

Interview: Steven Isserlis

The virtuoso believes his instrument is superior to all others, but wants more pieces to play.

By Jessica Duchon, September 2, 2010



Stephen Isserlis is planning a memorial concert at the Wigmore Hall for his wife, Pauline, who died of cancer earlier this year

Steven Isserlis is probably Britain's best-loved and most highly respected solo cellist. At 51, with his distinctive mop of curls and a family tree that takes in figures as diverse as Rabbi Moses Isserlis, Felix Mendelssohn, Karl Marx and Helena Rubinstein, he has been at the forefront of British musical life over several decades.

As a cellist his tone is remarkable - indeed, unmistakable: he has long preferred to use gut strings, which give his sound a burnished, soulful timbre rather than the harsher, sock-it-to-'em quality of the metal strings employed by most big-time soloists.

That tone should be employed to ideal effect on Sunday afternoon, when he will appear in this year's Free Prom, a recreation of the Last Night of the Proms of 1910. Isserlis will give the premiere of *Dark Pastoral* by David Matthews, based on the surviving fragment of Vaughan Williams's long-lost cello concerto.

"We've lost an incredible amount of cello music," Isserlis says. "Two Haydn concertos at least, a Mendelssohn concerto, a Brahms duo for cello and piano, some Schumann, some Shostakovich. As cellists we can't afford to lose all that - the

repertoire is not so huge. So when we have, as we do, four or five minutes of really beautiful music in Vaughan Williams's handwriting, it's a pity to waste it."

Backstory

Born: London, December 1958.

Family: Father a keen amateur violinist, mother a piano teacher. Grandfather one of the first 12 musicians allowed to leave the Soviet Union to promote Russian culture

Career: Internationally acclaimed, award-winning soloist and chamber musician. Specialises in reviving neglected works. Artistic director of the annual International Musicians Seminar in Cornwall

Personal life: Wife Pauline died in June of cancer. One son

He will also play a rarely-heard rondo by Dvorák. "It's one of the most difficult pieces I know," he laughs. "I recorded it with the pianist Stephen Hough and I remember thinking: 'Thank goodness I'll never have to play that again!'"

Isserlis was born into a musical family in south-west London. "My mother played the piano and my father played the violin," he recalls. "My elder sister played the piano though she's now a professional violist, and my middle sister plays the violin. So a cello was needed."

But even if the choice of instrument was not initially his own, he would not change his cello now. "The only problem is that I'd have liked 32 Beethoven sonatas. As an instrument, I don't think any other even comes close to the cello."

A local teacher offered to give the young Steven lessons for three months. "I refused to play on the right side of the bridge, so they decided I wasn't taking it seriously and made me give up. Then I started again. And this time I was hooked."

The family's musical lineage goes back further than Isserlis's parents. His grandfather, the celebrated pianist, composer and teacher Julius Isserlis, was among the first dozen Soviet musicians to be allowed out of Russia by Lenin to tour. "The intention was to spread the word about what a wonderful place the Soviet Union was," says Isserlis. "But as none of them ever went back, it didn't do the USSR much good."

His grandfather, with Isserlis's father as a small boy, sought lodgings in Vienna in 1923. "He was shown around a flat by a 102-year-old landlady, who was very friendly and ruffled my father's hair. But when my grandfather explained that he was a musician, she said: 'Oh no, I hate musicians'. Why? 'Because when I was a girl, my aunt had a musician lodger, a filthy old man who used to spit on the floor, and I hated him. His name was Beethoven!'"

It is not only Beethoven whose life starts to feel closer around Isserlis. There is a tremendous immediacy about his CD, *ReVisions*, works for cello and orchestra by Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev and Bloch. The title refers to the fact that each has been orchestrated by someone other than the composer.

The Debussy Suite was the disc's original *raison d'être*. "I knew Debussy had written a suite for cello and orchestra when he was very young, but only one or two movements

survived, in versions for cello and piano," Isserlis explains. "Then I heard an orchestral piece by [British composer] Sally Beamish and enjoyed her use of the instruments. I asked her to arrange the existing pieces and add others that Debussy wrote around the same time. Now the Suite has really caught on - I'm performing it loads of times."

The CD's conductor, Gábor Takács-Nagy, is among several great Hungarian musicians and close friends who, Isserlis says, have been some of his most crucial influences. Others include the violinist and conductor Sándor Végh and, in Isserlis's own generation, the pianist András Schiff. What is it about the Hungarian musical tradition that he admires so much?

"It's the simplicity of approach - it's very direct," Isserlis says. "You don't look outside the music. You just explore what the composer wrote and why he wrote it." Isserlis met all his Hungarian colleagues at the International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove in Cornwall, formerly under the artistic direction of Végh. Isserlis took on the directorship after Végh's death. "We cultivate the same approach," he says. "We don't talk about projection, career or success. We just try to look inside the music."

Back in London, Isserlis is currently artist-in-residence at the Wigmore Hall, a venue he adores and terms his "musical home". The residency includes recitals and chamber music, but also educational events, with a lecture ("Only my second lecture ever!"), masterclasses and concerts for children.

Music for children is a special enthusiasm. Isserlis has written some very successful - and very funny - books to introduce youngsters to the great composers, *Why Beethoven Threw the Stew* and *Why Handel Waggled his Wig*. And he has collaborated with composer Anne Dudley on three musical fairytales: *Little Red Violin*, *Goldpegs* and *the Three Cellos and Cindercello*.

On a more sombre note, both the *ReVisions* CD and *Dark Pastoral* are dedicated to the memory of Isserlis's wife, Pauline, who died earlier this year after a long battle with cancer. A memorial concert is planned for next summer with Isserlis joined by luminaries including Schiff and the violinist Joshua Bell. Isserlis says the composer John Tavener is planning to write a piece in her memory. The rallying round of musical friends proves how much love and good will exist towards the Isserlis family. It is there for a good reason.

'ReVisions' is on BIS records. *Last Night of the Proms 1910* is at 2.30pm on Sunday. Free entry. bbc.co.uk/proms