

# Pieter Wispelwey

Cello

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## Selected reviews

### Van der Aa: Double Concerto, Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (June 2019)

"The entrance of the soloists affirmed a poignant spirit, one that appeared selectively throughout the work and gave the piece a distinctive resonance."  
Geoffrey Newman, Vancouver Classical Music

### Bach: Six Suites for Cello, Tonhalle St. Gallen (March 2019)

"Pieter Wispelwey can be boisterous and likes to curiously follow the spur of the moment; that much was obvious in his two concerts in the Tonhalle und Sunday: a Bach feast extraordinaire. On the programme were the six cello suites, in two instalments, in the morning and late afternoon. An energy-sapping marathon? No, more of a light-footed stroll where you always want to keep going and at the end your spirits are still so fresh and you're so full of energy that you must have an encore. ... It's exhilarating how Pieter Wispelwey allows his audience to leave through [Bach's musical „encyclopedia"] with him, without ever precociously showing off his profound knowledge."

Bettina Kugler, St Galler Tagblatt

### Bach Gamba Sonatas with Mahan Esfahani, Tonhalle München (February 2019)

"It is always a special experience when the great Dutch cellist Pieter Wispelwey plays one of the six solo suites by Johann Sebastian Bach. In him, an unparalleled understanding of Bach's musical eloquence and animating sense of rhythm meet the most splendid cello playing. It is through this, as was the case in the Allerheiligen Hofkirche, that the sixth suite in D major can unfold in all its jubilantly bright diversity.

As directed by Bach, Wispelwey plays on a five stringed instrument with gut strings and a baroque bow – a "tongue" which he makes bow, jump and skip over the strings. This way, he enables the six dance movements to become character pieces, lively and animated: the Prelude as a gambit roaring upwards, the Allegro as a heavily ornamented slow meditation, the Courante full of attack, the Sarabande as a wonderfully unfolding song of chords, the gavottes as energetic folk dances, the Gigue an unstoppable hunt.

With the magnificent harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani, the three gamba sonatas became witty conversations between three voices that imitate each other, interlink into a web or (in the slow movements) lead pensive and intimate dialogues and trialogues – especially powerfully in the Andante in the G major sonata. Both artists played mindful of transparency and with mutual understanding – features that make complex music exciting and gripping. In the D minor toccata, Esfahani portrayed how the young Bach (during his Weimar period) ... [showed] off his virtuosic skills on the keyboard and his enthusiasm for passionate expressivity. The duo thanked the audience for the big applause with a fine da capo of the Andante of the D major [sonata]."

Harald Eggebrecht, Süddeutsche Zeitung

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CD: Schubert and Brahms: The Complete Duos / Rondo

"Wispelwey is again an amazing master of his instrument, both in the roaring, low, neck-breaking runs and the heat in the high notes at the end. The two musicians are perfectly matched in their enthusiasm and musicality ..."

Luister (August 2018)

Haydn in C, "Fantasy on Themes from Porgy & Bess" (South American Tour with Geneva Camerata, June 2018)

"This extraordinary cellist is the complete artist; his proficient technique translates the music into excellent shapes and phrases; his impeccable fingering makes the most complicated passages seem effortless. He draws clarity and beauty of sound from the instrument derived from his musical talent and skill. ... From pianissimo to forte, his sound maintains the same nobility, while at the same time recognising an infinity of nuances which are continuously varied. His interpretation of Haydn's [Concerto in C] is an anthology. ... Wispelwey's performance was a unique experience for our country"

Julio César Huertas, El Pais

"In the middle part of the concert, we heard cellist Pieter Wispelwey. An amazing musician, Wispelwey has brilliant technique but it was his encore, apparently by Crumb, which was the high point of this concert. After this, [the Gershwin] was delivered to perfection."

Manuel Dresser, El Espectador

"The Dutch cellist Pieter Wispelwey played Haydn's C Major Concerto in the first half. He produced a lavish sound where his left-hand fingers and bow made the instrument speak with a different timbre in the allegro and in the adagio"

Rodolfo Ponce de León, Busqueda

Bach, Brahms and Beethoven marathon (Melbourne Recital Centre, August 2017)

"Last week Melbournians were treated to a one-man cello festival of sorts, as over three consecutive nights Dutch cellist Pieter Wispelwey guided nearly 3000 souls through the cello recital output of Beethoven, Bach and Brahms. Memorable both for the sheer largesse of the idea let alone the task itself, it might prove hard to name another living artist able to sustain a crowd with such imagination, passion and stamina. On two of these evenings he was supported by well-known pianist and collaborator Caroline Almonte whose beautiful tone and calm presence became a bedrock to which Wispelwey's energy could anchor. The Melbourne Recital Centre was on the money too with bold programming, and a sense as the evenings progressed that the hall itself was in on the fun. Beethoven's five Sonatas for pianoforte and violoncello (not Cello Sonatas as labelled in the program) are bold forays into a cusp-of-the-nineteenth-century newish artform, with the cello emergent from a continuo role. The pairing of the F major and G minor Sonatas presented Wispelwey as chief protagonist, and a provocative one at that. With larger than life physical gestures Wispelwey delivered the rhetorical style for which he is known. Think master orator even more than master musician. Entertaining and theatrical, Wispelwey never slid into egotistical navel-gazing. His playing in the 5th Sonata in D major Op.102 No.2 was raw and unabashed as if stating, "Here I am. Here He is." A remarkable moment for this listener came in the shift of a single B to a B sharp, a moment suspended and ripe with hope.

