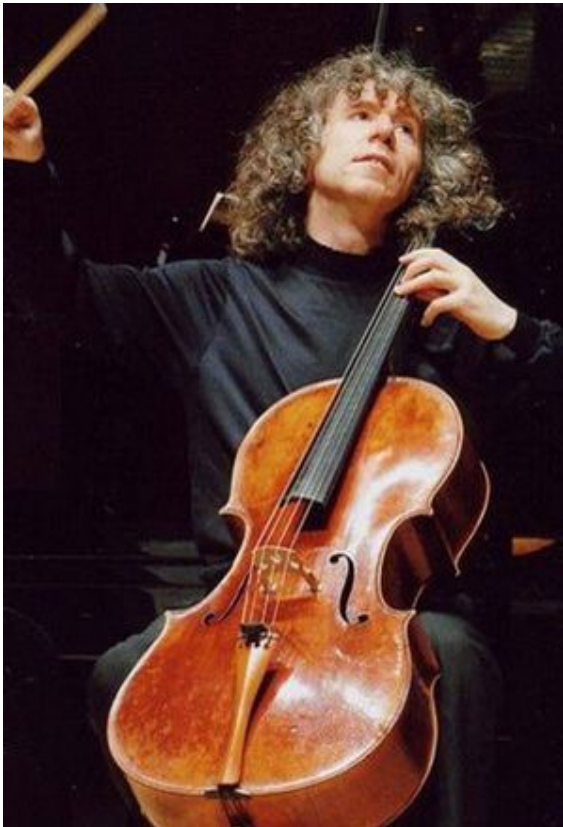


Steven Isserlis, Viviane Hagner, Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, Wigmore Hall, London

(Rated 5/5)

Reviewed by Jessica Duchon

Tuesday, 16 November 2010



Moments of perfection are rare, but you know one when you find it. In the opening concert of cellist Steven Isserlis's Saint-Saëns, Fauré and Ravel series, it was the quietest, most modest piece that stopped the breath. Who would have thought that Fauré's little Berceuse could house that much magic? Isserlis, cradling his muted cello, made it speak with an ineffable fusion of

beauty, truth and love. I reckon Fauré himself would have been moved to tears.

The same probably couldn't be said of Saint-Saëns's nightmare mother. Isserlis treated us to a letter in which she threatened her son (in his thirties) that if he did not play his concert well she would disown him – and she wasn't joking. When she declared the last movement of his Cello Sonata No 1 "worthless", he meekly wrote another. As an addendum to the Sonata, Isserlis and his fabulous pianist, Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, offered the original finale – apparently the first time it has been heard since 1873. It's charming.

Isserlis poured into the Sonata itself three parts melodrama, two parts good fun and one part sheer delight. Bavouzet was everything a great French pianist should be, with limpid touch, dazzling fingerwork and a palette of myriad colours.

Viviane Hagner, a promising German violinist, completed the trio; she was at her best duetting with Isserlis in the Fauré Trio. Too many performers treat Fauré with kid gloves, but Isserlis knows better, instead offering sensuality, gutsiness and something made of fire and light that resembles a state of grace. The slow movement built in Proust-like exploratory paragraphs towards its moment of clarity; the finale became a flight of dazzling energy, Bavouzet's cascades propelling it skywards. Fauré once wrote that music exists "to carry us as far as possible above reality". This did. I floated home.

The series continues on 19 November