

LOVE AND LOSS

Elena Firsova & Dmitri Smirnov



Rudersdal Chamber Players

Jonas Frølund, clarinet

Christine Pryn, violin

Marie Stockmarr Becker, viola

John Ehde, cello

Manuel Esperilla, piano



Август 1974, Крым



Октябрь 1974, Москва



Июль 1975, Сортавала



LOVE AND LOSS - A LIFE TOGETHER IN MUSIC

by Richard Shaw

It was a happy conversation with Hans-Ulrich Duffek from the music publisher Sikorski that led to the newly-formed Rudersdal Chamber Players featuring composers Elena Firsova (b. 1950) and Dmitri Smirnov (1948-2020) at their Rudersdal Sommerkonserter festival in 2019. Out of this grew the commissioning of *Four Seasons* (Firsova) and *to be or not to be...* (Smirnov), the latter generously supported by Simon Rayner from Newcastle under Lyme, England.

The husband-and-wife team of Smirnov and Firsova was an inspired choice. Both composers were very well-established and respected, each with a prolific list of works in all forms: operas, concertos, songs, instrumental solos and chamber music. And both composers shared an interesting history.

They met and fell in love while studying at the Moscow Conservatoire. From the start they shared a passionate curiosity about the new possibilities open to composers. Edison Denisov was their leading mentor and catalyst, his private, experimental works straying far from the musical styles, references and approaches expected of a submissive and dutiful Soviet composer.

Meetings with the composer and music theorist Philip Herschkovitz, a pupil of Berg and Webern, added further stimulation.

Smirnov and Firsova's music was heard in "unofficial" concerts outside the USSR — outside the control and permission of the Union of Soviet

Composers. And a concert of new music featuring Denisov, Smirnov, Firsova and others, but not Tikhon Khrennikov, despite his requests, in Cologne in 1979 seems to have been the trigger that led to his spiteful, infamous denunciation of The Seven — the composers including Denisov, Firsova, Smirnov and Gubaidulina — at the 6th Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers later that year. Contrary to the intention of Khrennikov, the powerful Secretary of the Union, his denunciation of The Seven brought their names to the immediate attention of the wider world. It was of course Khrennikov who as a young, ambitious apparatchik had been instrumental in denouncing composers such as Shostakovich and Prokofiev at the 1st Congress, back in 1948.

The denunciation in 1979 led to severely restricted opportunities for both Smirnov and Firsova. With the futures of their children to consider, they — like so many of their fellow free-thinking composers — made the difficult decision to leave their native Russia. They moved to England in 1991 and settled in St Albans, north of London.



Dmitri Smirnov: to be or not to be... (2018-19)

Premiered in 2019 to a commission from the Rudersdal Sommerkonceter festival, the work takes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as its point of departure — a deliberate nod to the Danish setting — and includes musical references to Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*.

Unusually for a piano quartet, it is the viola player who is cast into the limelight, mirroring the syllabic pattern and thoughts of Hamlet's famous soliloquy and dominating the texture and drama of the work throughout. The powerful accompaniment from the piano, violin and cello — providing nightmarish, troubled dialogues — refers to the distinctive throbbing dotted rhythm in the closing movement, *Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus* (Praise to the immortality of Jesus) of Messiaen's work.

Smirnov's own words about the work: *This is quite a special work for me, because I have never used before a piece of literature in music in a such unusual way. Moreover I have not heard about any work of any composer that would be written in a similar way (probably except the finale of the last of Beethoven quartets where the words "Muss es Sein? Es muss sein!" were encrypted).*

To Dear Christine Pryn
and Rudersdal Chamber Players
with my gratitude.

12 August 2019, Virum

Smirnov's dedication to the ensemble,
written in the score during his stay in Denmark

Dmitri Smirnov: Abel (1991)

It is entirely fitting that one of Dmitri Smirnov's works on this commemorative recording should reflect his long and fruitful obsession with the visionary English poet and artist William Blake. He was a lasting source of inspiration for Smirnov, who translated nearly all of the poet's writings into Russian — together with an erudite commentary — to great critical acclaim.

Written late in 1991, *Abel* was one of the first works he composed after moving to England. It was commissioned by the Chameleon Ensemble, who premiered the work in the St Magnus Festival, Orkney, the following June.

Smirnov writes: *Four figures of Blake's highly expressive tempera drawing The body of Abel found by Adam and Eve (c. 1826, now in the Tate Gallery) correspond to the four instruments: Abel — clarinet, Eve — violin, Adam — cello, and Cain — piano. Each of them is given a unique motif, enabling me to attempt to grasp the spirit of the picture in musical sounds and shapes.*

Blake's picture presents a disturbing, ambiguous image of the anguished Cain appearing to flee from the dark, open grave of Abel, the brother he has just slain, witnessed by the two brothers' parents, Adam and Eve. The brash colours and images of the landscape (dark clouds, blood-red sun, elemental mountains and stark open grave) heighten the expressions of the four protagonists.

