

2016

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The Singing Cello: The Use of Virtuosity and Lyricism in Selected Repertoire

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MUSC 480: Senior Inquiry

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May 9, 2016

In his treatise Johann Joachim Quantz described the role of the cellist as:

“...[S]omeone who intends to make it his profession will do well to apply himself above all else to becoming a good accompanist, for in this way he will make himself more useful and of greater service in ensembles... Good accompaniment is the chief quality demanded from this instrument. And even if accompanying and solo playing do not represent the same degree of excellence, a good accompanist is of greater service in an orchestra than a mediocre soloist.¹”

harmonic support for the ensemble, and that the cellist should focus primarily on the ability to accompany. The cellist should not indulge in solo performance, because that is not where they are needed in music society. The cello did play a major role in ensembles at the time, forcing cellists to focus their technique on the art of accompanying. This being said, as musical styles changed throughout history, the demands of the cello also evolved. As composers became more daring in terms of lyricism, length, and technical advancements, the cello would become an instrument that many would choose to be the singer of the music.

Throughout this paper we will look at examples of the cello’s use in music, beginning with its use as an accompaniment instrument in Baroque opera, and ending with the virtuosity and lyricism it portrays in Romantic concertos. We will begin with two Baroque operas, *L’Orfeo* by Claudio Monteverdi and *Giulio Cesare* by Georg Frederic Handel, and consider the similarities and differences between the cello and its predecessor the viol. What qualities/features would the cello bring to Baroque opera, and what aspects about it would influence composers to write for it? We will also look at *Six Suites for*

¹ Valerie Walden, “One Hundred Years of Violoncello: A History of Technique and Performance Practice, 1740-1840,” (Cambridge University Press: New York), 2004, pg. 240.

Unaccompanied Cello by Johann Sebastian Bach, focusing on the differences between the first and second suites.

From here we will move to the Classical era, specifically at the *Cello Concerto in B-flat Major* by Luigi Boccherini, and the *Cello Concerto No. 1 in C Major Hob. VII:1* by Franz Joseph Haydn. We will examine the technical advancements that were made by these two composers, and how their influence would shape the way composers would write for the instrument throughout the Classical era. In the Romantic era our focus will be on the *Cello Concerto in A Minor Op. 129* by Robert Schumann, and how lyricism influenced the way he would write for the cello.

The purpose of this paper is to consider Quantz's quote on the role of the cello, and its purpose in concerts. I agree with Quantz in that the cello does indeed play an important role in ensembles. This being said, I argue that the cello's role is not restricted to the function of an accompanying instrument, and that the changing times allowed it to emerge as a solo instrument. The cello would become a lyrical instrument, acquiring its own voice, and singing the lyrical passages of the Romantic era.

When discussing a topic such as the development and evolution of the cello as a solo instrument, one must first understand what role it played before it began to emerge as such an instrument. To begin one must look at the Baroque Era in order to understand the cello's role within the concerts of that time. In the earlier phases of this era, the cello had one main function: providing support for the harmonic foundation within a piece of music.² From this key function, we can see that the cello served primarily as an accompanying instrument.

² Dimitry Markevich, "The Solo Cello: A Bibliography of the Unaccompanied Violoncello Literature," (Fallen Leaf Press: Berkeley, California), 1989, pg. 5.

The function mentioned above displays the cello within the basso continuo of a larger ensemble, such as an opera or oratorio. The role of the basso continuo in these large operatic performances was to provide the harmonic foundation for a given arias and recitatives. This section of the ensemble varied in size depending on the type of performance, often including a bassoon, viol or trombone. In addition to these instruments, the cello would gradually be incorporated into the continuo along with other instruments.

The cello's incorporation into this ensemble may have been because of features that it offered that differed from the viol family. With an increasing size of ensembles, the viol family began to show flaws within their construction. For example, a flat front made it more difficult for players to provide the harmonic foundation, being that it could not sustain high tension from the strings. As music began to be heard in larger concert halls, the viol simply could not produce the sound necessary for the changing conditions in music performance. Because of this, the cello was included in the ensembles, with its thicker strings and increased size.

