deux-elles

# MICHAEL CSÁNYI-WILLS

VIOLA SONATA • VIOLIN SONATA • 3 RUSSIAN SONGS

Ilona Domnich
Charles Mutter
Michael Csányi-Wills

In 2020, while in lockdown, I felt the impulse to write some chamber music, having finished my second symphony. Soprano Ilona Domnich has been a long-term collaborator of mine, and asked me if I'd be interested in writing a few songs. The choices of texts were hers. I loved the idea of setting Pushkin, who lived through the cholera pandemic of 1830. Lockdown for him was liberating, as it was (a hundred and ninety years later) for isolating creatives in 2020. Having finished these songs, I spent some time in 2021 writing a violin sonata for my brother-in-law, composer Mihkel Kerem, then in 2023 writing a viola sonata for Charles Mutter.

As a composer, I have always been drawn to the emotional currents that run beneath personal and historical memory - to the quiet spaces where loss, resilience and hope meet. In these new works for viola, violin, soprano, and piano, I want to bring that sensibility to bear on a broader reflection: on the fragility of our world, both politically and environmentally, and the forces that connect and divide us. I've drawn on the lyrical, introspective language that shapes much of my music. Rather than making a direct political statement, my aim is to create a space for reflection—to evoke the beauty, the tensions, and the quiet urgency of a world at a crossroads.

The idea for the Viola Sonata first sparked at a party in 2023. I was chatting to Charles Mutter when he mentioned that he'd just bought a viola - an instrument I hadn't known he played. Without thinking, I said, 'I should write you a sonata,' and that throwaway comment was all the push I needed. The 1st movement opens with a dreamy atmosphere - impressionistic and fluid. It drifts between keys, with hints of Hungarian folk colour that gradually darken the mood. Tension builds, before fading into something quieter and reflective. But the storm returns with more force, and when the opening theme reappears, it feels changed - marked by what's come before. The second movement is a kind of lament - the sound of a world after something has happened, but before the feelings have caught up. Brief memories surface, then vanish, leaving behind an emotional emptiness. The third movement brings sudden energy, reworking themes from the first movement at double speed. What once felt expansive now rushes forward. From a dance-like

beginning, it grows more serious. Echoes of earlier music return - distant, altered - and the piece ends as it began, but bearing the weight of everything that's unfolded.

Once I had finished the viola sonata, Charles Mutter asked me to write a short stand-alone piece for viola and piano, similar in mood to the second movement of the viola sonata. Adagio is a lament of sorts, but angrier and more intense than the slow movement of the sonata. Less at ease with the world, anxiety builds in the middle section, then the piece ends as it started, acquiescing to sadness.

Meditation is another recent short piece for viola and piano. I began to write it almost immediately after ▸

finishing the Adagio. This time I wanted a piece that maintained lyrical beauty throughout, and I found myself writing as if setting words. So this Meditation is a 'song without words', with the viola singing above a constant piano beat.

The idea for the Violin Sonata began in the summer of 2021, during a week spent with my brother-in-law, composer Mihkel Kerem, whose own sonatas had been a recent inspiration to me. When I started writing, I didn't have a grand plan, just a small idea; four simple bars, a shift from one chord to another. Somehow that idea held enough mystery to keep me chasing after it. The first movement grows from this fragment, constantly shifting rhythm and harmony. It resists settling, weaving through unexpected tonalities and brief moments of atonality, always moving forward. It builds to a burst of energy before gradually returning to the opening material, now distant and transformed. The second movement, grounded in C minor, begins with a long solo for the piano. The violin enters with a sombre melody. Later, there are sighs - downward glissandi which the piano tries to echo. The final movement opens like a dance, but one that stumbles between time signatures and syncopated accents. This playful energy quickly darkens into a more confrontational dialogue between the instruments. A fragment of the first movement reappears, now with a sharper, more bitter edge. By the end, both voices seem spent - the violin left with a single note, the piano closing the sonata with a solitary E major chord.

The Three Russian Songs are settings, composed during the Covid Lockdown in 2020, of poems about the Russian cholera epidemic of 1830. The first two are by the towering figure of Russian poetry, Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), and the third is a parody of Pushkin's poetry that appeared on the Russian-speaking internet in 2020. While it is a satire, it also struck me as a toast to resilience. In setting these three texts, I sought to capture their distinct worlds: the dawning light of *Awakening*, the deep shadows of *Elegy*, and the folk-like boisterous vitality of the rural refuge. They form a triptych of Russian voices - reflective, philosophical, and defiantly alive. ■

***Michael Csányi-Wills***
*September 2025*

## 1. ПРОБУЖДЕНИЕ [Я ПОМНЮ ЧУДНОЕ МГНОВЕНЬЕ]
## AWAKENING [THE MOMENT WONDROUS I REMEMBER]

***Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) | trans. Ivan Panin (1855-1942)***

*Я помню чудное мгновенье:*
*Передо мной явилась ты,*
*Как мимолетное виденье,*
*Как гений чистой красоты.*