Mention must be made of the inclusion of the three sets of Variations. As if the Sonatas weren't enough in one marathon, Wispelwey and Almonte exploited the quick-witted characters in these underperformed works that take their themes from Mozart's Magic Flute and Handel's Judas Maccabeus. Notable was Wispelwey's sparing choice of vibrato, an affect especially powerful in the E flat Variations, "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen".

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As to the presentation of the six Bach Suites in one sitting, Wispelwey is an old hand. Performed in numerical order, this allowed an arch of understanding of the works and their keys. Wispelwey continued in his expert rhetorical style, adding to the dance characters contained within. As the evening progressed Wispelwey became even more generous with his daring and his phrases might well have been musically equivalent to "Why should I? Here's another way! Now, do you see?"

The slow Sarabandes were unusually animalistic in character, and therefore, instantly refreshing. Of the six galanteries, the Bourrees of the C and E flat major Suites provided the most whimsy of the night: wry, playful and outgoing. Sure, at times one could hear some scratches and bumps, reminiscent of the crackle and hiss of gut strings. In a drier acoustic this might have been a problem.

Night three and Brahms Sonatas saw the return of Caroline Almonte in a concert that opened with the arrangement for cello and piano of the Op.78 Violin Sonata, tuned down a 4th for the cello into D major.

I suspect many in the audience recognised its suitability to the cello; particularly touching in this case was Wispelwey's sparing use of vibrato and his knowledge of the room; how long to allow a note to decay coupled with a knack of knowing when to add spice and heat to the tone. The E minor Sonata Op.38 provides many moments to exploit the lower register, which Wispelwey did in spades. During the fastest final movement Allegro I have ever heard, Wispelwey's impetuous playing was well met by Almonte in the final hurrah.

Brahms' Op.99 F major Sonata gave ample opportunity for some necessary frisson between the two artists, as Wispelwey made heroic flourishes and some glorious pizzicato against Almonte's chords in the slow Adagio affetuoso. Two encores followed, an appropriate one and an inappropriate one (according to Wispelwey, and stated with glee). Most of the audience revelled in the gag of the page turner/aka Dale Barltrop, MSO Concertmaster being dragged on stage to perform a slightly undercooked yet warm-hearted 1st movement of Brahms' B major piano trio.

Some small criticism might be found in a discussion of intonation. Wispelwey errs deliberately on the sharp side for certain tonal areas, although this seems rather grounded in his system of highlighting emotional affect and meaning than any technical deficiency.

As a cellist myself I wondered what Wispelwey's secret is in terms of stamina. This was a truly superhuman effort, which, apart from technical command, reveals a musical mind of abundant ideas." Josephine Vains, Classic Melbourne

## Beethoven & Brahms: Sonatas (Ukaria, August 2017)

"It's difficult to imagine a more perfect way to spend an afternoon than listening to great music in beautiful surroundings on a sunny winter's afternoon.

Depending on your taste of course, this might mean listening to extremely loud Japanese industrial noise music in a grungy warehouse. Presumably that would appeal to very few of the capacity audience who attended this marvellous concert by Dutch cellist Pieter Wispelwey and Australian pianist Carolyn Almonte. Wispelwey is a musician of prodigious energy, and his program for this concert is just one of several daunting programs that he is to play in Melbourne this coming week. Four substantial sonatas, three by Beethoven and one by Brahms, were cunningly arranged so that Beethoven's middle period Sonata in A was followed by Brahms's first cello sonata, which Wispelwey cheekily referred to as Beethoven's 'sixth cello sonata'; both are big, dramatic works. Few cellists could portray their tempestuous character as convincingly as Wispelwey, who is not afraid to shred his bow in the pursuit of emotional intensity.

In contrast, the second half contained two lyrical late sonatas by Beethoven – which came as something of a relief after a first half which was as exhausting to listen to – in a good way, to be sure – as it no doubt was to play. Wispelwey has a way of playing that makes you think he is making it up as he goes along; the mercurial changes of mood, the quirks and unexpected twists of late Beethoven, seem to emerge from his playing with perfectly natural spontaneity. He was magnificently partnered throughout by Carolyn Almonte, who was finely attuned to Wispelwey's imaginative playing." Stephen Whittington, The Advertiser

## Bach: Six Suites for Solo Cello (Sydney Symphony Orchestra / City Recital Hall, August 2017)

"Pieter Wispelwey played all six of Bach's Suites for Cello with magical lightness, clarity and an imagination that seems to spontaneously call new musical shapes into being.

There was none of the heavy drawn quality that some cellists bring to this music particularly during chordal passages across multiple strings.

