

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra No 1 in A minor, Opus 33

I Allegro non troppo -

II Allegretto con moto - (Cadenza) -

III Tempo Primo

France was feeling battered and bruised in the early 1870s. The country had been defeated in the Franco-Prussian War, Napoleon's Second Empire had fallen, and the capital had erupted with fresh protests and revolts. After a two-month attempt to establish control, the insurgent government known as the Paris Commune fell in May 1871.

As the nation tried to stabilize, national pride soared. Musically, that manifested itself in distaste for German styles and a quest to cultivate all that was quintessentially French. Progressive musicians recognized the need to develop distinctly French instrumental and orchestral music to counterbalance the country's traditional preoccupation with music for voice.

In 1871, an organization sprang up with the primary objective of addressing these concerns. The motto of the Société Nationale de Musique was simply *Ars Gallica* - 'French art'. It found an unlikely hero in Camille Saint-Saëns, a progressive composer but one who had long admired the musical innovations brought to bear by Liszt and Wagner (yes, Germans).

In truth, Saint-Saëns's regard for French traditions was just as strong. He was a genuine cosmopolitan: traveler, astronomer, linguist, historian, archeologist, philosopher and teacher. He had been a child prodigy pianist and as an adult composer his style never stopped evolving. According to his colleague Charles Gounod, Saint-Saëns could 'play the orchestra as he played the piano'. His most famous works, including the spellbinding *Carnival of the Animals*, prove as much.

That piece was some way off in 1872 when Saint-Saëns wrote a sonata for cello, and immediately thereafter a Cello Concerto that the Société Nationale de Musique took to its heart. Perhaps the Society recognized what was inherently French about the concerto: its combination of lightness of utterance with a deep sensual expressivity, all delivered through melodies that were noted by one observer for their 'haunting otherworldliness'.

It was the Society that arranged the first performance of the work, as part of the Concerts du Conservatoire series, on 19 January 1873 (it was written the previous November). Saint-Saëns' friend August Tolbecque, also the work's dedicatee, was the soloist.

The French music specialist Roger Nichols cites two particular influences on the concerto. One was the composer's friendship with Auguste-Joseph Franchomme, a cellist whose light bowing technique came to embody a particular cello playing style thought of as quintessentially French (and easily associated with this concerto). The other influence, according to Nichols, was the death of the composer's great aunt Charlotte in 1772, which affected him deeply. Bereavement might well have provided the undertow of profundity that sets that lightness of touch in such alluring relief.

Either way, Saint-Saëns evidently had a feel for the cello's principle sound characteristics - its combination of dignity and passion, its depth of colour and its suggestion of the contours of the

human voice. The cello's natural lyricism is at the forefront of the concerto, even its opening gesture - a rapid stream of triplets from the soloist that forms the concerto's recurring motto. The three movements continue without a break, that motto forming the touchstone for the whole as it undergoes recursions and transformations along the lines of the developmental techniques pioneered by Liszt.

Delicate balance is essential in any concerto for the soft-spoken cello (performances on 'period' instruments, like today's, help restore that sense of balance). Still, it would have been easy for listeners to interpret the score's Apollonian perfection as a sign of Saint-Saëns playing safe following recent innovations that had attracted criticism. In truth, the concerto is full of unusual features even beyond the threading of that opening theme through a continuous stream of music. The opening movement appears to grind momentarily to a halt in deference to the 'second movement' 'Allegretto', a minuet* that isn't a minuet (and with a solo cadenza* in the place of the normal section). This movement has been compared to a music box in its decorative charm, as muted strings with no discernible bass rooting set up a marked contrast with the final Allegro that follows.

Everywhere in the concerto, the main theme introduced by the cello is shown to be unusually ripe and malleable in its derivations - lyrical and dramatic, conversational and expansive. The solo instrument appears to sing even when, as right at the beginning, it could be said to stutter. As his peer the author Romain Rolland wrote, Saint-Saëns managed to 'bring into the midst of our modern restlessness something of the sweetness and clarity of past periods, something that seems like fragments of a vanished world.'

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra No 2 in D minor, Opus 119

I Allegro moderato e maestoso

II Allegro non troppo

Three decades after Saint-Saëns' first cello concerto, France was experiencing upheavals more musical than political. 1902 was the year Claude Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* was first performed - a work that extended Debussy's desire to move the art of music in a radical new direction, away from the central European idea of taking a melody and developing it through conversation.

Debussy's focus on musical texture and colour was just too modern for Saint-Saëns, who disapproved of his younger colleague's innovations and failed to recognize how they would usher the art of music into a vital new age. Saint-Saëns was clinging to eighteenth-century principles. But even in his seventies, he still held the reigns of musical power in Paris.

Even so, the composer's second cello concerto, written in 1902, is not without a determination to sound different. It was written for a cellist whose sensibilities contrasted markedly with those of either Tolbecque or Franchomme. He wasn't even French. Joseph Hollman was born in Holland and became known for a muscular, energetic playing style that seems to have drawn Saint-Saëns away from the sensuality of his first concerto towards something more intense and ambitious. Today's

performance on historically appropriate instruments - rare for this music - is likely to take us even closer to the sound of that first performance.

At least Saint-Saëns had the openness to respond to Hollman's playing style. Not everyone was so accommodating. At the premiere in Paris on 5 February 1905, the critic Jean Chantavoine wrote of Hollman's 'thrown about hair, stormy shoulders, furious brow and athletic double-stopping'. But it was Chantavoine's summary of the work as 'bad music well written' that particularly stung Saint-Saëns. Plenty countered that the musical material in this second concerto was, self-evidently, even finer than that in the first.

