

CLASSICAL

Steven Isserlis & Robert Levin

Queen's Hall



If there were ever any doubts that a whole concert of Beethoven cello music might prove too much of a good thing, the joyful, exuberant and thoroughly intelligent playing of cellist Steven Isserlis and fortepianist Robert Levin soon dispelled them entirely. It was the first of the International Festival's two

recitals covering the composer's complete music for cello and keyboard from the duo – and their clever pacing of light and shade, humour and seriousness across the recital made for instructive and entertaining listening.

They attacked sets of variations on Handel and Mozart with high-flying fantasy and a glorious sense of freedom, and Isserlis turned Beethoven's own transcription of his Op. 17 Horn Sonata into music that sounded utterly idiomatic on the cello. "That's only half of it!" was the cellist's good-natured

comment to the audience following premature applause half-way through the Sonata in F, Op. 5/1 – but his playing in the first movement had been so witty and virtuosic that clapping felt like the only thing to do. They closed with a sublime A major Sonata, Op. 69, tender, thoughtful and thoroughly lyrical. Just one nagging puzzle: Levin's instrument – a somewhat jangly, percussive fortepiano from 2009 – sounded rather at odds with the depth and richness of Isserlis's resonant playing.

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