



# LORD OF THE STRINGS

The cellist Steven Isserlis is celebrating a landmark birthday with a feast of Fauré, Schumann and Shostakovich, played with friends, he tells *Hugh Canning*

I am a chamber musician who plays concertos." So says the British cellist Steven Isserlis when we meet in December, the day after his 60th birthday party. The living room of his house in West Hampstead is strewn with the aftermath: balloons, presents, wrapping paper.

He emerges, understandably dishevelled, his trademark mop of curls only lightly sprinkled with salt and pepper. He doesn't really look his age as he faces a punishing schedule of national and international touring in his 61st year. The music website Bachtrack recently named him one of the five busiest cellists in the world. He takes it all in his stride.

This month, he plays a beloved work by a favourite composer, Schumann's Cello Concerto, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican; there are repeat performances in Birmingham with the CBSO two weeks later. His Schumann/Fauré Project at Wigmore Hall – in which he plays late chamber works with a dazzling array of international musical friends – continues in March, with further concerts in April and June.

He also has a new disc out next month with one of his regular pianists, the Finn Olli Mustonen, playing a programme of Russian works: the Shostakovich Sonata, Prokofiev's Ballade and the Sonata of Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904-87), a late "Romantic" among Soviet composers, whom Isserlis has significantly championed.

He recorded the Shostakovich Sonata with Mustonen about 20 years ago, but the other works are new to his discography. "For once there are a couple of pieces I learnt specially for the record, which is rare. The Kabalevsky sonata is a wonderful piece, written for Mstislav Rostropovich. It's an early-1960s or late-1950s piece – I should know, as I wrote the sleeve notes – and it's powerful music.

"It's less of an original voice than Prokofiev or Shostakovich, but not much. I suppose his reputation has been tarnished by being too close to the Soviet regime. Michael Berkeley met him in Moscow and told me he was charming, whereas Tikhon Khrennikov [secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers and the bane of Shostakovich and Prokofiev's lives in the 1940s] was horrible!"

Isserlis can't compare the number of pieces he has premiered with Rostropovich's 100 or so, but several of the new works he has championed have proved their durability. "When I talk to

composers, I say the cello is basically a lyrical instrument – John Tavener [whose *The Protecting Veil* Isserlis launched in 1989] needed no encouragement, and Gyorgy Kurtag recently wrote a short piece for my 60th birthday. I only had a week to learn it." It was the third piece written for him by the Hungarian composer, widely regarded as one of the world's most individual voices.

Isserlis admits he is never happier than when collaborating with other musicians, especially in chamber music. For the past 10 years, he has accompanied other soloists, but not, he says, as a conductor. (He "accompanies" Radu Lupu, a favourite pianist, in Mozart piano concertos this June.)

"I direct from the cello. I can't conduct, so I say to the orchestra, 'Let's do this as chamber music.' I rehearse and talk a lot, and when it comes to the concert, it seems to work. Sometimes you do need a conductor, but that's not going to be me."

Isserlis's collaborative approach derives from his musical family. Both of his string-playing sisters, Rachel (violin) and Annette (viola), have been regular musical partners since they were children, so presumably he grew up with a love of "family" music-making that now extends to a wider circle of friends.

"Absolutely. It's all chamber music to me, because I've grown up playing with my sisters. For my party, they played a version of *Happy Birthday* with quotes from 20 string quartets!"

He calls Wigmore Hall's Schumann/Fauré Project, begun last year, his

"comfort zone". "I'm obsessed with both of them, especially Schumann's late music. It has been trashed over the years, partly because Clara, his wife, tore up some of his late masterpieces. She didn't want to be reminded of her husband's madness, with which they were inextricably associated in her mind. The last five cello Romances are completely gone, no sketches, nothing, survived. But you can understand her – what a nightmare to watch her husband go mad."

Most music lovers of my, and Isserlis's, generation have lived with the "received wisdom" that Schumann's late Violin Concerto lay unperformed because it was the product of a deranged mind. Yehudi Menuhin rediscovered it in the 1930s and planned to give its first public performance – it had languished in the Prussian State Library, in Berlin, since the composer's death in 1856 – but the Nazi government insisted that a German, Georg Kulenkampff, should premiere the work in Berlin in 1937. "It's a work of genius!" Isserlis asserts with persuasive certainty. Yet it remains a specialist piece, championed only by a handful of international virtuosos, although performances and recordings have become more frequent in recent years.

Another beloved project is his cycle of all the Beethoven Sonatas and Variations, with Robert Levin on the fortepiano. "This year we're doing them at the Chipping Campden festival, a beautiful village with a beautiful church, in May. We've done them a lot together – Chicago, Tokyo, New York, Florence. I do them as often as possible."

Isserlis famously strings his instrument with old-fashioned gut, rather than the usual steel, to produce a less macho sound, one that suits the delicacy of the fortepiano; and he uses his "Bach" bow, the lighter of the two he owns. "It's actually an early-19th-century bow, perfect for Beethoven."