Another feature that the cello offered was an increase of register. The range of bass viol instrument extends from D2 to A4,³ while the cellos range is from C2 to C7. From this we can see that the cello's range far surpassed that of bass viols, further presenting the cello's superiority as an instrument of choice. In the opera *L'Orfeo* by Claudio Monteverdi, the composer specifies the inclusion of the cello into the basso continuo for these main features, that is range and resonance.⁴ Another opera significant to the cellos inclusion into orchestras is *Giulio Cesare* by George Frederic Handel, where the instrument is not only

³ "Composing for Viola da Gamba," <http://vdgsa.org/pgs/Comp-forViols.pdf>.

⁴ Markevitch, pg. 5.

more prominent in its role of providing harmonic foundation, but also begins to emerge as more of a specialty instrument used for accompanying.

The cello played a major role as an accompanying instrument, providing the harmonic foundation within a musical ensemble. Because of this professional cellists at the time were dependent on their skills and abilities as accompanists in order to make a living in their profession. The flautist Johann Joachim Quantz wrote on the accompaniment ability of cellists, stating the difference between an amateur cellist and a professional one. Quantz writes that an amateur cellist has liberties that they can take into a performance, but a professional cellist should focus on becoming an excellent accompanist, for this role will be of greater value in music society.⁵

The incorporation of the cello in *L'Orfeo* may have been because of its ability to support the harmonic foundation in the ensemble. With the growing size of ensembles and concert halls, the viol alone could no longer be able to sustain the volume required for the ensemble. The incorporation of the cello by Monteverdi into *L'Orfeo* helped solve this predicament faced by both continuo players and composers.

In *Giulio Cesare*, the composer expands the use of the cello even further than seen in *L'Orfeo*. Like Monteverdi, Handel incorporated the cello because of its ability to sustain the harmonic foundation, due to its increase in volume over the viol. Additionally, he goes beyond the instrument's basic function as harmonic support, featuring its lyrical aspects as well. While the instrument still supported the singers during the recitatives of the opera, accompanying their line, it had more control over the melodic freedom in arias.⁶

⁵ Walden, pg. 241.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 243.

The cello also emphasized important phrases sung by the singer, either by imitating the gesture, or by accompanying the voice shortly before their cadenza. This can be seen in the aria *Non disperar, non disperar; chisa?*, where the cello is featured as a solo instrument meant to accompany the solo voice. In this aria, Handel expands the range of the cello, displaying the instrument's lyrical nature by having it participate in short duets with Cleopatra. As the aria comes to a close, the cello accompanies the singer during her cadenza, displaying the instrument's versatility as an accompanying instrument.

If we return to Quantz's quote on the importance of the cello in an ensemble setting, we can recall that it is as an accompanying instrument that the cellist would be most useful. We have just seen examples from two Baroque operas that display the cello's role as such an instrument. But Quantz also states that the solo cellist, although less significant, has a role to play in concert life. We will now look to the *Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* by Johann Sebastian Bach, particularly BWV 1007 in G major and BWV 1008 in D minor for comparison, in order to see how the cello served as a solo instrument.

Johann Sebastian Bach composed his these suites circa 1720 in Cöthen. Although the dedication for these compositions is debatable, it is likely that he composed these suites for Christian Bernhard Linike, a cellist who joined Prince Leopold's *Capelle* in 1716.⁷ Bach's composing of these works demonstrates his awareness of popularity to the dance genre in German courts at the time. With these works Bach created a foundation for the cello as it would begin to emerge as a solo instrument.

In his suites Bach employs the cello in various ways in order to exploit the many features that it offers. Bach uses the full range of the instrument: reaching lower registers

⁷ David Ledbetter, "Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works," (Yale University Press: New Haven), 2009, pg. 35.

for harmonic shifts, and the higher register for more lyrical passages. By looking at the compositional methods used in these suites, one can observe Bach's transition from a vertical approach (harmony) to one that is more horizontal (lyrical).

