

Steven Isserlis finds his voice

By Jessica Duchen

Friday, 21 October 2011



Much-loved: British cellist Steven Isserlis

There's only one sound as beautiful as the human voice, says Steven Isserlis, and that is a cello. It has a similar expressive capability, but a much bigger range. And when the voice and cello, are combined, each enhances the other. That's the idea behind his forthcoming series of three Voice and Cello concerts at London's Wigmore Hall next month, in which the much-loved British cellist is joined by friends from the worlds of song, new music and early music to explore composers' multifarious responses over the centuries to this luscious sonic cocktail.

"I've had the idea for the series for years," says Isserlis. "I'm always collecting any songs I can find with cello obbligato – I pounce on them because I think voice and cello sound so wonderful together." It's a vital chance for him to extend that repertoire, too. The second concert features a brand new song cycle, specially commissioned from James Francis Brown: settings of poems by, surprisingly, the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns. "I'd come across the poems by Saint-Saëns before, but I used to think that if they were any good he'd have set them himself. But then I thought maybe not – it might have seemed a bit self-regarding – so I asked James to have a look at them and he picked three to compose." And the result? "It's a fantastic piece. I'm dead impressed."

The final concert may be the most popular: it features Baroque music, including Handel and Purcell, with the tenor Mark Padmore centre stage. But the first programme is perhaps even more fascinating. It's devoted to matters Russian and includes rare works by Borodin and Taneyev, plus the British composer John Tavener's settings of the poetry of Anna Akhmatova – "one of his most beautiful pieces," says Isserlis.

Steven Isserlis, Voice and Cello Series, Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020 7535 2141; www.wigmore-hall.org.uk) 1, 3 and 11 November