As in Blake's picture, Smirnov's piece ends quietly and uncertainly, this terrible moment remaining frozen in time.



*The Body of Abel Found by Adam and Eve, 1826, William Blake, Tate Bequeathed by W. Graham Robertson 1949. Photo: Tate
Medium: Ink, tempera and gold on mahogany*

Elena Firsova: Piano Quartet No. 2 Four Seasons (2019)

Firsova has never felt the urge to write extensively about her own works, beyond stating the raw facts of the circumstances of their composition and their premieres. Her spare words need not be taken too literally: *The four movements are a description of the English seasons starting from a mild Winter, a beautiful Spring, a short Summer and a rather sad Autumn.*

Everything she writes is profound, poetic and searching, and for all the tenderness and beauty of so much of her writing there is a strong, confident and far-reaching bardic quality. For all the quiet intimacy of her sounds, a masterly creator and a philosopher of enormous power and integrity is at work.

A glance at the poetic texts at the heart of many of her compositions gives us a closer glimpse into her inner world, with settings of verses by Akhmatova, including her masterwork for soprano, choir and orchestra *Requiem* (2001), Mandelstam, including *Petrarch's Sonnets* (1976) performed at that famous concert in Cologne in 1979, the cantatas *Earthly Life* for soprano and chamber ensemble (1984) and *Before the Thunderstorm* (1994), Pasternak (the very early *Two Romances on Poems by Boris Pasternak* (1967), Blok, Tsvetaeva, Blake and Pushkin among others.

Her abiding interest in Dante found its fruits in the *Divina Commedia* (2008), written for the Dante String Quartet, with the first part, *Inferno*,

by her husband, her own *Purgatorio* as the second part, and closing with their daughter Alissa Firsova's *Paradiso*. A true family affair.

For her delicate, moving memorial to her friend the poet Oleg Prokofiev (son of the composer), *The Scent of Absence* for flute, harp and bass baritone (1998), she selected his two poems *like a sketch I'll be rubbed out* and *of life remains a heap of minutes*, with their reflections on one's brief time on earth.



Elena Firsova: Quartet for the Time of Grief (2023)

Firsova's *Quartet for the Time of Grief* was written following her husband Dmitri Smirnov's tragic death in April 2020, an early victim of the covid pandemic. With his fertile mind full of plans for further compositions, translations and family life, he died aged just 71.

As with so many of her works Firsova's *Quartet* seems to explore the central theme of time passing, reflecting too the unworldly cessation of activity at the time of the pandemic.

Reflecting both the title and instrumentation of Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*, scored for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, Firsova's work features the same distinctive, throbbing, repeating dotted rhythms borrowed from Messiaen and also found in her late husband's *to be or not to be....* It is an elegant and moving act of homage and memory.



RUDERSDAL CHAMBER PLAYERS

Rudersdal Chamber Players were founded in 2017 by violinist Christine Pryn at the suggestion of internationally acclaimed Russian-American composer Lera Auerbach. After visiting the festival Rudersdal Sommerkonserter, Auerbach suggested that a flexible ensemble of high-profile chamber musicians could elevate the festival to new artistic heights.

Shortly thereafter, the ensemble became a reality. In addition to serving as ensemble-in-residence at Rudersdal Sommerkonserter, the Chamber Players have performed in a wide range of settings.

Praised for their interpretive depth, stylistic versatility, and flawless ensemble playing, they have appeared at venues as diverse as Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Hindsgavl Festival, Klang Festival, and the



National Gallery of Denmark – as well as in a hangar on the island of Ærø and a church on a houseboat.

They have toured the United States, Canada, Germany, Poland, Russia (before Russia's full scale war against Ukraine), Sweden, and Norway, giving concerts at venues such as Symphony Space in New York City, Agassiz Chamber Music Festival in Winnipeg, Canada's Festival of the Sound, and the opening concert of the prestigious Sound Ways Festival organized by the Composers' Union in St. Petersburg.

Their repertoire ranges from baroque to contemporary music. In addition to performing the well-known classics, Rudersdal Chamber Players have a strong focus on presenting masterworks by lesser-known classical composers, including women. They have championed works by Romantic composers such as Mel Bonis and Amanda Maier-Röntgen, as



well as 20th-century figures including Priaulx Rainier and Boris Tishchenko, making them known to Danish audiences. In 2025, they were given the rare opportunity to give the world premiere of a piano trio from 1921 by Julius Röntgen.

