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Estos artículos y entrevistas son de distinguidos músicos. Aquí se desvelan sus pensamientos, especialmente acerca de los intérpretes en los que se han inspirado, y las influencias en su estilo y buen hacer.

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INSPIRATIONS

Meet the Artist – Steven Isserlis, cellist

AUGUST, 2025

Steven Isserlis touches upon a theme which is very important for today's musicians, and it is an area which unfortunately is often overlooked! Many thanks to Steven for permission to reproduce this....

The 'accompanying' myth

“Long time no rant – in fact, I can't remember when I last wrote about music per se {on this page}. I've written too many farewells – and alas, there are several more I could write now. But instead, I want to rant today about something that frequently disturbs me in all sorts of musical performances: the sense that there is a 'soloist' and there are 'accompanists', and never the twain shall be equal. I'm talking here not only about duos (though there are countless instances of solo-ego duo distortion), but also about larger-scale works, especially concertos.

But let's talk first about duo sonatas (as I've probably done before – once I've ranted, I tend to forget what I've just ranted about): for a start, it bothers me hugely when string players talk about 'my pianist' – as if the unfortunate keyboard player was a sort of pet! Well, I suppose it's OK if the pianist then talks about 'my violinist' or 'my cellist' or whatever – but that doesn't seem to happen nearly as often. At least it's better than 'my accompanist'. I'm not always a fan of politically correct naming – I tend to agree (in many instances) with Kermit from the Muppet Show, who confesses to be quite happy being referred to as a frog, rather than an Amphibio-American; but I do approve of the relabelling of 'accompanists' as 'collaborative pianists'. Preferable – if a little less than snappy.

Anyway, the title isn't THAT important. Much worse is when string players strut onto the stage, never allowing the pianist to enter first on any curtain call, and acting as if this were a solo recital with piano in the background. This inequality is then frequently reflected in both the aural and visual aspects of the performance itself. The aural is more important, naturally; but the visual matters too. Recently, I was rather shocked to see an extremely talented young musician playing duo sonatas from memory. I tasked him/her with it later - only to be told that the management had insisted on it! No comment.

(I do have to put in the proviso here that there are a few duos - such as Schubert's Arpeggione sonata or Schumann's Fantasiestücke op 73 - where the lack of page-turn opportunities make it necessary for an Ipad-phobe such as myself to play from memory. But these are rare exceptions.)

Of course, many people - especially those brought up in the Russian-Soviet school - would object to my objection. But for me, the sight of a duo played from memory by one player but not the other gives a distorted impression.

Enough about the visual, however. Far more disturbing is the fact that too many musicians fail to get to know the other parts of the work they are playing, whether it be in a duo, an ensemble work or a concerto. As I'm sure I've said here before, that's like learning one part in a play and not knowing what the other characters are doing or saying. In other words - it's pretty meaningless. And if they don't know the other parts, it's a given that won't be listening to them.

Obviously, concertos are slightly different, because the composer refers to a 'soloist'; but that by no means implies that that 'soloist' plays the principal voice at all times. What concerto of any musical value does not contain a story shared more or less equally by the soloist and the different instruments of the orchestra? And that must be reflected not just in the balance of sound, but also in how the 'soloist' plays the 'accompanying' passages. (Sorry - too many inverted commas; but you get my point, I hope.)

To take just a couple of excerpts from famous concertos – first the solo violin’s trill in the first movement of the Beethoven violin concerto (ex 1):



Here even the most ego-deluded violinist would have to admit that the first subject, heard in the orchestra, is the principal voice, the ‘tune’; but not only is the trill often played too loudly, but there are all too many instances where it’s obvious that the triller isn’t actually listening to the orchestra. Why should he/she? It’s boring to have to play second fiddle, as it were. Hmmm...The trill should gently follow the shape of the melody; if the violinist is truly immersed in the music, that will happen naturally. It mustn’t sound like an ‘idea’, of course – NOTHING should ever sound like a pre-fabricated idea; but it should sound as if the trill is alive, part of the story – not just a trill, in fact!

Somewhat similarly, the following passage from the Dvorak cello concerto can bring out the worst in a performer (ex 2):



How many times does one hear a cellist scrambling his or her way through this, trying to show off? Again, the singing line is actually in the woodwinds, who are playing a beautiful melodic line, taking up something of the mood – albeit at a faster tempo – of the gorgeous melody that the cellist has just played. Dvorak’s original cello part consisted of simple 16ths; the rewritten triplets – no doubt the suggestion of his cellist friend Wihan – should retain that simplicity. Their function is to aid the flow and follow the contours - and above all, not to destroy the atmosphere - of the woodwind line.

Finally (sorry – I know that I sound unnecessarily disapproving, but I’m just trying to make a point) two openings (or near-openings) of concertos where the solo instrument certainly DOES have the principal voice:

Mendelssohn’s violin concerto (ex 3):



The image shows a page of musical notation for Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, first movement. The tempo is marked "Allegro molto appassionato". The score includes staves for Violino (Violin) and Pianoforte (Piano). The violin part features a prominent melodic line, while the piano accompaniment provides harmonic support with rhythmic patterns.

And Schumann's cello concerto (ex 4):



The image shows a page of musical notation for Schumann's Cello Concerto, first movement. The tempo is marked "Nicht zu schnell. (♩ = 120)". The score includes staves for Violoncell. (Cello), Fl. (Flute), and Pianoforte (Piano). The cello part has a melodic line, and the piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic texture. A "Solo" marking is present above the cello staff.

