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Cello Concertos

C.P.E. BACH | BLOCH | BOCCHERINI | BRUCH | DVOŘÁK | ELGAR
FAURÉ | FINZI | GINASTERA | HAYDN | KABALEVSKY | KHACHATURIAN
LALO | LEO | LUTOSŁAWSKI | MONN | PLATTI | PORPORA
SAINT-SAËNS | SCHUMANN | SHOSTAKOVICH | TCHAIKOVSKY | VIVALDI

BRILLIANT CLASSICS

The cello concerto genre has a relatively short history. Before the 19th century, the only composers of stature who wrote such works were Vivaldi, C.P.E. Bach, Haydn and Boccherini. Considering the problem inherent in the cello's lower register, the potential difficulty of projecting its tone against the weight of an orchestra, it is rather ironic that most of the great concertos for the instrument were composed later than the Baroque or Classical periods. The orchestra of these earlier periods was smaller and lighter – a more accommodating accompaniment for the cello – whereas during the 19th century the symphony orchestra was significantly expanded, so that composers had to take more care to avoid overwhelming the soloist.

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) composed several hundred concertos while employed as a violin teacher (and, from 1716, as 'maestro dei concerti') at the Venetian girls' orphanage known as Ospedale della Pietà. It is believed that many of these girls were the unwanted children of courtesans. So outstanding was the orchestra of this institution that it became one of the city's main tourist attractions. The indefatigable Vivaldi composed nearly 30 cello concertos and six cello sonatas. His concertos are almost certainly the very first composed for the cello, though Albinoni included soloistic obbligato parts for the instrument in his Opus 2 and Opus 5. Vivaldi's cello concertos are typically inventive and diverse, with eloquent slow movements. Stravinsky was known for his witty, often barbed remarks, but his suggestion that Vivaldi wrote the same concerto several hundred times is far-fetched. Belying their historical position as examples of the cello concerto in its infancy, the majority are mature works with adventurous solo parts. Vivaldi often wrote specifically for the talented girls of the orphanage, but he composed some of these cello concertos on commission for cellists from various parts of Europe.

Though his life began and ended in Naples, **Nicola Porpora** (1686–1768) travelled restlessly – Venice, Vienna, Dresden and London, where he directed an opera house – relatively unsuccessfully – in competition with Handel's. Porpora composed nearly 50 operas and was the most celebrated singing teacher of his day. Joseph Haydn acknowledged that with Porpora he 'benefited a great deal in voice, composition and the Italian language'. Influenced by the current operatic style, Porpora's melodic lines are amply ornamented, a quality evident in the solo writing of his one cello concerto. He also composed six cello sonatas.

The Viennese composer **Matthias Georg Monn** (1717–1750) wrote 16 symphonies, several keyboard concertos and a cello concerto in G minor. This should not be confused with a cello concerto in D major which Schoenberg very freely arranged for Pablo Casals from a keyboard concerto by Monn. Schoenberg's evident admiration of Monn's music extended to his editing of a few other works, including Monn's fine, characterful Cello Concerto in G minor. Monn died of tuberculosis at the age of 33.

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) made phenomenal contributions to the history of the symphony, the string quartet, the piano sonata and the piano trio. He generally found concerto form less stimulating to his creative imagination, but he did compose several fine examples. In 1961 the unearthing of a set of parts for Haydn's Cello Concerto in C major in Radenín Castle (now in the Czech Republic) proved to be one of the most exciting discoveries in 20th-century musicology. Probably dating from the early 1760s, the concerto is believed to have been composed for Joseph Weigl, principal cellist of Haydn's orchestra. This is the more rhythmically arresting of Haydn's authentic cello concertos. At one time the Concerto in D major, Hoboken VIIb:4 was considered to be authentic, whereas the other concerto in the same key – Hoboken VIIb:2 – was thought to have been written by Anton Kraft, principal cellist of Haydn's Eszterháza orchestra from 1778–90. Today the roles are reversed, most scholars finding little stylistic evidence suggesting Haydn as the composer of Hoboken VIIb:4. The D major Concerto Hoboken VIIb:2 is a more expansive work than the C major Concerto, with a particularly broad, leisurely opening movement.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788) was the most individual talent among Bach's composer-sons. His concertos span 55 years – almost his entire career – most of them composed while he was in the employment of Frederick the Great. The majority are for keyboard, but C.P.E. made alternative versions of a few of these for other instruments, including at least three for cello. However, some scholars now believe that these cello versions may be the originals. Of the three cello concertos (dating from the early 1750s), the A minor work begins with an Allegro assai typical of the composer's most impetuous manner. Each of these concertos is a valued addition to the repertoire.

