

Tommy Mesa, Cello, and Michelle Cann, Piano

New Orleans Friends of Music, Tuesday, April 14, 2026

PROGRAM

Sonata for Cello and Piano in D Minor (L. 135) Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

1. Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto
2. Sérénade: Modérément animé
3. Final: Animé, léger et nerveux

Mensajes del Agua Andrea Cassarubios (b. 1988)

Sonata for Cello and Piano Kevin Day (b. 1996)

1. Allegro Agitato; Rhythmic
2. Lento
3. Giocoso

Intermission

Sonata for Cello and Piano in G Minor (Op. 19) Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

1. Lento; Allegro moderato
 2. Allegro scherzando
 3. Andante
 4. Allegro mosso
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PROGRAM NOTES

by Marc Loudon

Board Member Marc Loudon provides these program notes in advance of each concert. These contain more detail than those in the program.

[*Note:* Performance links provided in these notes are generally available *YouTube* links that in some cases start with advertisements. You can skip the ads by clicking on the “Skip” message that will appear on the lower right of the video after a few seconds. You can avoid the ads completely by subscribing to YouTube Premium.]

Claude Debussy composed the **Sonata for Cello and Piano**, published in 1915, as the first in a project to compose six sonatas for various instruments. (Only three were completed—the second, for viola, flute, and harp in late 1915, and the third, a violin sonata, in the winter of 1916–1917.) All of the sonatas were “offered in homage to Emma-Claude Debussy by her husband.” This is the first chamber work that Debussy had written since his string quartet of 1893. Since 1910, when Debussy had been diagnosed with cancer, he had composed little, and the six-sonata project had been encouraged by Durand, his publisher. This technically difficult sonata has become regarded as one of the masterpieces of the cello repertoire.

This sonata is not the impressionistic Debussy of *La Mer*, or “Afternoon of a Faun,” or *Clair de Lune*. Rather, it is a Debussy who claims that he is harking back to the style of the French baroque, but, to our ears, is looking forward to the more adventurous music of the late twentieth century.

The opening movement is marked “sustained and very resolute.” In this sonata we hear Spanish elements; the opening of the first movement in the piano reminds us of a Spanish guitar. The slower sustained sections alternate with more animated passages. The movement ends with a very soft *lento* section that concludes with an open fifth played by the cellist in harmonics.

The last two movements are played without pause. The second movement opens with an extended section played *pizzicato* on the cello, reminding us of the strumming on a guitar. In a slower section, marked “Nearly slow,” the cellist is instructed to play a short passage *flautando*, which is a rarely heard bowing technique in which the rapidly moving bow, applied near the base of the fingerboard, barely touches the strings and elicits a flute-like sound from the instrument. A long, sustained “A” by the cello, accompanied by occasional soft, tonally unrelated, staccato strokes in the piano, leads directly to the Finale, marked “animated, light, and nervous,” which features highly virtuosic playing by both instruments that is reminiscent, at times, of “Minstrels” in the Debussy *Préludes* for piano. This is interrupted by a *lento* section marked *molto rubato con morbidezza*—“very flexible, smoothly, with tenderness”. This leads to a section in the original animated tempo in which the cello plays a long passage of rapid staccato triplets. This section concludes with violent, *pizzicato*, four-note chords in the cello, then a cello cadenza, then a return to the animated tempo, which ends the movement suddenly.

The following link leads to a stunning performance of the Cello Sonata in d minor by Sol Gabetta, Cello, and Bertrand Chamayou, Piano, from the 2019 Solsberg Festival.

[Performance of the Debussy Sonata for Cello and Piano in d Minor](#)

Andrea Casarrubios is a Spanish cellist who became known principally as a performer, but who has devoted an increasing amount of her time to composing. Her works have been programmed



by Carnegie Hall, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra, National Philharmonic and the Sphinx Organization, and have been broadcast on NPR, as well as on national radio stations in Argentina, Brazil, France, Sweden, Australia and Spain. **Mensajes del Agua** (Messages from the Water), as the title might suggest, is slow, dreamy and impressionistic work from her album *SEVEN*, which was nominated for a Latin Grammy Award.

The link leads to a performance of “Mensajes” by the composer herself. You will need a subscription to Spotify to play the link.

[Andrea Casarrubios performing her Mensajes del Agua](#)

Kevin Day (b. 1996) is an award-winning multi-disciplinary composer and conductor based in Las Vegas, Nevada. His bio states that his music is “a vibrant exploration of diverse musical



traditions from contemporary classical, cinematic, jazz, R&B, Soul and more,” and that his music “takes inspiration from a broad range of sources, including romanticism, late 20th century music, jazz fusion and gospel.” In addition to his work as a composer, Day also enjoys an active career as a jazz pianist.

