

The trench cello sounds again

World-renowned cellist Steven Isserlis has recorded music from the First World War era on an instrument with a remarkable and moving story. Claire Jackson reports

DEBUSSY'S haunting cello sonata (1915) is at once plaintive and ecstatic in Steven Isserlis's hands. The work, played on the Marquis de Corberon Stradivarius of 1726, on loan from the Royal Academy of Music, produces a multi-faceted tone and opens the 'The Cello in Wartime', a thought-provoking, beautiful collection of pieces written during the First World War.

Then, the cello's voice changes: we hear 'The Swan' from Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals*. The tone is softer, a little shallower, perhaps, but just as lovely. Mr Isserlis has swapped his Stradivarius for the 'trench cello', an instrument that resonates with the emotions weaving through this repertoire.

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The trench cello belonged to Harold Triggs, a keen amateur cellist in the Royal Sussex Regiment. It was one of several similar 'travelling' cellos that were intended to be more portable than their counterparts proper for travels presumably more pleasurable than a stint in the trenches, which is where Triggs and his cello found themselves.

Triggs wasn't the only musician to perform in the trenches: the Australian composer F. S. Kelly, who was killed, detailed the music he played during trench concerts in his diaries, accounts



Steven Isserlis with the trench cello, which was played at the Front

Mr Isserlis used to inform his programming. 'I wanted to play things Triggs might have played during the war,' he explains.

'Alongside the Saint-Saëns, I chose a hymn, a popular song and *God Save the King*. I wasn't sure I could do "The Swan", as there are a couple of notes that don't speak on the trench cello, but, in fact, that's one of the pieces that people talk about the most.'

It's unsurprising that a couple of notes are problematic on the trench cello, because the instrument is rather rudimentary—it can be assembled in less than five minutes. The body is rectangular, with a removable neck secured with a normal mortise joint, fixed to a button at the top of the back with a brass bolt. The fingerboard slides into place on the neck and the top nut is added, as are the endpin holder, tailpiece, bridge and strings.

The back slides out so that all the fixtures and fittings can be placed inside the box, including the bow—when it's packed up,

the cello looks like an ammunition box, the item soldiers often used to form instruments. 'With conventional cellos, you can move the sound post around or adjust the bridge,' says Mr Isserlis. 'This is essentially a box with some holes, but it sounds lovely.'

Mr Isserlis learnt of the cello through his friend Charles Beare in 2014. Mr Beare, an expert in the field of fine antique stringed instruments and bows, is from the historic family business J. & A. Beare that has served elite musicians and collectors since 1892. 'I mentioned that we'd fished the cello out of storage and Steven was interested right away,' remembers Mr Beare. Days later, the musician travelled to Mr Beare's home in Kent to try it.

'It took a few minutes to adjust my playing, but, after that, we connected,' reports Mr Isserlis.

So much so, that, later that same year, the cellist played it in a special Parliamentary Service of Remembrance in Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day, held to



Have cello, will travel: even in the trenches, music flourished, with impromptu concerts blocking, at least for a time, the sound of the guns

commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. 'It was a great moment for us all,' reflects Mr Beare.

Although there are no current plans to perform with the trench cello in public, Mr Isserlis reveals that he would be in favour of reconnecting with his old friend for the centenary celebrations. In the meantime, it remains with Mr Beare, who's writing a book about its history. He's well placed for this, given that his firm has owned the cello since 1962.

'Harold Triggs came to us and asked for £15, together with the assurance that it would have

a home,' he says, adding: 'It's been with us ever since.' Triggs died soon afterwards, in 1964.

Mr Beare is reticent about putting a price on the trench cello. He knows of at least five portable cellos in existence, probably made 'for holidays, cruise liners and the sorts of places where one didn't want to make a lot of noise', but none of these are known to have gone to the trenches and probably don't have such a curious story behind them, either.

'We don't know a huge amount about Triggs, but we know that,

towards the end of the war, he was captured by the Germans during a counterattack,' explains Mr Beare. 'He didn't see the cello again until years later, in the late 1950s, when he was walking along the beach at Brighton and passed someone holding it!'

Hidden on the back is an inscription written in 1962 by war poet Edmund Blunden who, like Triggs, was an officer in the Royal Sussex. It recalls their time together at Ypres and expresses his pleasure at being reunited with the cello, almost 50 years

after hearing it in the trenches. There's also an invitation stuck to the instrument, which dates from 1916, when Triggs was summoned by the corps commander to play for the officers. Mr Beare doesn't have any plans to sell it, although, as he points out, 'no one comes to the shop and says "have you got a trench cello?". I offered it to the Royal Sussex Regiment Museum, but that's since closed down'.

For now, the trench cello stays where Triggs intended, although there's no doubt the veteran

would be pleased to see it loaned to Mr Isserlis once in a while. *'The Cello in Wartime' album, with works by Fauré, Novello, Parry and Webern, with pianist Connie Shih, is available from BIS Records (bis.se) or Amazon. Steven Isserlis's CD of Chopin and Schubert sonatas is out now from Hyperion Records. He will be playing Schumann and Fauré at Wigmore Hall, London W1, on November 17 (020-7935 2141) and Beethoven at the Cambridge Music Festival on November 22 (01223 357851)*