STRINGWOOD
CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL
FestivalConcertTwo
ASTRID SCHWEEN, 'cello u JOHN JENSEN, piano

Benjamin Britten

Claude Debussy

Cesar Franck

Thursday, August 13, 2026
Sons of Norway Hall
Lanesboro, Minnesota
7pm

Program
Voices in Dialogue

Stringwood welcomes two extraordinary artists whose careers have been shaped by a passion for chamber music and a commitment to sharing its richness with new generations of musicians. Astrid Schween and John Jensen —artists celebrated not only for their technical mastery but also for their generosity as teachers and collaborators—have selected program that traces the expressive possibilities of the cello across three generations of composers: Claude Debussy, Benjamin Britten, and César Franck. This recital embodies the spirit of Stringwood itself. It is an evening of listening, conversation, and discovery.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Sonata for Cello & Piano (1915)

I. Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto
II. Sérénade: Modérément animé
III. Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux Oscilante

Claude Debussy's Sonata for Cello and Piano emerged during one of the most turbulent periods of the composer's life. France was engulfed in the First World War, and Debussy, already battling cancer, envisioned a series of six sonatas that would honor the traditions of French music while pointing toward an entirely new musical language. Only three were completed before his death, with the cello sonata becoming the first. Compact in scale yet remarkably inventive, the work abandons the expansive rhetoric of Romanticism in favor of concise gestures, shimmering harmonies, and an almost improvisatory sense of freedom.

The opening movement unfolds with an air of quiet mystery before yielding to playful exchanges between the instruments. Moments of melancholy are interrupted by flashes of wit, sudden shifts of mood, and passages that seem to suspend time altogether. The cello is asked to sing, whisper, dance, and declaim, while the piano provides an ever-changing palette of color and atmosphere. Rather than dazzling through sheer virtuosity, Debussy invites listeners into a world where subtle inflections, unexpected harmonies, and delicate timbres become the true source of expressive power. More than a century after its premiere, the sonata continues to sound remarkably fresh and modern.

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Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Cello Sonata in C major, Op.65 (1961)

I. Dialogo. Allegro
II. Scherzo–Pizzicato. Allegretto
III. Elegia. Lento
IV. Marcia. Energico
V. Moto perpetuo. Presto

Benjamin Britten's Cello Sonata in C major, Op. 65 (1961) inhabits a strikingly different musical world while sharing Debussy's fascination with color and dialogue. Britten composed the work for the legendary Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich after hearing him perform in London. Their meeting blossomed into one of the twentieth century's most celebrated artistic partnerships, inspiring Britten to write a series of major works that transformed the cello repertoire.

The sonata's five contrasting movements reveal every facet of the instrument's personality. Lyrical melodies give way to biting humor, energetic dances dissolve into moments of haunting stillness, and brilliant technical passages alternate with music of profound intimacy. Britten's rhythmic ingenuity and inventive textures continually surprise the listener, while the piano remains an equal dramatic voice rather than a supporting accompaniment. Particularly memorable is the final Moto Perpetuo, whose relentless energy demands extraordinary precision and stamina from both performers. Throughout the work, Britten balances intellectual sophistication with direct emotional expression, creating music that feels both modern and deeply human.

Cesar Franck (1822-1890)

Sonata in A major (1886)

I. Allegretto ben moderato
II. Allegro
III. Ben moderato. Recitativo-Fantasia
IV. Allegretto poco mosso

The recital concludes with César Franck's Sonata in A major, heard in its beloved transcription for cello and piano. Originally composed in 1886 as a wedding gift for the great Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, the sonata quickly became one of the crowning achievements of the Romantic chamber music repertoire. Its enduring appeal lies not only in its memorable melodies but also in Franck's masterful use of cyclical form, allowing themes introduced early in the work to return later in transformed and unexpected ways. This architectural unity gives the sonata a remarkable sense of narrative continuity, as though the music itself remembers where it has been while continually looking ahead.

The cello's warm, resonant voice lends exceptional depth to Franck's soaring melodic lines, making the transcription feel entirely natural. The opening movement unfolds with gentle lyricism and quiet anticipation before the passionate second movement erupts with dramatic intensity. A reflective recitative-fantasia offers moments of introspection and improvisatory freedom before the radiant final movement crowns the sonata with one of chamber music's most joyful conclusions—a luminous canon in which cello and piano weave together in graceful imitation, arriving at a triumphant affirmation of hope and unity.

CELLIST ASTRID SCHWEEN has gained a rich following as a soloist, chamber artist and teacher. Since joining the Juilliard String Quartet and Juilliard Cello Faculty in 2016, she has appeared at many of the world's great concert halls and collaborated with performers Itzhak Perlman, Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Emmanuel Ax. She has been featured on National Public Radio, in The Strad magazine, and as an invited speaker at the Library of Congress.

Astrid Schween made her concerto debut with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic at age 16. She received her degrees from the Juilliard School, and was mentored in London by the great cellist Jacqueline DuPré. Other teachers included Leonard Rose, Harvey Shapiro and Bernard Greenhouse. During summers at the Marlboro Festival, she performed with Rudolf Serkin and Joshua Bell.

As a member of the Lark Quartet, she received the Naumburg Chamber Music Award and Gold Medal at the Shostakovich International Competition.

Recent recitals and master classes have taken her to Houston, Denver, Cleveland, Memphis, Cincinnati and San Francisco, with festival appearances at Tanglewood, where she performed in recital with Shai Wosner, and the Seattle Chamber Music Festival, where she collaborated with James Ehnes and Orion Weiss.

Astrid Schween served as longtime faculty at the Perlman Music Program and Interlochen Center for the Arts. Her recordings appear on the Sony, Arabesque, Decca/Argo, CRI, New World, JRI, Centaur, NAR, and Point labels. In 2024, she contributed a series of instructional videos for the popular platform ToneBase. u

PIANIST JOHN JENSEN is a versatile pianist whose career spans the worlds of classical music, jazz, recording, and education. Known for his imaginative artistry, effortless improvisation, remarkable musical memory, and collaborative spirit, he brings equal conviction to contemporary masterworks, chamber music, and timeless jazz standards, making him a sought-after performer and musical partner.

A Southern California native, Jensen studied at Occidental College and the University of Southern California, where he worked with distinguished teachers including John Crown and Ingolf Dahl. Early in his career he performed extensively throughout Los Angeles, including appearances on The Andy Williams Show, before embarking on international tours with the Mirecourt Trio.

Since making Minnesota his home, Jensen has become a familiar presence on the region's musical landscape, performing with the Minnesota Orchestra, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and VocalEssence, while also inspiring students and leading music programs. His acclaimed recordings range from the music of Charles Ives and Paul Reale to classic jazz repertoire, reflecting the breadth and curiosity that have defined his lifelong musical journey. u

STRINGWOOD 2026 PERFORMANCES

August 11 - FestivalConcertOne
August 13 - FestivalConcertTwo
August 14 - First Friday Concert (7pm) Sons of Norway Hall
August 15/16 - Saturday Gallery & Sunday Church performances
August 15 - Spillville Tour Concert (3pm) St. Wenceslaus Church
August 18 - FestivalConcertThree
August 20 - FestivalConcertFour
August 21 - 2nd Friday Concert (7pm) Urness Recital Hall (St. Olaf), Northfield
August 22 - Young Artist Concert (7pm) Elstad Church, Lanesboro
August 23 - Young Artist Final Concert (1pm) 1st Congregational Church, Winona

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts & cultural heritage fund.