, and continues throughout the sonata. The second movement, a minuet and trio, seems to pay nostalgic tribute to the world of classical Mozart. The last movement, a mixture of fugue and sonata form, takes its main theme from Contrapunctus 13 from the Art of Fugue – as if Brahms is looking further backwards in time as the sonata moves forward.

The sonata was dedicated to a good friend of Brahms’s, Dr. Josef Gänsbacher, who was an amateur cellist. In the course of a private performance for an audience of friends, Brahms played the piano so loudly that Gänsbacher complained that he could not hear his cello at all - “Lucky for you, too,” growled Brahms, and let the piano rage on.

*Programme notes by Isis Tse*

***Special thanks to my teacher Colin Ryan for his guidance, knowledge and support; to pianist Mathew Walton, who has been my go-to collaborative artist for these past few years; and to chamber coaches Dr. Patricia Tao and Yue Deng for their expertise.***