

On Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2021 an audience of 40 witnessed and acclaimed the third programme in our 2021 Season, supported by the Countess of Munster Trust, who do so much to bring high quality recitals to local music clubs. Leo Popplewell (cello) graduate of Clare College Cambridge and The Guildhall School of Music and Drama and Antonina Suhanova (piano) Latvian by birth and also a Guildhall graduate, gave a programme of three contrasted cello sonatas: Beethoven no. 3 in A major Opus 69; Debussy cello sonata, and after the interval Rachmaninov in G minor opus 19. Opening the recital Leo stated that they were his favourites, and they were certainly played with panache, complemented by the clarity of Antonina's lucid accompaniment. The sound of Leo's Guaneri cello resonated against the rounded tone of the Club's 1898 Bechstein grand. The pair provided excellent introductions to each item, personalising their programme in a manner that would have been impossible in a larger venue. Howgills invariably adds value with its acoustic immediacy.

Beethoven's Third cello sonata is the flourishing 'middle period' pivot between his early Opus five pair, where the cello role is somewhat tentative and the concentrated form of the late Opus 105 pair. Leo commended the 'glimpse of paradise' in the second subject of Opus 69's opening movement, underlined by observing the first repeat, and the swerve into the minor key in the development. The double scherzo and trio was relished by both players. Leo also drew attention to the lack of a specific slow movement, with an *adagio cantabile* (literally singing) 'bridging piece' that the composer also used in his fourth Piano Concerto, heralding the finale.

The Debussy sonata was his last composition before his death in 1918. Leo told us that an early literary appraisal suggested that the three concise movements portray a narrative of 'Pierrot's anger with the Moon'. I feel that the piece rather has a brittle clarity of oriental porcelain and an emergent modernism, matched by the lucid partnership of the players.

After a 'dry' interval, came the Rachmaninov cello sonata opus 19. This had been written during the composer's recovery from a nervous breakdown, brought on by the failure of the premiere of his First Symphony, indifferently conducted by the composer Alexander Glazunov. The sonata followed on from the Second Piano Concerto opus 18. In the 1940s critics after the composer's death suggested that the sonata was a 'piano fantasia' with a redundant cello part. The performance we heard, and the introduction by Leo and Antonina, proved how wrong that summary verdict was. It brought a rousing end to a superb recital.

Since the concert the Government has announced the possibility of more stringent lockdown policies due to the spread of the Omicron variant. We will keep you informed about the effect of these on our 2022 concerts.

Mervyn Miller, Letchworth Music Committee