Contemporary music plays a central role in the ensemble's artistic profile, and they are deeply committed to working with living composers. Several renowned composers from Denmark and abroad have written music for the ensemble, including Poul Ruders, Raymond Deane, Rafał Augustyn, Andrew Waggoner, Elena Firsova and Dmitri Smirnov. They have also collaborated with, among others, Giya Kancheli and Victoria Bond.

The Rudersdal Chamber Players are often involved in large-scale interdisciplinary projects, working with visual artists, poets, and scientists. Their debut recording — a world premiere recording of chamber music by Poul Ruders — was released in 2022.

The core of the ensemble is a piano quartet, but the instrumentation is flexible and can be adapted to suit different venues and programs. They have appeared in various formations including clarinet quintet, flute quartet, piano quintet, string trio, and string quartet. All members of Rudersdal Chamber Players have chosen to make chamber music the primary focus of their musical careers.

www.rudersdalchamberplayers.com



Rudersdal Chamber Players with Elena Firsova at a rehearsal before the premiere of Quartet of the Time of Grief in 2023.

Jonas Frølund is a Danish musician and entrepreneur born in 1996 in Roskilde, Denmark. He is educated from the Paris Conservatoire in 2022 and is active both as a soloist, chamber musician and orchestra musician. He is a member of the Danish Chamber Orchestra, member of the wind quintet V Coloris and various other ensembles.

Jonas is passionate about contemporary music and working with composers and of the idea of mixing up genres and arts, and he constantly brings the question of transmission into focus: Meeting and communicating with his audience means everything to

Jonas and in recent years all of the above has been

expressed and experienced not least in numerous concerts, concert series, recordings and projects initiated by Jonas and qualified collaborators of his.

Over the years Jonas has premiered 34 chamber music and solo pieces and has in recent years been working with composers such as Bent Sørensen, Poul Ruders, Hans Abrahamsen, Simon Steen-Andersen, Matias Vestergård, Lil Lacy, Mette Nielsen, and Birgitte Alsted.

Christine Pryn, a graduate of the Danish National Academy of Music and the Folkwang-Hochschule Essen, has performed in more than 25 countries across Europe, Asia, and North America.

She has received numerous prizes, including the Danish Music Critics' Award, the Polish Gloria Artis medal, Gladsaxe Music Prize, the Léonie Sonning Talent Prize and The Award of the Danish Composers' Society

Praised for her impeccable technique, compelling musicality, and artistic authority, Christine has appeared as a soloist with orchestras such as the Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra, the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, and the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra.

Deeply committed to contemporary music, she has premiered more than 150 solo and chamber works. Alongside this, she is passionate about uncovering hidden gems of the classical repertoire and has introduced several lesser-known composers to Danish audiences. In 2010, she founded Rudersdal Sommerkonserter, an international music festival, and has served as its artistic director ever since.

www.christinepryn.dk

Marie Stockmarr Becker pursues a diverse musical path engaging in a range of musical expressions, including early music on period instruments, contemporary music and improvisation. She performs across Scandinavia, Europe and beyond.

As principal violist of the Basel Sinfonietta — an orchestra specialized in contemporary music — she has collaborated with artists such as Laurie Anderson and Heinz Holliger.

Over the years, Marie has presented numerous world premieres of solo, chamber, and orchestral music. She is member of the acclaimed Icelandic ensemble Nordic Affect and the danish baroque orchestra Concerto Copenhagen.

A dedicated chamber musician with a particular passion for the viola's early repertoire, Marie enjoys bringing her instrument into the limelight, introducing audiences to unknown or forgotten music. In 2024, she received a one-year work grant from the Swedish Arts Grants Committee to develop her projects around the early viola repertoire.

www.mariestockmarrbecker.com

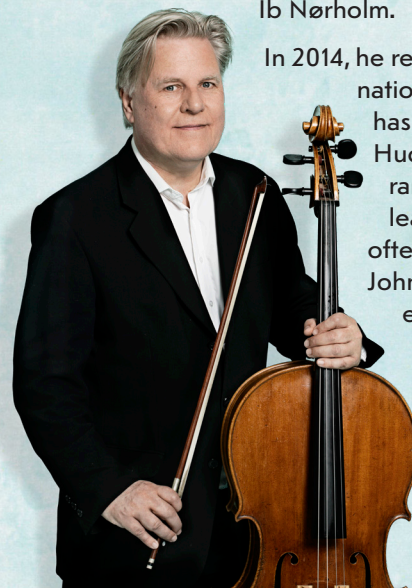


John Ehde has performed as a soloist and chamber musician across the USA, Europe, Asia, and Canada. For many years, he was a member of the renowned LINensemble and has released numerous acclaimed recordings. While studying in Vienna, he performed with the Vienna Philharmonic and later he became principal cellist of the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra.

