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Cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han made a fine pair Friday at the Library of Congress.

Cellist David Finckel

Half a century neatly separates the three Russian cello sonatas played by David Finckel and pianist Wu Han Friday at the Library of Congress.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's Cello Sonata, from 1901, is filled with grand gestures and sweeping melodies. Finding balance between the two instruments can be problematic, since the commanding piano part can easily chew up scenery. But Finckel made this a cellist's sonata. With his rich, cocoa tone, Finckel turned Rachmaninoff's luxuriant themes into arias. His graceful flight up to the pivotal high note in the Scherzo was ravishing.

To her credit, Han's piano never obscured her partner's playing. Her solos had energy and ardor, sounding as if they were lifted straight from a Rachmaninoff concerto.

Perhaps it was unwise to place Lera Auerbach's ambitious new Cello Sonata (written in 2002 for Finckel and Han) beside Sergei Prokofiev's masterful Op.

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In her early thirties, Auerbach is already a celebrated poet, composer and pianist. Her sonata pushed both instruments to their limits, but Finckel and Han were undaunted. The special effects included various pluckings, strummings and grand tolling bells in the piano, in addition to a tight, whirring vibrato technique that made Finckel sound like a teakettle gone berserk,

In contrast, Prokofiev was ill and elderly when his Sonata premiered in 1950, yet it bubbles with life. He emptied the essence of his career into the piece, and Finckel and Han brought out all the smart-aleck wit, darkest fears and joyful lyricism.

Their committed performances proved that these three Russian sonatas represent distinct personalities well worth knowing.

— Tom Huizenga