

Virtual Lunchbreak Concert

Catherine Strachan, cello and David Hammond, piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): Rondo from Sonata op. 5 no. 2 for cello and piano

Adrien-François Servais (1807-1866): Souvenir de la Suisse, op. 10

People often picture Beethoven as a tragic figure, suffering with his deafness and struggling unhappily through life, lonely and bad-tempered. However, this piece shows a very different side to him. When he wrote his first two cello sonatas, Beethoven was a young man of 25, busy making a name for himself in Vienna as a pianist and composer. He wrote these pieces while he was visiting Berlin, where he performed them with the cellist Duport at the court of King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia. In a smart political move, the young composer dedicated the sonatas to the king, who was a keen amateur cellist. On leaving Berlin, he was rewarded with a gold snuffbox filled with louis d'ors.

The Rondo we are performing today is the final movement of the second sonata. The sonata begins in G minor but by the time we get to this movement we have reached a sunny G major, full of fun. These are the first sonatas for piano and cello where the two instruments are treated as equal partners rather than solo and accompaniment. If anything, the cello plays more of an accompanying role than the piano; you can hear that this music was composed by a virtuoso pianist!

Adrien-François Servais was a Belgian cello virtuoso who became one of the foremost cellists of the 19th century. He composed many works for the cello and played a huge part in establishing it as a solo instrument in its own right. Berlioz once described him as “the Paganini of the cello”. Servais toured all over Europe and composed pieces for himself to perform based on popular tunes at the time, as well as several “Souvenirs” of various places using local musical styles, presumably to please the local audiences.

Souvenir de la Suisse is described as a “Caprice” by the composer. It is loosely in the form of a theme and variations, with a long and dramatic introduction before the theme appears. In the music we hear hints of Swiss mountain landscapes with yodelling and alpenhorns (we have added a little extra percussion of our own in today’s concert – surely Servais would approve!).