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Rather, there was transparent colour with delicate inner light and sweetness, immaculately tuned and balanced. In the patterned arpeggiations of the Prelude in the first suite in G major, Wispelwey would plant each bass note like a marker in the listener's memory and then play the upper with growing fantasy as though taking flight.

The Prelude of the Suite No. 3 in C major, by contrast was richly resonant, while that of the final Suite No. 6 in D, presented here with the additional challenge of encompassing a work written for a five strings on a four-stringed instrument, was cogent and structured, spinning its idea from a hypothesis based on a single repeated note.

The Sarabandes marked the still centre of each suite and a chance to focus on the simple shape of the melodic line and translucent beauty of sound.

In the more energetic dances, the Courantes, Minuets and Giges, Wispelwey's rhythm is buoyant and free and, undergirded by great strength of pulse which, paradoxically allowed the greatest flexibility. The tonal freshness and originality of Wispelwey's thought will remain in the memory for a long time."

Peter McCallum, Sydney Morning Herald (4.5 stars)

Schubert - Brahms: The Complete Duos / Opus 100 (Evil Penguin Records Classics)

"Wispelwey is a trailblazing virtuoso, opening up exciting repertoire directions and proving that a new guise for familiar repertoire can be entirely idiomatic. As an interpreter of Brahms, he integrates the lilting melodies and the more fervent writing with rigorous rhythmic underplay, dressed in well-nuanced phrases. Giacometti never obscures the cello and is a magician of balance and colour. In the F major Sonata, Wispelwey projects the heroic opening with tremendous authority, initiating the dialogue with the piano much in the manner of a play. Both players bring out the introspective poetry of Brahms's melodic invention in the slow movement, whereas the ensuing Allegro appassionata grabs us by the collar. But all is well as the sunny finale restores equilibrium."

Joanne Talbot, The Strad

"Wispelwey and Paolo Giacometti offer appropriately imperious performances of the first three movements [of Brahms' F major sonata], and they're admirably light in the affable finale. [...] these are fine performances, and if you're attracted by the notion of transcribed pieces you couldn't do better."

Misha Donat, BBC Music Magazine \*\*\*\*

"I'd describe this lovingly produced studio recording as a brave, brilliantly played mixed bag. The disc's opener is Schubert's *Introduction and Variations on 'Trockne Blumen'*, originally for flute and piano, and it makes for a striking start. Wispelwey's top-register entry with those first despairing four notes hooks you right in, aching and vulnerable of character, with an arresting, visceral tone (incidentally, the top two strings of his 1760 Guadagnini are of uncovered gut). Indeed, as we move through the variations, there's a lot to enjoy."

Charlotte Gardner, Gramophone

"[Wispelwey and Giacometti] are a well attuned to each other and understand themselves as brothers in spirit. Appropriately tight and almost conspiratorial is their collaboration. They bring both the sensitivity and the right character for these composers to the table. ... The playing of these two instrumentalists is so authentic that adapting the works for cello does not seem disturbing but enables the listener to hear new facets in the works.

[In summary:] Besides one Brahms Sonata originally written for the cello, this CD offers two sonatas by Brahms and Schubert composed for violin and piano in transcriptions for the cello. They certainly bring new aspects to the works. Wispelwey and Giacometti concur completely and deliver compelling performances."

Pizzicato

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Prokofiev: Sinfonia Concertante for Cello and Orchestra, Op 125 (Melbourne Symphony Orchestra)

"Technically superb, Wispelwey's impressive variety of tonal options also negotiated the vast emotional upheavals of this work as it ranged from quiet contemplation, moments of sardonic humour, through to raging aggression."

Martin Duffe, Sydney Morning Herald \*\*\*\*

Bach: 6 Suites for Cello Solo (Evil Penguin Records Classics)

"Wispelwey uses a Baroque cello with the strings tuned down a whole tone. It gives a deep grainy sound, but counteracting that is the fabulous springy liveliness of the playing. Wispelwey can certainly make these dances dance, but at the same time he gives each one a speaking eloquence. Like a master rhetorician, he fills Bach's even procession of notes with meaningful pauses, emphatic emphases, pleading diminuendos, changes of tone. To add to the effect he often ventures to daring extremes of tempo, as in the slow and tragic Allemande of the Fifth Suite, or the startling contrast between the two Bourrées in the Fourth."

Ivan Hewett, The Telegraph \*\*\*\*\*

"[Wispelwey] plays with deep affection and understanding. ... His bowing - often emulating the sound of the plucking of a lute - is masterful and always full of character."

Julie Anne Sadie, Gramophone

Dvorak: Cello Concerto; Symphonic Variations for Orchestra (Budapest Festival Orchestra)

"Wispelwey's playing is at once supremely lyrical and furiously intense."

Tim Ashley, The Guardian

"Cello playing of incomparable technical and musical accomplishment."

Hugh Canning, The Sunday Times

Bach: Suites for Cello Solo (Lincoln Center)

"Deeply communicative and highly individual performances."

James R. Oestreich, New York Times