*В томленьях грусти безнадежной,*
*В тревогах шумной суеты,*
*Звучал мне долго голос нежный*
*И снились милые черты.*

*Шли годы. Бурь порыв мятежный*
*Рассеял прежние мечты,*
*И я забыл твой голос нежный,*
*Твои небесные черты.*

*В глуши, во мраке заточенья*
*Тянулись тихо дни мои*
*Без божества, без вдохновенья,*
*Без слез, без жизни, без любви.*

*The moment wondrous I remember*
*Thou before me didst appear*
*Like a flashing apparition,*
*Like a spirit of beauty pure.*

*'Mid sorrows of hopeless grief,*
*'Mid tumults of noiseful bustle,*
*Rang long to me thy tender voice,*
*Came dreams to me of thy lovely features.*

*Went by the years. The storm's rebellious rush*
*The former dreams had scattered*
*And I forgot thy tender voice,*
*I forgot thy heavenly features.*

*In the desert, in prison's darkness,*
*Quietly my days were dragging;*
*No reverence, nor inspiration,*
*Nor tears, nor life, nor love.*

*Душе настало пробужденье:*
*И вот опять явилась ты,*
*Как мимолетное виденье,*
*Как гений чистой красоты.*

*И сердце бьется в упоенье,*
*И для него воскресли вновь*
*И божество, и вдохновенье,*
*И жизнь, и слезы, и любовь.*

*But at last awakes my soul:*
*And again didst thou appear:*
*Like a flashing apparition,*
*Like a spirit of beauty pure.*

*And enraptured beats my heart,*
*And risen are for it again*
*Both reverence, and inspiration*
*And life, and tears, and love.* ■

## 2. ЭЛЕГИЯ / ELEGY

***Alexander Pushkin** (1799-1837) | **trans. Ivan Panin** (1855-1942)*

*Безумных лет угасшее веселье*
*Мне тяжело, как смутное похмелье.*
*Но, как вино — печаль минувших дней*
*В моей душе чем старе, тем сильней.*
*Мой путь уныл. Сулит мне труд и горе*
*Грядущего волнуемое море.*

*Но не хочу, о други, умирать;*
*Я жить хочу, чтоб мыслить и страдать;*
*И ведаю, мне будут наслажденья*
*Меж горестей, забот и треволненья:*

*The extinguished joy of crazy years*
*On me rests heavy, like dull debauch.*
*But of by-gone days the grief, like wine*
*In my soul the older, the stronger 't grows.*
*Dark my path. Toil and pain promised are me*
*By the Future's roughened sea.*

*But not Death, O friends, I wish!*
*But Life I wish: to think and suffer;*
*Well I know, for me are joys in store*
*'Mid struggles, toils, and sorrows:*

*Порой опять гармонией упьюсь,*
*Над вымыслом слезами обольюсь,*
*И может быть — на мой закат печальный*
*Блеснет любовь улыбкою прощальной.*

*Yet 'gain at times shall harmony drink in*
*And tears I'll shed over Fancy's fruit,—*
*Yet mayhap at my saddened sunset*
*Love will beam with farewell and smile.* ■

## 3. TO THE COUNTRYSIDE!

***Anon., ironically attributed to Pushkin, 2020 | trans. Claude 'in the style of Ivan Panin'***

*Мой друг, пора на хутора!*
*Там средь унылой, серой хери,*
*Нет преопаснейших бактерий,*
*Для нашего с тобой нутра.*

*Там браги сварим мы бидон,*
*Нарежем сала, хлеба, лука,*
*И ни одна болячка, сука,*
*Не пошатнёт здоровья трон!*

*My friend, time for the countryside!*
*There 'mid the drear, gray nastiness,*
*Are not the germs most dangerous*
*For our insides, mine and thine.*

*There of moonshine we shall brew a jug,*
*And we shall cut the lard, the bread, the onion,*
*And not one ailment, damn it all,*
*Shall shake the throne of health.* ■

Award-winning composer and pianist **Michael Csányi-Wills** has created a diverse body of work, ranging from chamber music and choral compositions to orchestral pieces and film scores. He was composer in residence with the Welsh Sinfonia 2013 - 2016; and his recent orchestral works have been widely performed through-out the UK. Michael's music has been commissioned and performed across Europe, Australia, China, and also the USA, where in 2016 his violin concerto was premiered at the Constella Arts Festival by violinist Tatiana Berman, with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra, and their principal conductor José Luis Gomez. He has composed scores for over 40 films, including documentaries and dramas. He won Best Score at the Movie Maverick Awards for *A Love Story in Milk* and was nominated for Best Newcomer at the World

Soundtrack Awards. Most recently, in December 2023 he scored *The Grand Getaway*, a Wallace and Gromit VR game released by Meta Quest and Aardman. As a pianist, Michael performs and records regularly. His recordings of the complete Weinberg Violin Sonatas, with Russian violinist Yuri Kalnits, were released by Toccata Classics to critical acclaim. Volumes 1 & 2 won a *Diapason d'Or* in the French magazine *Diapason*. Volume 3 was nominated for a much coveted ICMA award in 2021, and Volume 4 was released in 2022.

