

## Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Isserlis & Shih dazzle at Disciples (Feb. 27)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Rarely has a recital program packed Disciples Christian Church with as much excitement or as many people as on Tuesday, February 27. Happily, cellist Steven Isserlis and pianist Connie Shih more than lived up to expectations.

The program, presented by the Cleveland Chamber Music Society, included highlights of 20th-century Russian cello repertoire — sonatas of Shostakovich, Kabalevsky, and Rachmaninoff, plus one unsung gem by the cellist's grandfather. Mstislav

Rostropovich — the late-great cellist-progenitor for a large swath of modern cello works, including the Kabalevsky — seemed to hover as inspiration and patron saint.

Isserlis, who adopts the posture and breathing habits of a singer, produced a voluptuous tone, a range of colors, and a princely demeanor from the start. Shih was the ideal collaborator, an eloquent and graceful player in her own right, with a massive technique.

The concert began with the Shostakovich, whose opening notes are a test of nerves for any cellist — quiet, slow, and exposed. Isserlis ably seized this moment and others, as he moved from tension to irony, anguish to elegance, brooding to frenzy. Shih dazzled in the fireworks of sixteenth-notes that interrupt the otherwise routine finale.

“Kabalevsky gets a rough ride, nowadays because of his compliance with the Soviet regime,” Isserlis has written. “But what a composer!” This performance certainly convinced. Kabalevsky wrote his Cello Sonata for Rostropovich in 1962. It's an ambitious 30-minute piece that begins like a quiet, sad song, the performers exchanging

languid philosophies. Shih and Isserlis captured the bottled-up intensity of the first movement and the humor of the second — a ghostly dance of unsure steps — as well as the *perpetuum mobile* of the third. Shih drove the momentum with tireless fingers.

The *Ballade in a*, written by Julius Isserlis, is similar in form to the Ballades of Chopin. It's a miniature that reflects 19th-century ideals (melodic and succinct), but Isserlis and Shih also revealed attributes of early 20th-century Russian style: lyricism, poetry, and warmth.

The cellist's gorgeous legato was on full display in the Rachmaninoff, a piece for which his expressive gifts seemed preordained. Shih was a full partner in the organic give and take, willing to follow Isserlis into the dark shadows and cavort in the relative sunshine. The Andante gave license to the cellist to flaunt an even, supple timbre, and Shih glittered in the scherzo and finale, without overpowering her colleague.

Isserlis' own arrangement of a romance by Scriabin, written with either solo cello or horn in mind, was the satisfying encore. As a bonus, the cellist told us that before the First World War, Scriabin had recommended his grandfather Julius for an American concert tour — a hidden connection to the rest of the program.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 4, 2024.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)