Composer and oboist **Giovanni Benedetto Platti** (1697–1763) was born in Padua but moved to Germany in 1722 to work for the Prince-Bishop of Bamberg and Würzburg, Johann Philipp Franz von Schönborn. The bishop's brother was an enthusiastic cellist, so it seems likely that Platti intended these three concertos with obbligato cello (*c.*1724) for him. Platti also adapted Corelli's Opus 5 violin sonatas as concerti grossi including a solo cello and composed 12 sonatas for cello and continuo. As well as being influenced by the galant style evolving from the late Baroque, Platti also absorbed some German musical characteristics as he developed.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) composed 15 symphonies, 15 string quartets and two concertos each for piano, violin and cello. The two cello concertos are both among the most

outstanding works in the instrument's repertoire. Many composers have been inspired by a particular performer to write some of their greatest works. Shostakovich wrote both of these concertos with the phenomenal artistry of Mstislav Rostropovich, his Russian compatriot, in mind. The first (1959), including a major role for solo horn, is frequently performed, whereas the second (1966), a more complex work of tremendous imaginative range, is relatively neglected.

Born at Lucca, **Luigi Boccherini** (1743–1805) learnt the cello from the age of five and would become a virtuoso. In the late 1760s he travelled to Madrid, where he was employed by the Spanish royal family. The composition list of this very prolific composer includes over a hundred string quintets with two cellos – an unusual scoring which he pioneered – nearly as many string quartets, about a dozen quintets for strings and guitar, about 30 symphonies and a dozen cello concertos.

Boccherini's typical elegance, urbanity and charm predominate in the concertos, with considerable virtuosic demands on the soloist's technique, often in the uppermost register.

Leonardo Leo (1694–1744) was one of the leading composers of the so-called 'Neopolitan School', his reputation being founded especially upon his church music and theatre music. Leo's instrumental music, which includes six cello concertos (1737–38), combines stylistic features of the Baroque period (e.g. in his fugal movements) with forward-looking characteristics of the galant or early Classical manner – simpler textures with more emphasis on singing melodic lines. An unusual feature of these engaging and lyrical cello concertos is the four- or five-movement structure. One of Leo's patrons was Domenico Marzio Carafa, Duke of Maddaloni, who was an amateur cellist, so it is very likely that he would have commissioned these concertos.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) composed his Variations on a Rococo Theme in 1876 for a cellist friend, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen. After the work's premiere Fitzenhagen subsequently persuaded Tchaikovsky to change the order of the variations and to remove one completely, for what he believed would be greater effectiveness. Initially angry, Tchaikovsky reluctantly agreed to Fitzenhagen's re-ordered arrangement, which remains the standard, more commonly performed version. However, the composer's original has been gradually re-established as an alternative.

In the Rococo Variations Tchaikovsky shows his deep affinity with Mozartian poise and grace, also manifest in his incomparable ballet music. A few shorter works by Tchaikovsky exist in arrangements for cello. The best-known of these is the Andante cantabile, the poignant slow movement of his First String Quartet. Originally composed for cello, the Pezzo capriccioso is a fine but neglected piece, while the Nocturne, Op.19 No.4 is a highly effective arrangement from Six Pieces for solo piano.

Robert Schumann (1810–1856) composed his cello concerto in 1850. This is the first major concerto for the instrument since Boccherini's dozen examples dating from the 1780s. Schumann had briefly studied the cello, but now sought further advice from two local cellists in Düsseldorf. As in his other two concertos (for piano and violin), Schumann never allows technical display for its own sake obscure his characteristic qualities of poetic fantasy and intimacy. In the poetic slow movement the soloist plays a tender duet with the orchestral principal cello.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) wrote his First Cello Concerto in 1872. Defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 severely damaged French national pride. As part of the restoration of his nation's cultural credibility, Saint-Saëns played a major role in the revival of traditional forms – symphony, concerto, quartet and sonata. Two of his ten concertos are for cello, the first and most popular composed for the French cellist Auguste Tolbecque. Concise and melodically abundant, it must be reckoned as one of Saint-Saëns' most perfect works.

The Élégie by **Gabriel Fauré** (1845–1924) is one of the most eloquent shorter pieces in the cello repertoire. Originally intended as the slow movement of a sonata, this simple but powerful work dates from 1880. Fauré did complete two cello sonatas not many years before his death.

The German composer **Max Bruch** (1838–1920) completed his *Kol Nidrei* in 1880 in Liverpool, where he was chief conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra for three years. The Kol Nidre prayer is associated with Yom Kippur, but the Protestant Bruch considered his piece merely an artistic arrangement of folk material. Formally it is a set of variations on themes of Jewish origin.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) wrote his magnificent cello concerto between November 1894 and February 1895, near the end of his time in America. The weighty orchestration includes three trombones and tuba, but Dvořák's long experience enabled him to judiciously manage the solo/orchestra balance. This is one of the glories of the cello repertoire and the most frequently performed of all concertos for the instrument. 'Silent Woods' (*Czech*: Klid / *Ger.*: Waldesruhe) began life in 1884 as one of six piano-duet pieces entitled *From the Bohemian Forests* but Dvořák made two subsequent arrangements of this affecting piece for cello and piano and cello and orchestra. Dvořák composed his charming Rondo (1891) for Hanuš Wihan, the same cellist for whom he would write his concerto a few years later.