In the prelude to the first suite, BWV 1007, Bach has written out arpeggiations of the chords that are emphasized in each measure. The harmonic rhythm in this prelude is slow, following conventional harmonic structures and staying within the tonal center of G major. This movement can be defined by the progression from the tonic, to the dominant, and back to the tonic once again. In short, Bach focused on the harmonic sequencing and chord progressions, as opposed to lyricism.⁸

In the prelude of the second suite, BWV 1008, Bach displays more lyricism in the cello. The harmonic shifts are much more frequent, often emphasizing chords that are out of the tonal center of d minor.⁹ Bach further emphasizes these harmonic shifts by adding leaps in the melodic line, allowing for more lyrical phrases. Because of these leaps, the second prelude has a much slower tempo, providing opportunities for the cellist when performing. Bach also incorporates more use of the upper register, extending beyond what was displayed in the first suite. In the prelude to this suite, one could argue that Bach's primary focus was on the lyricism, as opposed to preluding chords as seen in the first suite.

While Bach is credited for the first major solo repertoire for the instrument, it was Luigi Boccherini who helped develop and strengthen the instrument's potential in this genre. Through his composing and virtuosic style of performance, Boccherini contributed to the standard repertoire of the instrument.

⁸ Ibid, pg. 186.

⁹ Ibid, pg. 186-187.

Boccherini was an eighteenth century virtuoso cellist from Lucca, Italy, one of the first to give expression and virtuoso aspects to the instrument.¹⁰ Not only did his technical prominence live on in the music that he composed for the instrument, but he also important for teaching other famous cellists from the time.¹¹ As a youth he would travel to different courts, with his father, Leopoldo, accompanying him on the double bass. Throughout his life Boccherini traveled throughout Europe, performing and composing music for the cello at a variety of noble courts. Throughout his travels to various European courts, Boccherini began to develop certain features and techniques on playing the cello. The most significant, is the expansion of the instrument's tessitura. Until Boccherini, there was little solo repertoire that required cellists to play past fourth position. This may be due to the unfamiliarity to the upper register of the instrument and how one would perform in that register.¹²

Boccherini not only employed this register in his compositions, but also developed a thumb position technique in order to help cellists maneuver around the upper register of the instrument. The technique of thumb position requires the performer to set their hand in a fixed position, allowing them to perform passages at quick speeds while still maintaining clarity. One such example comes from his *Cello Concerto in B-Flat major*. It is clear that there are issues surrounding the legitimacy of this piece, for cellist Frederick Grützmacher re-orchestrated it in ways that reinvented its musical quality. This being said, Boccherini still made technical advancements in this piece that should be addressed. In this concerto Boccherini incorporates thumb position in the lyrical sections of the piece. With

¹⁰ Margaret Campbell, "The Great Cellists," (North Pomfret, Vt: Trafalgar Square Pub.), 1988, pg. 55.

¹¹ Walden, pg. 37-38.

¹² Walden, pg. 134-135.

this technique developed, the use of the cello's upper range became more frequent in compositions after his time.

Another significant development in the instrument for which Boccherini is responsible is the use of the bow. There are many ways that the bow changed in compositions from the Baroque to the Classical, but one of the more significant changes is the adjustment of bowing in order to obtain stylistic gestures. In his *Rondo for Cello and Piano* Boccherini notates a sixteenth-note anacrusis. The articulation marking of staccato on this gesture displays a decision by the composer to display virtuosity. These bowings are organized into specific patterns in order to help interpret the *affekt* of the piece. Compared to the Baroque operas previously discussed, the compositions of Boccherini demonstrate a more virtuosic style of performing, with the cello as his instrument of choice.

Boccherini wrote his music with the intention that he would be the one performing it. This allowed himself to compose for the cello knowing not only the instrument's limitations, but also those of the performer as well. Franz Joseph Haydn, on the other hand, did not have this understanding of the instrument to the degree that Boccherini had. Sources indicate that these two composers wrote letters to one another, which suggests that Haydn may have learned some technical aspects about the instrument. From Boccherini this would have influenced how Haydn would write for the cello in his solo works for the instrument, the C and D major concertos.

Haydn was employed by the Esterhazy family, for whom he composed a wide variety of works. His symphonies and string quartets are considered to be his most valuable contributions, for it was in these forms that he would explore various

compositional avenues.¹³ Because of the popularity that these works received, they have been continually performed since their composition.

His concertos, however, were not received in popularity to the degree of his symphonies and his quartets. They struggled to survive publication, such as those composed for the baryton, the instrument of choice for his employer, Nicklaus Esterhazy.¹⁴ Nevertheless, some of his concertos received the praise of his symphonies, such as his two cello concertos, both of them representing important works for the instrument in the Classical era.

