

Stupendous Steven with his Strad

On Friday, music lovers were privy to a stupendous concert given by British born cellist Steven Isserlis and Singapore born pianist Melvyn Tan who received rapturous applause and a standing ovation from the small but most appreciative audience. This was the third concert in the Sixth Pharos Chamber Music Festival taking place in the Royal Manor House, Kouklia this year. They began with the *Sonata For Cello And Piano In D Minor* which Debussy wrote in 1915 and dedicated to his daughter Emma. From the outset, this marvellous duo who frequently perform together produced a perfect synergy from the quality of sound, to the tightness of their ensemble playing and not least to the superb music making. The strong chords in the beginning formed the basis with the shaping of the phrases made not only by Isserlis' left hand but also with his bow arm, where his varying speed and pressure of the bow created a beautiful palette of colours and images. The jazz like pizzicato chords of the second movement were always driven forward by both Tan and Isserlis but never rushed, the spaces of Debussy ever present.

The Britten *Suite No 3 For Cello Op 87* (solo) was preceded by a short explanation from Steven Isserlis about the work to complement the extensive programme notes, and to mention that he doesn't like all the cello suites by Britten, but holds the *Third Suite* close to his heart.

He also reiterated the friendship between Britten and Shostakovich and that both composers worked closely with cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, to whom Britten dedicated his *Third Suite*.

Steven Isserlis' playing is technically superlative, and I can categorically state that there was not one note out of tune the entire concert. But it is his musicianship, and his outpouring of feelings and emotions during his playing which makes him such a special artist. This is instantly clear even to those who are not musicians – the audience was held in rapt attention throughout this concert.

Following the interval was Schumann's *Romances for Cello and Piano* where both Isserlis and Tan had the opportunity to showcase the cantabile qualities of their instruments. The Strad which Isserlis plays is on loan from Japan and

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resounded beautifully in the Royal Manor House, considering it was not designed as a concert venue! Tan is a supreme pianist and a sensitive accompanist who had a palpable musical accord with his partner. It was in the final work of the programme, Beethoven's *Sonata For Cello And Piano In A Major Op 69* that he had a more equal role. His scale passages were crystal clear, his phrases carefully thought out, and the pedalling just right for the acoustics and genre of the work. This favourite of the Beethoven cello sonatas was warm and expressive,

and magnetic in its high-powered intensity which was stylistically perfect as were all the other works in the programme. The technical hurdles were seemingly effortless, and visually, it was as if Isserlis became the great composer himself, wrapped around his beautiful Strad. This concert was full of charisma and exhilaration and I think that it is a tragedy that so few people living in Cyprus attended. Those who did not attend missed the rare opportunity to hear these two committed and phenomenal artists.

By Saskia Constantinou



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