He has premiered many works written for him and worked closely with composers such as Per Nørgård, Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, and Ib Nørholm.

In 2014, he represented Scandinavia at the International Cello Festival in Canada and has played at major festivals including Huddersfield and Hong Kong Musicarama. He also collaborates with leading Danish jazz musicians and is often praised for his cello's warm sound. John is a sought-after teacher with engagements at Scandinavian music academies. He is also in demand as a conductor and has led many Scandinavian orchestras, as well as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

www.ehde.dk



Manuel Esperilla, piano, is a prizewinner of several competitions, including the Ciudad de Albacete and the Rotaract Club Palma de Mallorca piano competitions. He is an active soloist and chamber musician, as well as an orchestral pianist with the Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Malmö Symphony Orchestra, and Arctic Philharmonic, among others.

As a member of Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen, he has appeared at numerous festivals across Europe, including Klang Festival (Copenhagen), Tage für Neue Musik (Zürich), Festival Musica (Strasbourg), and the Sound Ways Festival (Saint Petersburg). Manuel has premiered, performed, and recorded works by composers such as Pierre Boulez (Danish premiere of *Dérive 2*), Hans Abrahamsen, Thomas Adès, Kaija Saariaho, Poul Ruders, Mauro Lanza, Philippe Hurel, Dai Fujikura, Gérard Zinsstag, Britta Byström, Niels Rosing-Schow, and Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen.

In addition to his performing career, he has taught at music academies in Cáceres and Madrid and is currently employed at the Royal Danish Academy of Music.





OVER THE ABYSS

by Christine Pryn

Eastern European music from the 20th century has fascinated me for as long as I can remember. And in a way, Rudersdal Chamber Players was born from that music, as it was the Russian-born composer Lera Auerbach and her husband, Rafael DeStella, who gave me the idea for the ensemble after visiting the Rudersdal Sommerkonserter in 2017.

We live in a privileged region in what is, in many ways, an idyllic country. Those of us born after World War II have more or less taken blessings such as democracy, freedom of speech, and peace for granted.

Without resorting to the old cliché of the suffering artist toiling away in a cold attic yet producing immortal masterpieces, it remains a fact that conditions were entirely different in the Eastern bloc.

They didn't have the same freedom to turn everything upside down, question the authorities and experiment as we did in the West in the '60s and '70s. On the other hand, they received an elite and rigorous musical education — Elena Firsova has told me that they had to submit a fugue every week.

As a composer, one had to navigate censorship and live in fear of the consequences of displeasing the authorities. Naturally, that filtered out anyone for whom composing wasn't an almost existential necessity.

The music is therefore marked by gravity, seriousness, and determination — and it leaves a strong impression. You are held over the abyss and not allowed to remain untouched. This is not music you can switch off at 4

p.m. and go home from without a care. Notions like comfort — and the much-loved Danish *hygge* — are entirely absent.

In 2019, Rudersdal Chamber Players began a collaboration with Elena Firsova and Dmitri Smirnov, both of whom wrote a piano quartet for us. It was a deeply inspiring encounter. Both were warmhearted and modest, and one could sense how their love for music and for each other had grown inseparable. Rarely have I received new works and felt so certain that they are long-lasting music with qualities that will resonate far into the future.

Eight months later, we found ourselves in a pandemic. Dmitri was hospitalized with COVID-19, and while I was out walking in the woods north of Copenhagen, Elena wrote to me that the doctors had said he would die that day. Later — still on my walk — I saw condolences begin to appear on his Facebook page. It was surreal and profoundly tragic.

We would have loved to commission more works from Dmitri, but we are grateful for the one masterpiece he wrote for us — just as we are grateful for the ongoing collaboration with Elena. She is now one of the last living representatives of the Soviet musical tradition, which also includes figures like Schnittke, Gubaidulina, and Denisov.

Firsova and Smirnov combine artistic necessity with sublime craftsmanship, and for a performer, working with their music — and being a small part of this important chapter in music history — gives life meaning!

Dmitri Smirnov and Elena Firsova during their visit to Denmark in 2019 – including an outing to Lake Esrum and concerts at Rudersdal Sommerkoncerter.





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LOVE AND LOSS

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SMIRNOV

1. Abel (1991).....13:15
2. to be or not to be... (2018-19).....15:06

FIRSOVA

Piano Quartet No 2 Four Seasons (2019)

3. Winter.....2:23
4. Spring.....5:11
5. Summer.....1:47
6. Autumn.....6:43
7. Quartet for the Time of Grief (2023)..10:22

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