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From Servant to Superstar

The Changing Role of the Virtuoso Cellist
Part 2

• *Valerie Walden*

Mstislav Rostropovich

The promotion of performance virtuosity in the nineteenth century emerged as a consequence of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Until those events, employment for the most proficient players was normally through the *Kapelles* of the wealthy or the church. The wars disrupted this social organisation and by 1815, the number of jobs and the salaries available through this system were greatly diminished. This was the impetus that sent violinist Niccolò Paganini to the solo stage, and many others followed, including cellists. In contrast to earlier

Valerie Walden

ideas of virtuosity, which first stressed theoretical, compositional or leadership proficiency before describing soloistic superiority, the nineteenth century vision of virtuosity came to exemplify what Peter Fribbins calls, 'the predominately masculine values of bravura, stamina, agility, and showmanship', all attributes of the battlefield in a sanitised version. According to Fribbins, 'this is particularly acute in the nineteenth century concerto, where the heroic soloist, Flash Gordon-like, is pitted against the overwhelming odds of the Romantic orchestra.'

Military imagery, coupled with 'manly' performance was certainly presented by Bernard Romberg. Considered the foremost cellist of his lifetime, he is one of the virtuoso performers who led the transition from servant to superstar. A performance of his 'military' concerto (no. 6), which is a thumb position marathon, engendered this report by E. T. A. Hoffmann: 'The opening Allegro of this concerto was especially pleasing… in the burning brilliance of the southern sun I saw Spanish regiments moving past with flying colours and jubilant hurrahs. You know that such images cannot appear to me unless I am genuinely aroused.' Romberg's performance abilities eclipsed all other cellists throughout his career. At the same time audiences, especially in France, appeared to question the appropriateness of cello music emulating violin acrobatics. Cellists working in the mid-part of the century seemed to gravitate towards chamber music and teaching, without flaunting their solo skills.

Virtuosity itself was also questioned, and the term became a pejorative for some. The nuances of this negativity were explained by Sir George Grove in the first edition of his encyclopedia:

> *VIRTUOSO. A term of Italian origin, applied, more abroad than in England, to a player who excels in the technical part of his art. Such players being naturally open to a temptation to indulge their ability unduly at the expense of the meaning of the composer, the word has acquired a somewhat depreciatory meaning, as of display for its own sake.*

Grove also suggested in this definition that by the end of the nineteenth century, players were no longer obligated to play only their own compositions, a standard of musical excellence required of earlier professional musicians. Some cellists, such as Adrien Servais (1807-1866), Alfredo Piatti (1822-1901), Karl Davidov (1838-1889), and David Popper (1843-1913), certainly did, and contemporary performers still wrestle with the challenges presented in the compositions that incited adulation from late nineteenth century audiences. However, other cellists moved the idea of virtuosity towards a 20th and 21st century experience; the virtuoso cellist inspiring new works being written especially for them by renowned composers. Present-day cellists have Robert Hausmann (1852-1909) to thank for some of our most memorable works. A student of Piatti and, like his teacher, one of the last players to forgo the endpin, Hausmann was the cellist of famed violinist Joseph Joachim's quartet, and a compatriot of Brahms. Compositions written for him to premiere include *Kol Nidrei*, and Brahms's F major sonata and double concerto. Likewise, Hanuš Wihan (1855-1920), a student of Davidov, badgered Dvořák for a cello concerto, and was the dedicatee of Strauss's cello sonata.

Pre-World War I concepts of virtuosity continued to stress perceptions of elegance and refinement over flamboyance and fireworks, although Sir George Grove did note in his 1904 definition of virtuosity that German writers were no longer viewing the word in the 'depreciatory' manner in which he defined the term fourteen years earlier. Edmond Van der Straeten, describing the playing of cellists that he had personally heard, noted of Hugo Becker (1863-1941) that 'his style is noble and refined, carefully avoiding anything approaching vulgar trickery and cheap effect.' Extolling similar virtues of Jean Gérardy (1878-1929), the author remarked that with Gérardy, 'there is no need to speak of the technique of the left hand, for that is a matter of course with all modern virtuosos. Be it said to his praise that he is in every respect an artist of the

highest order who looks for the best and noblest in art … he eschews anything trivial or merely calculated for outward show or technical display.'