The Swiss composer **Ernest Bloch** (1880–1959) studied at the Brussels Conservatory, where his teachers included the virtuoso violinist Eugene Ysaÿe. In 1924 he took American citizenship, settling in Oregon in 1941. In the USA he held several major administrative and teaching positions. Many of his works take inspiration from his Jewish heritage, the best-known being

Schelomo: Rhapsodie Hébraïque for cello and orchestra (1915–16). Bloch intended the cello as the incarnation of Solomon, while the orchestra represents the world around the king and his experiences in life. This is a work of nobility and power, both declamatory and lyrical, with vividly imaginative orchestration.

Edward Elgar (1857–1934), the greatest British composer for over two hundred years, wrote his cello concerto in 1919. As the effects of the First World War, combined with personal illness and depression, led to a decline in his morale, Elgar had turned to the more intimate medium of chamber music in 1918, producing a string quartet, piano quintet and violin sonata. The four-movement Cello Concerto, his last major work, also explores rather introspective or meditative kinds of expression. This masterpiece is a more concise and restrained work than Elgar's two symphonies or violin concerto, but nevertheless its popularity approaches that of the Dvořák Cello Concerto.

Though of Jewish, partly Italian descent, **Gerald Finzi** (1901–1956) became one of the most quintessentially English composers. His musical language is generally intimate, unostentatious, yet distinctive. His relatively few orchestral, chamber and instrumental works are outnumbered by his word-settings, including dozens of songs and choral works. He wrote his cello concerto at the request of conductor John Barbirolli, completing the work in 1955. This is a characteristically lyrical and heartfelt piece, with a serene slow movement. A distinct element of unease is probably explained by Finzi's knowledge that he would not live long. The first BBC broadcast was given the night before he died.

The Argentine **Alberto Ginastera** (1916–1983) is one of the most important composers from South America. He studied at the Williams Conservatory in Buenos Aires and subsequently with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood. His list of compositions includes three operas, two ballets and many concertante works for solo instrument and orchestra – one harp concerto, two piano concertos, one violin concerto and two cello concertos. The latter, dating from 1968 and 1981 respectively, are less superficially attractive works than Ginastera's relatively familiar ballet scores for *Estancia* and *Panambí*. Often mysterious, brooding and astringent, these two concertos give an impression of the composer communing privately rather than with an audience, but they repay repeated listening.

Dmitry Kabalevsky (1904–1987) was born in St Petersburg, studied at the Moscow Conservatory (his teachers including Myaskovsky for composition) and would become a leading figure of the Soviet Union of Composers. Like Shostakovich, as a young man he provided the piano accompaniment for silent films. Artistically conservative, Kabalevsky espoused the cause of 'socialist realism', but he also made a major contribution to children's music education. He composed four symphonies, seven concertos and numerous works in most of the principal genres. Both Kabalevsky Cello Concertos (1948–9 and 1964 respectively) are fine, accessible works – neglected partly because they are overshadowed by the concertos of his compatriots Shostakovich and Prokofiev.

Though born in Tbilisi, Georgia, **Aram Khachaturian** (1903–1978) found the rather exotic cultural heritage of Armenia, his parents' home, a source of inspiration. He studied at the Gnessin Musical Institute, then the Moscow Conservatory, his teachers including Myaskovsky. The ballet scores for *Spartacus* and *Gayaneh* and music for the play *Masquerade* are his best-known works, but he also composed three symphonies, three concertos and other concertante works, film music, incidental music, chamber works, dozens of songs and piano pieces. His cello concerto of 1946 was the last of the three concertos which he wrote for the members of a distinguished piano trio – Lev Oborin (piano), David Oistrakh (violin) and Sviatoslav Knushevitsky (cello).

Édouard Lalo (1823–1892) learnt the violin and the cello at his local Conservatoire in Lille, before pursuing his studies in Paris. In 1876, two years after composing his celebrated *Symphonie espagnole*, the work which had brought him belated success, he wrote his attractive cello concerto for the Belgian-born Adolphe Fischer. The opening movement is alternately declamatory and lyrical, the intermezzo/scherzo and finale have Spanish elements, while Lalo's deftness as an orchestrator is evident.

The Polish **Witold Lutosławski** (1913–1994) was one of the outstanding composers of the latter half of the 20th century. His musical development, from his early folk-influenced works to the avant-garde music of his later years, amounts to a transformative process. His list of works includes a relatively early concerto for orchestra, four symphonies, a double concerto for oboe and harp, and concertos for piano and cello. His cello concerto, composed 1969–70 for Rostropovich, employs some aleatoric techniques and typical drama in the form of soloist/orchestra confrontation.