Dr. Day currently works as Artist Teacher in Residence of Composition at the Keys Conservatory at Pinecrest Academy Sloan Campus in Henderson, Nevada. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree in Performance from Texas Christian University, a Master of Music degree in Composition from the University of Georgia, and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Composition

from the University of Miami Frost School of Music.

The **Sonata for Cello and Piano** is a three-movement work with an impressionistic flavor. In the first movement, an agitated, rhythmic figure in $5/4$ alternates with a slow waltz. At times, the $3/4$ meter of the waltz is retained as a more agitated passage is superimposed. The second movement begins as a beautiful, slow, lyrical song in triple meter. The gentle lyricism becomes increasingly passionate, then resolves back into the slow, meditative, conclusion with the cello playing its final notes in harmonics. In the third movement, a rapid galloping triplet figure in the piano introduction is picked up by the cello. This leads to a cello cadenza, followed by a rapid, rhythmic section in triple meter. Various highly rhythmic episodes with triple meter and occasional quintuple meter alternate with more lyrical passages, and at one point the galloping rhythm of the initial theme is imitated by bow tapping on the cello body. A passionate waltz brings the movement to an exciting close.

The following link leads to a performance of the Kevin Day sonata by Tommy Mesa and pianist Vivian Fan at the Colburn School of Music in Los Angeles.

[Performance of the Kevin Day Sonata for Cello and Piano](#)

After the failure of the premiere of his First Symphony (Op. 13) in March 1897, **Sergei Rachmaninoff** suffered a psychological collapse and produced no major compositions while appearing in a number of concerts as an opera conductor. Just as he was finally beginning to recover from his ordeal, in January 1900 he once again lost confidence after receiving harsh criticism for one of his songs. Relatives decided to introduce Rachmaninoff to the neurologist Nikolai Dahl. Between January and April 1900, Rachmaninoff underwent hypnotherapy and daily supportive therapy sessions with Dahl that were specifically structured to reignite his desire to compose. That summer, Rachmaninoff felt that “new musical ideas were beginning to stir,” and he successfully resumed composition.

This new burst of compositional energy resulted in a number of enduring works—among them the famous second Piano Concerto (Op. 18) and the Opus 19 **Sonata for Cello and Piano**. There is a clear resemblance in the lyricism of these two works. Although the reputation of the cello sonata may suffer from fewer public performances than the concerto, it is an equally great masterpiece. (Our Louisiana Philharmonic opens the fall season with the Op. 18 concerto. Therefore, we are privileged to hear both of these works this year.) Rachmaninoff the pianist was

not about to subjugate the piano to a secondary role in the sonata; rather, the pianist and cellist are equal partners in this monumental work, which is a technical *tour de force* for both instruments.

Rachmaninoff dedicated the sonata to the eminent Russian cellist Anatoliy Brandukov, who gave the first performance in Moscow with the composer himself playing the fiendishly difficult piano part. Although 14 years older than the composer, Brandukov and Rachmaninoff were nevertheless great friends. The cellist was Rachmaninoff's best man at his wedding, and the two of them gave numerous concerts together.

When he wrote this marvelous sonata, Rachmaninoff surely could not have known that this would be his last chamber music work. From that time on, he would only dedicate his skills to solo piano pieces, and the larger scale orchestral and choral pieces. So, this is a piece to be discovered and treasured as representing both a beginning and an end to a phase of Rachmaninoff's career, as well as a testimony to a fine musical friendship.

As is typical of many sonatas of the romantic period, the sonata is in four movements. The first two notes of the first movement—a rising minor second—imply the hidden word “Warum?” (German for “Why?”). This “Warum?” motif appears frequently in this movement in different forms. The second movement, a scherzo in form, is anything but playful: with its minor key and galloping triplets, it is reminiscent of the ghostly song *Erlkönig* of Schubert. This terrifying theme is interrupted with lyrical sections in major keys. The movement ends as the excitement of the initial idea fades into nothingness. The third movement, in E-flat major (the relative major of the C minor key of the previous movement), is a beautiful “song without words,” with long phrases building to the expressive climaxes that we have come to love in Rachmaninoff's other works of the period. The G major key of the final movement conveys a sense of triumph. Near the end of the movement, there is a sudden hush as descending rolled chords in the piano evoke the carillons of Russian Orthodox churches. As the church bells fade, the movement concludes with 24 measures of a thundering *vivace* flourish.

The following link leads to a 2020 performance of the sonata by Gautier Capuçon, Cello, and Nikolai Lugansky, Pianist, at the Moscow Philharmonic Society

[Performance of the Rachmaninoff Sonata for Cello and Piano in G Minor](#)