Many young cellists entered the 20th century believing that they would follow in the footsteps of their teachers, touring a bit with solo performances, taking a principal cello position and/or playing chamber music, and ultimately settling with a comfortable teaching position. Politics and war altered that reality to a point where life-threatening challenges produced a new virtuoso experience, survival by cello. Escaping the horrors of the Russian Revolution, German Nationalism, Spanish Fascism, World War II and Soviet repression, numerous cellists made their way to countries of safety, their music a vehicle to find protection and to powerfully express the depth of the human experience. Nobility and refinement were not necessarily the musical qualities that reflected the emotions of the time. This cello heritage has been passed to present players through teaching legacies, personal writings, and the power of recordings. Modern cello literature has also been vastly expanded by composers inspired by the playing of the following cellists who survived these events:

• Pablo Casals (1876-1973) became a household name in the 20th century, even for non-musicians. Casals made many statements about his political beliefs (his instrument used in protest against fascism) and much has been written about him, perhaps the greatest indicator of his importance to world culture. He was, in many respects, a transitional figure, moving his music from comfortable expectations to unexplored possibilities. Casals is most celebrated for turning the Bach unaccompanied suites into popular solo literature, but perhaps even more importantly, he was a technical rebel, revolutionising cello fingerings through the use of fluid extensions, and rethinking bowing strategies.

• Emanuel Feuermann (1902-1942) began his concert career at 11, soloing with the Vienna Philharmonic. By age 14 he was studying with Julius Klengel in Leipzig before becoming a principal cellist at age 17. Forced to leave Germany to escape Nazi discrimination, Feuermann emigrated to London, Zürich and Palestine before moving to the United States. With an effortless, elegant style, he captivated both general audiences and the most esteemed musicians of his era, including his trio partners Jascha Heifetz and Arthur Rubenstein. The perfection of his technique is left through the legacy of his recordings.

• Escaping Russia at age 18, his first cello destroyed by gunfire, Gregor Piatigorsky (1903-1976) studied under Hugo Becker and Julius Klengel before adopting first France and then the United States as his home. Adamant that a musician must always have something to say, he expressed himself through a large, virile sound, effortless bow strokes and copious vibrato.

• The legacy of David Popper as passed on by Adolf Schiffer was the provenance of Hungarian classmates János Starker (1924-2013) and Laszlo Varga (1924-2014), both of whom faced the starvation and intellectual deprivation of the Nazi internment camps. Surviving to eventually emigrate to the United States after World War II, both combined flawless execution with creative problem-solving. Varga became principal cellist of the New York Philharmonic, while Starker took the chair in Chicago. Both toured as international soloists, established important teaching centers, and Starker became one of the most recorded cellists in history.

• Mstislav Rostropovich (1927-2007) remains a familiar name to current cellists. Together with the much younger Yo-Yo Ma (b. 1955), he dominated cello performance into the 21st century. Premiering over 100 new compositions for cello, Rostropovich enraptured audiences with the emotional intensity of his playing. An outspoken proponent for freedom of speech and personal artistic choice under a totalitarian government, he defected from the Soviet Union in 1974, not returning until 1990.

As music moves through the 21st century, Yo-Yo Ma remains the ideal of the consummate virtuoso and has emerged as a global superstar. In a holistic society, Ma has elevated the cultural understanding necessary for modern concepts of virtuosity. Viewing his role in the world as that of a 'citizen musician', he is a collaborator in artistic endeavours of all persuasions. Ma's Silk Road Project celebrates the music of global interaction just as he himself does in his performances and recordings. His seemingly limitless facility on the cello is a gift that he readily shares in performances both grand and humble, and his maxim 'the more you put in, the more you get out' is wisdom for all future virtuoso performers.

William Pleeth

• *Tatty Theo*

William Pleeth

I'll make no bones about the fact that this is an unashamedly personal insight into the great cellist and teacher, my grandfather William Pleeth. If you want to read about his teaching methods then I can refer you to his wonderful book on the cello, part of the 'Yehudi Menuhin Music Guides' series, published in 1982. I remember him writing this, trying out chunks of text on my mother Jan, at the kitchen table at 19 Holly Park. We all spent a lot of time there, the sound of music lessons ever present in the background. My grandmother Margaret Good taught piano, and it would have been these lessons that provided the musical backdrop as William played with words and ideas, as my sister Lucy and I gathered around the table, munching on biscuits from the bottomless biscuit tin.