Violinist and violist **Charles Mutter** was born in Sussex, England. After winning numerous prizes as a Junior Exhibitioner at the Royal College of Music, Charles read Music and English Literature at Jesus College, Cambridge. He made his London debut as the solo violinist in Giacinto Scelsi's *Anahit* at St John's, Smith Square, while still a student. His studio recording of solo viola works by Alwynne Pritchard, James Dillon, James Clapperton, and others was repeated as one of the highlights of BBC Radio 3's 1994 new music season. As a member of the Smith Quartet for ten years, Charles toured the world and made numerous broadcasts and recordings; the quartet's contribution to the 2005 BBC film, *Holocaust: a Musical Memorial Film from Auschwitz* won an Emmy Award. He also led the Edinburgh Quartet for four years. In 2007 Charles moved back to London to take up the position of Associate Leader of the BBC Concert ▸

Orchestra, which he still holds. As soloist with the BBC Concert Orchestra, Charles has performed works by composers from Bach to Muhly, including Guy Barker's Violin Concerto, which was written for him and premiered in Bucharest in 2016. He is also in great demand as a guest concertmaster (Philharmonia, CBSO, Bournemouth SO, Ulster Orchestra), a session musician, West End concertmaster, and a chamber musician.

**Ilona Domnich** is a lyric soprano, described by *Opera Now* as 'A memorable voice of silken beauty, with a luminous edge to the tone. A sensitive musician and an actress of magnetic presence.' She was chosen by *Opera Now* as one of the magazine's 'Top 10 High Flyers - a new generation of sopranos having impressive careers. She was also highlighted as a *Daily Telegraph* choice of 'best British based talent', and in *Opera* magazine as an 'Artist of the Month'. Ilona has worked in close collaboration with English National Opera, Grange Park Opera, Buxton Opera Festival, English Touring Opera, BBC Concert Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Concert Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia, and Southbank Sinfonia. Her operatic highlights include leading roles in *Tosca, La Boheme, Onegin, Il barbiere di Siviglia, Medea, Pelleas et Melisande, Fortunio, Rigoletto, La Rondine, Tales of Hoffmann, Der neue Orpheus, La Voix Humaine, Don Giovanni, Der Schauspieldirektor, Judgement of Paris,* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail.* In the socially distanced summer of 2021, Ilona Domnich started an open-air concert series in Hadley Woods, Barnet. Now in its fifth year, *Music by Jack's Lake* goes from strength to strength, bringing together international artists and young performers in a beautiful sylvan setting, and delighting the richly diverse communities of North London. Many in the audiences experience classical music here for the first time. As an emotional response to the horrific events of October 7th 2023, together with arranger/violinist Charles Mutter, videographer Stewart French, and director Sebastian Harcombe, Ilona created a music video, '*The Hope - Hatikvah'* to show her solidarity with the wider Jewish communities. ■

deux-elles

DXL1222

## MICHAEL CSÁNYI-WILLS (1975-)

### VIOLA SONATA

1 Moderato ..... 9:21
2 Adagio ..... 4:45
3 Con Moto ..... 5:37

4 Adagio for Viola and Piano ..... 4:51

5 Meditation for Viola and Piano ..... 4:22

### VIOLIN SONATA

6 Con Moto ..... 8:57
7 Andante Moderato ..... 7:23
8 Allegro Moderato ..... 6:29

### THREE RUSSIAN SONGS

9 Awakening ..... 5:21
10 Elegy ..... 4:43
11 To the Countryside! ..... 3:04

Total playing time: 1:04.54

**Soprano** Ilona Domnich
**Violin / Viola** - Charles Mutter
**Piano -** Michael Csányi-Wills

---

**Recording Engineer** Jim Sorenson | **Editing** Michael Csányi-Wills | **Mastering** Matthew Wadsworth | **Cover art** Jonathan Cuff
**Cover and booklet design** Tim A'Court | **Booklet editing** Kate Bennett Wadsworth | **Photography** Nikki Wills
Recorded at World Heart Beat Embassy Gardens, November 2024 and April 2025
© ℗ **2026 Deux-Elles Limited, Norwich, UK | www.deux-elles.co.uk**