This is certainly a far more difficult piece to play for the soloist (another tribute to Hollman). It includes dangerously exposed passages, wide leaps, the ability to play harmonics (the often inaudible 'overtones' produced by bowing the strings lightly) and plenteous chords or 'double-stops'. Much of the solo part had to be written on two staves of music. Perhaps that explains Hollman's physical disposition as described by Chantavoine. Soon after its first performance, Gabriel Fauré chose the concerto as a test piece for assessing the abilities of the Paris Conservatoire's cello class.

The concerto is structured in two parts of two sections each. In common with its predecessor, it spins a web of music almost entirely from its opening gesture. This is a fiery, long-tailed but shapely theme thrust out by the soloist at the beginning of the piece - part polonaise*, part bolero*. It dominates the first part of the concerto until, again like its predecessor, the work appears to stop in its tracks.

In this case, it gives way to a tender 'Andante sostenuto*', ushered in by a pair of clarinets playing in parallel, followed by a cello melody derived from the upward portion of the opening tune. The soloist then muses on detailed figurations and complex elaborations as woodwinds surreptitiously add color. The section ends as the cellist climbs upwards on harmonics - the serene notes produced by the overtone spectrum when the strings are lightly stroked by the bow - and a muted horn apparently lulls it into slumber.

Agitated strings form the slipway from which the second part of the concerto is launched - the cellist splashing into perpetual motion while the woodwinds comment from the sidelines with the very material the soloist introduced at the start of the work. The frantic mood dissipates for the solo cadenza, formed like an old-style recitative or speech song that climbs to the top of the cello's register (again based on the concerto's opening), before low-key trumpet fanfares signals a reprise of both the opening tune and the 'Andante sostenuto' theme flipped upside down. We are back to the mood of the concerto's beginning.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No 2 in D major, Opus 73

I Allegro non troppo

II Adagio non troppo

III Allegretto grazioso quasi andantino

IV Allegro con spirit

Like Saint-Saëns, Johannes Brahms has a reputation as a fusty conservative. But that only obscures his determination to reinvent traditional methods to transformative effect. Brahms was diligent, conscientious and severely self-critical - predicaments magnified by the timing of his birth in the shadow of Beethoven, dead for six years but still a towering figure.

By the age of 40, Brahms had completed only four works for orchestra and sketched just one symphony (it would take him two decades to finish). The composer would, eventually, prove the natural successor to Beethoven - especially in the domain of the symphony. From an orchestra basically the size of Beethoven's, Brahms mined textures of unprecedented imagination. He treated simple musical ideas with thrilling resourcefulness. He reexamined the old-school discipline of counterpoint* while finding a new sense of pathos and conflict in it - particularly in the near-constant tussle between major and minor keys that can seem to tear at his orchestra from within.

That latter feature is particularly apparent in the sunshine-and-clouds of Brahms's Symphony No 2 - many a listener's favorite Brahms symphony. This work flowed rather more easily onto the page than its predecessor. It was written in just four months at the lakeside resort of Pörtschach, in the summer of 1877 (five years after Saint-Saëns's first cello concerto). If Brahms's first symphony was an epic tussle, this one was a rural idyll. But a troubled one.

Brahms was quizzed by colleagues as to why he insisted on injecting dark thoughts and moods into such a serene symphony (mostly via kettle drums and trombones). 'I would have to admit that I am a thoroughly melancholy person,' responded the composer in one instance.

In truth, the agile mood swings of the symphony, particularly of its opening movement, only make the music more interesting. The movement - indeed the whole symphony - is built almost entirely on the three pitches heard right at the start on low strings. When the apparently serene melody is visited by a drum roll and a severe dirge from trombones and a tuba, an already dense musical conversation turns ominous. It sounds almost as if Brahms is straining to get back to the joyous atmosphere of the waltz-fantasy established at the movement's opening.

In the slow second movement, the cautious opening music dispensed by the cellos gives way to a tune of wondrous expanse and optimism. But the battle isn't won, and the two ideas - and major and minor keys - continue to vie for supremacy throughout the course of music whose weight is dispiriting despite its warming glow. The mood lightens again at the outset of the third movement, a graceful 'Andante'* introduced by an oboe playing a variation on the three notes that opened the symphony. This movement is all push-and-pull, rhythmic escapades included, as light, waltz-like music is forced to give way to rambunctious rants.

Brahms's final movement provides the payoff he surely felt his listeners deserved following so much emotional turmoil. It opens with brooding tensions that are thrillingly obliterated by the orchestra's sudden explosion into a positivity that could, with all its complex rhythmic innards, collapse into despair or proceed headlong into joy. The latter wins out, and the orchestra celebrates it by reimagining the movement's doleful second theme as a triumphant one. Not even the trombones feel the need to sully the mood.

Program notes by Andrew Mellor © 2023

*glossary

ALLEGRETTO

A speed indication suggesting, in Italian, a fairly brisk speed.

MINUET

A slow and gallant dance form popular in the 18th century, whose stately rhythms were often used by composers as a framework for the movement of a symphony.

COUNTERPOINT

Music that combines a number of interwoven musical lines, each maintaining its autonomy while the whole produces particular harmonies.

ANDANTE

A speed indication suggesting, in Italian, a moderate or slow speed.

ANDANTE SOSTENUTO

An Andante, but slightly slower or more drawn-out.

CADENZA

A monologue usually played by a concerto soloist, that riffs on themes already heard in a piece and often shows off the technical capabilities of the player.

POLONAISE

A slow dance, with three steps, originating in Poland.

BOLERO

A sultry dance in three steps, originating in Spain, characterized by sharp turns, sudden pauses and stamping of the feet.