Being that Haydn was not an accomplished cellist, unlike Boccherini, he could not perform the cello concertos that he composed. Fortunately he had access to a distinguished group of musicians who comprised the orchestra at the Esterhazy court. Evidence suggests that the *Cello Concerto in C Major, Hob. VII:1* was most likely composed for Joseph Weigel, the principal cellist in the orchestra at the time.¹⁵ The *Cello Concerto No. 2 in D major, Hob. VIIb:2* was written for Anton Kraft, who was principal of the Esterhazy orchestra from 1778-1790, although there has been dispute between who actually composed the work. An autograph from Haydn at the end of the concerto supports the idea that it was Haydn who actually composed the work.¹⁶

Like Boccherini's works for the instrument, Haydn's concertos also display virtuosity and showmanship. The technical passages in the piece provide opportunities for the cellist to be expressive and display virtuosity. This can be seen in the second movement

¹³ Caryl Leslie Clark, "The Cambridge Companion to Haydn," (Cambridge University Press: New York), 2005, pg. 100.

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 100.

¹⁵ "Violoncello," *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of the C major Cello Concerto, where the composer uses a wide variety of ranges and timbres, as well as techniques such as double stop droning. In the first movement there are frequent points of arpeggiations and scalar patterns that require an advanced level of technique in order to execute. Boccherini's method of thumb position can be seen in this movement as well, for Haydn has set passages in accordance to the layout of the hand in thumb position. Examples 1-6 compare excerpts from this concerto and that of Boccherini's *Cello Concerto in B-Flat Major*.

It is clear that these works have contributed to the development of the cello repertoire, offering ample opportunities for a display of virtuosity and expression. With little knowledge about the cello, Haydn needed to seek the help of cellists at the time in order to understand the instrument, and the limitations that were presented with it. With great cellists at his expense in the Esterhazy Court, such as Kraft and Weigel, as well as advice from Boccherini, one could say that Haydn incorporated their advice into his music, ultimately creating two grand concertos that display a high demand of technique for the performer.

In the Classical era we looked at how Haydn and Boccherini were influenced by the cello, and how their familiarity with the instrument affected the way they composed for it. Boccherini was a virtuoso cellist, extending the instrument's tessitura. Haydn was not a cellist, but was acquainted with the cellists at the Esterhazy Court. These composers used their skills and resources in order to promote the lyrical qualities of the instrument, along with expanding its repertoire.

Haydn and Boccherini were influential composers for the cello in the Classical era. Both of them were responsible for the expansion of the instrument's tessitura, along with

composing concertos that required an understanding of advanced cello technique. These features offered ways for cellists to display their virtuosity, as well as expression within their performance. From the Classical era to the Romantic era, these aspects would continue to be developed, with the concerto being a driving genre for this innovation. Before approaching works from the Romantic era, it is important that we identify some characteristics from this era that relate to cello concerto repertoire. When comparing Classical and Romantic cello concertos, there are some aspects that are more prevalent.

The overall scale of the work is expanded considerably in those from the Romantic than those of the Classical. Examples of this increase in scale are the size of the orchestra and duration of the works. In Classical concertos, composers used the orchestra primarily as an accompaniment to the soloist, thus requiring fewer members. In the Romantic era the orchestra's role became more intertwined with the soloists, offering opportunities for interplay between the orchestra and the soloist. In terms of duration these concertos were for the most part longer, requiring stamina and concentration for longer periods of time.

Another aspect of the Romantic concerto that changed from the Classical was the development in form, which may be a cause of the increase in duration.¹⁷ Composers began to stretch the boundaries of sonata form, allowing for more opportunities for development and expansion of thematic material. Along with this they expanded on the techniques that were developed in the Classical, requiring an even more advanced level of technique from the performers.