He won't, it seems, be using it for Bach's Cello Suites, another staple of the repertoire, which he has decided to keep for private contemplation. "I don't think I'll play them on stage again – too scary. I did a cycle in New York, Krakow and the Casals festival, and thought, 'No, I'd rather be on stage with someone else, it's too nerve-racking.' I play them all the time, but no more, I think, in public." ■

*Shostakovich & Kabalevsky: Cello Sonatas is out on Hyperion on Feb 1*

## BEST OF ISSERLIS ON DISC

**Elgar, Walton** Cello Concertos  
*Hyperion*

**Bach** The Cello Suites *Hyperion*

**Debussy, Bridge, Fauré, Webern**  
The Cello in Wartime *BIS*

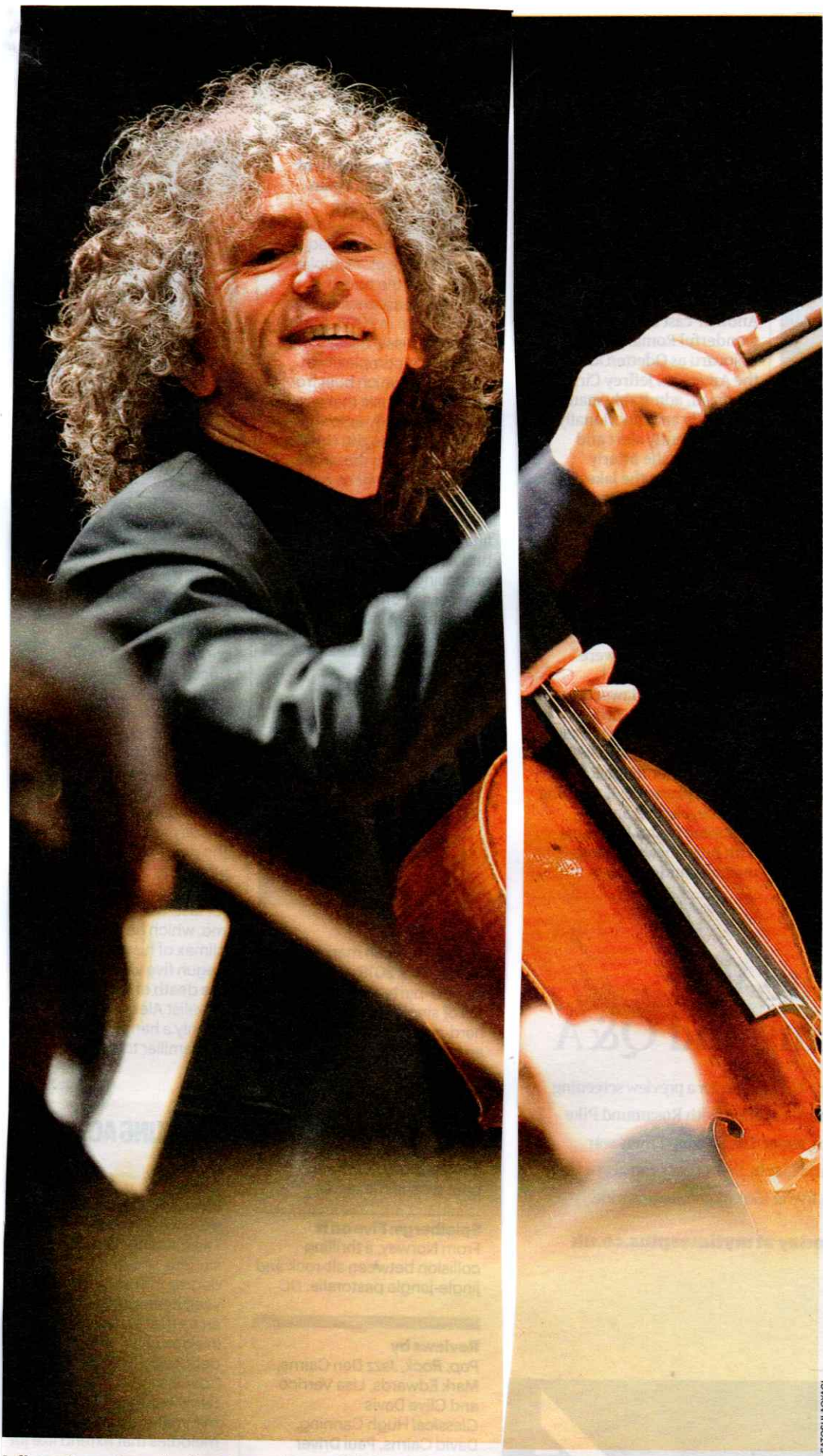
**Beethoven** Cello Sonatas, Horn Sonata, Variations *Hyperion*

**Schumann, Fauré, Tavener** The Complete RCA Recordings *RCA*

**Tavener, Britten** The Protecting Veil, Cello Suite No 3 *Virgin Classics*

**For the Love of Brahms** *Sony*





SATOSHI AOYAGI

I direct from the cello. I can't conduct, so I say, let's do this as chamber music' Steven Isserlis on stage