In both these excerpts, the orchestra is certainly playing a supporting role; but nevertheless the violinist and cellist (respectively) absolutely have to listen, to respond, to shape their phrases and rubato around the orchestra, so that the underlying rhythms can be played naturally. These rhythms are the heartbeat powering the singer of the melodies; an irregular heartbeat is not a good sign of health, musical or otherwise. Furthermore, who says that the heart ‘accompanies’ the body? It is an essential component, which makes life possible; we ignore it at our peril!

Besides, immersing ourselves in the score as a whole makes any performance so much more enjoyable for all involved! I can’t imagine how boring it would be just to take ‘my interpretation’ of a work from orchestra to orchestra, and not to respond to how the first oboe, the first clarinet, the first flute, has played a melody that I then take up. Other musicians appreciate it when we listen to them, as we appreciate it when they listen to us; it brings the whole experience to life. Listening to others is a win-win proposition, in fact!

Rant over – for the moment...”



Acclaimed worldwide for his profound musicianship and technical mastery, British cellist **Steven Isserlis** enjoys a distinguished career as a soloist, chamber musician, educator, author and broadcaster.

As a concerto soloist he appears regularly with the world's leading orchestras and conductors, recent engagements including performances with the Berlin Philharmonic, Budapest Festival, Philharmonia, Cleveland, Minnesota, Zurich Tonhalle and NHK Symphony Orchestras. He gives recitals every season in major musical centres, working with pianists such as Jeremy Denk, Kirill Gerstein, Stephen Hough, Alexander Melnikov, Olli Mustonen, Mikhail Pletnev, Sir Andras Schiff, Connie Shih, Ferenc Rados and Dénes Várjon; and plays with many of the world's leading chamber orchestras, including period-instrument ensembles. Unusually, he also directs chamber orchestras from the cello, in classical programmes.

As a chamber musician he has curated series for many of the world's most famous festivals and venues, including the Wigmore Hall, the 92nd St Y in New York, and the festivals of Salzburg and Verbier. These specially devised programmes have included 'In the Shadow of War', a major four-part series for the Wigmore Hall to mark the centenary of the First World War and the 75th anniversary of the Second World War; explorations of Czech music; the teacher-pupil line of Saint-Saens, Faure and Ravel; the affinity of the cello and the human voice; varied aspects of Robert Schumann's life and music; and the music of Serge Taneyev (teacher of Steven's grandfather, Julius Isserlis). For these concerts Steven is joined by a regular group of friends who include the violinists Joshua Bell, Pamela Frank and Isabelle Faust, violist Tabea Zimmermann, and clarinettist Michael Collins.

He takes a strong interest in authentic performance, and in addition to working with many of the foremost period instrument orchestras he frequently gives recitals with harpsichord and fortepiano. Together with Robert Levin, and using original or replica pianos from the early nineteenth century, he has performed and recorded Beethoven's complete music for cello and piano; and with Richard Egarr he has performed and recorded the viola da gamba sonatas of J.S. Bach as well as sonatas by Handel and Scarlatti.

He is also a keen exponent of contemporary music and has premiered many new works, including John Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* (as well as several other pieces by Tavener), Thomas Adès's *Lieux retrouvés*, Stephen Hough's *Sonata for Cello and Piano, Left Hand (Les Adieux)*, Wolfgang Rihm's *Concerto in One Movement*, David Matthews' *Concerto in Azzurro*, works for cello and piano by Olli Mustonen, and *For Steven* by György Kurtág.

Writing and playing for children is another major interest. Steven Isserlis' books for children about the lives of the great composers – *Why Beethoven Threw the Stew* and its sequel, *Why Handel Waggled his Wig* – are published by Faber and Faber. He has also written the text for three musical stories for children – *Little Red Violin*, *Goldiepegs and the Three Cellos* and *Cinderella* – with music by Oscar-winning composer Anne Dudley; these are published by Universal Edition in Vienna. He has also given many concerts for children, for several years presenting a regular series at the 92nd Street Y in New York. As an educator Steven Isserlis gives frequent masterclasses all around the world, and for the past eighteen years he has been Artistic Director of the International Musicians' Seminar at Prussia Cove in Cornwall, where his fellow-professors include Sir Andras Schiff, Thomas Adès and Ferenc Rados. As a writer and broadcaster he contributes regularly to publications including *Gramophone*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, has guest edited *The Strad* magazine, and makes regular appearances on BBC Radio including on the *Today* programme, on *Soul Music*, as guest presenter of two editions of *Saturday Classics*, and as writer and presenter of a documentary about the life of Robert Schumann.

His diverse interests are reflected in an extensive and award-winning discography. His recording of the complete Solo Cello Suites by J.S. Bach for Hyperion met with the highest critical acclaim, and was *Gramophone's Instrumental Disc of the Year* and *Critic's Choice* at the Classical Brits. Other recent releases include Prokofiev and Shostakovich concertos with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony and Paavo Järvi; Dvorak Cello Concertos with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Daniel Harding; the complete works for cello by Beethoven with Robert Levin on fortepiano, selected for the *Deutsche SchallplattenPreis*; and recital discs with Richard Egarr, Stephen Hough, Thomas Adès and (for BIS) a Grammy-nominated album of sonatas by Martinů with Olli Mustonen. Future releases for Hyperion include the Elgar and Walton concertos, alongside works by Gustav and Imogen Holst, with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Paavo Järvi.

The recipient of many awards, Steven Isserlis's honours include a CBE in recognition of his services to music, and the Schumann Prize of the City of Zwickau. He is also one of only two living cellists featured in *Gramophone's Hall of Fame*. He gives most of his concerts on the Marquis de Corberon (Nelsova) Stradivarius of 1726, kindly loaned to him by the Royal Academy of Music.

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