Above we discussed how the range and projection of the cello allowed it to become a more optimal accompanying instrument in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. We also saw how Handel

¹⁷ Robin Stowell, "The Cambridge Companion to the Cello," (Cambridge University Press: New York), 1999, pg. 95-96.

incorporated the instrument's lyrical qualities into arias from *Giulio Cesare*. If we look again at Cleopatra's aria, we can see that the cello was used as an instrument to not only accompany the voice, but also impose lyrical moments into the aria, creating interplay between the voice and the instrument. Composers during the Romantic Era were also drawn to the lyrical qualities of the cello.¹⁸

With the instrument's tessitura now expanded, as well as advanced techniques, composers could now incorporate more lyricism into the instrument. One way is through specific fingerings in a passage, displaying the different timbres of each string. This was often left to the discretion of the performer, allowing them to express and interpret the line. Looking at thumb position patterns in Boccherini and Haydn, we can see an example of this shift changed from virtuosic excerpts to more lyrical ones.

The cello influenced Haydn and Boccherini, and that their familiarity with the instrument affected the way they composed for it. In the Romantic era, the cello would emerge as an instrument of choice amongst composers. During this time, composers would focus on lyrical qualities of the instrument, as well as making developments in both form and scale.¹⁹ The cello, with its wide range of timbre, offered composers many opportunities to experiment with changes in color in the lyrical phrases they composed. The concerto that we will focus on from this era is the *Cello Concerto in A Minor, Op. 129* by Robert Schumann.

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 95.

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 95.

Robert Schumann was not considered an accomplished cellist, only taking lessons on the instrument at a young age.²⁰ When composing his cello concerto, he sought help from multiple cellists with whom he was acquainted at the time, such as Grützmacher, Romberg and Boehmühl.²¹ The work was composed in 1850 at a rather quick rate, starting it on October 10, and completing it on October 24. Schumann made revisions to the work after receiving advice from Boehmühl on certain technical aspects of the instrument.

This piece introduces major changes in formal structure. The work is separated into three movements, but is different for Schumann blurs the endings of the first two so that they run *attaca*. Instead of pauses between the movements, Schumann adds transitions into and out of the second movement. In these transitions, Schumann recounts the motives of the first two movements, thus creating a sense of unity throughout the work.

The motives that Schumann uses can be seen throughout the work, such as the woodwind introduction that sets the mood for the entire piece. This motive appears throughout the second movement as well, suggesting to the audience that the brief moment of tranquility is to be short lived.²² The first movement begins by displaying the various colors and techniques that the instrument may achieve. For example there are these moments of rapid arpeggios that leap from the lower range of the cello to the upper. These moments contrast with the lyrical phrase of the main theme, being that they are darker and agitated as opposed to rich (Example 7).

The rhythms used in this piece are also a developing process. Schumann has multiple moments where he creates hemiolas between the cello and orchestra, adding to

²⁰ Julia Beate Perrey, "The Cambridge Companion to Schumann," (Cambridge University Press: New York), 2007, pg. 183-185.

²¹ Stowell, pg. 95-96.

²² Perrey, pg. 184.

the difficulty of the piece. In the first movement this can be seen in the second theme of the exposition, where the cello plays eighth-note triplets against the orchestras hemiola. Schumann furthers this melodic gesture by displacing the theme by a quarter note, making the phrase start on a weaker beat (beat 2) as opposed to a strong one. These hemiolas appear throughout the second movement as well, but this time it is reversed, with the cello performing eighth note rhythms, while the orchestra plays in triplets.

The motives and rhythms that Schumann uses throughout this work contribute to the lyricism of the piece. In the examples that I have given, one can see that Schumann invests into the cello in ways that Haydn and Boccherini have not. In the Boccherini and Haydn examples, we may conclude that their objective was to create cello concertos with technically challenging passages, allowing for the virtuoso to exploit their skills as a performer. Schumann, however, does write challenging passages, but the purpose of these passages are for reasons other than simple display of virtuosity. The use of range, timbre, double stops, and lyricism in this piece is devoted to the expressivity that the composer is striving for. This suggests that the cello has emerged as an instrument of choice for composers writing lyrical pieces.

With this we return to Quantz's quote on the professional cellist. His statement of the cello's role in the musical society identifies the instrument as an accompanying tool, and should not assume the role of a solo instrument. From the progression that the cello has made from the Baroque era to the Romantic era, it is clear that the cello changed with time to fit the needs of composers. Although it began as an accompanying instrument, especially for voice as we have seen in *Guilio Cesare*, the cello would adapt the voice and sing in the works of Romantic composers, such as Robert Schumann.

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