I am a baroque cellist, taught mostly by my uncle Anthony Pleeth, but as a child and teenager I also studied with my grandfather. My cello 'lessons' with William took place every Saturday morning; I stayed most Friday nights, and we'd play cello duets for several hours each Saturday. There were no notebooks, or formal lists of things to work on. We played scales in thirds and sixths, which to my child's ear turned them into something fun. Even then I was drawn to music from the eighteenth century, and William found pieces that would stimulate and challenge me, but would still cover the technical ground needed. This was light-years away from the approach of my formal and official cello teacher, who taught by more conventional methods involving grades, which I hated. William provided the much needed counter-balance to this, so the emphasis during our sessions was purely on having fun…and this usually involved eating doughnuts too!

By the time I came to learn the cello William's performing career was slowing down, as latterly he suffered terribly from arthritis in his bowing arm. But teaching had always played a crucial part in his career, with long associations with both the Guildhall School or Music and Drama, and the Royal College of Music, not to mention Aldeburgh, the Menuhin School, countless international forums such as Kuhmo, and of course private individual lessons. A quick glance at the biographies of most cellists over the age of about 35 list William as a valued teacher. This used to make our family laugh, when we knew that sometimes the individual in question could have attended at most a single masterclass of William's. However, as I have made my way in the profession I have come to realise that this is an enormous testament to the huge admiration and respect garnered for William during his lifetime, and his lasting legacy as one of the great cello pedagogues.

William was a uniquely personal teacher, tailoring his approach to suit each individual. He no more followed a system than his own teacher Julius Klengel. William studied with Klengel for a brief period, from 1930-1932 at the Landesconservatorium der Musik in Leipzig, Germany, as one of the youngest students ever to be admitted to the course. May 1932 marked the occasion of William's last ever cello lesson. His first lessons (circa 1924-26), were given by a man called Waldstahl. There is no information about him at all, although it is likely he was the cellist that William heard playing in a London café orchestra, the man who inspired William to learn the instrument. William then studied at the London Cello School under Herbert Walenn from 1927 and then with Klengel from January 1930. Klengel viewed William as a 'son', missing their walks together during

Pleeth family at Dartington 1960s

holiday time, when William was absent from the conservatoire. William found Klengel to be a relaxed teacher, high on expectation, but not at all dogmatic or inflexible in his teaching methods. This in turn informed William's approach, best summed up in his own words:

'[Klengel] was a wonderful teacher because he allowed you to be yourself. He hated it if someone copied him. He wanted us to develop our own musicality - and we did, and we're all different after all. Klengel himself was a very simple, unsophisticated man whose integrity was unquestionable. He was always honest and I loved him for it. Since he didn't force me into any moulds, he left me free to shape myself. And since I didn't have to undo anything later on, I was left to be me. My own teaching was free to evolve out of teaching people as they came along.'

As William himself said, 'I'm eternally grateful that I'm not a copy of anybody'. So too are we, fellow cellists, students and music-lovers the world over, still to this day inspired by William Pleeth's unique musical voice.

William was firmly anti-method: 'You can't have methods when you're dealing with human beings who are all different. You have to treat them all differently. If you have methods you encourage copying and I don't believe that a teacher should allow his pupils to copy anything. It was the greatest quality in Klengel, which is almost a negative thing. He had no gimmicks. I had my last lesson with him when I was 16 and I've never had a lesson since. I've had to grow out of myself, and I'm eternally grateful that I'm not a copy of anybody.

On the Edge

Finding Peace at the Precipice

• *Christian Elliott*

I'm writing this on a train to Oxford, very excited as I'm about to record Mendelssohn's C minor and Clara Schumann's G minor piano trios with the Phoenix Piano Trio, with whom I've been playing for the past two years. This will be part of a double disc entitled '1840's Leipzig', featuring piano trios by the Schumanns, Brahms, Niels Gade and Mendelssohn… Watch this space!

I've been incredibly fortunate, particularly in the past two years, to have settled into a diverse freelance career. It's a strange and wonderful moment to realize that I'm doing everything I had hoped to be doing when I 'grew up' (except for the growing up part…!)

After my studies at the RNCM in Manchester with Hannah Roberts and Ralph Kirshbaum I moved to Edinburgh with my wife, violinist Sijie Chen, who was playing with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra at the time. I was carving a niche for myself as a freelance cellist, but it was a bit of a slow start. I was lucky to have the support of some wonderful musicians giving me opportunities to play. It's always difficult to establish oneself in a profession with so many excellent people already working. Sometimes loyalty to people who have worked regularly with a group takes precedence over giving young people an opportunity to prove themselves — understandably, in such a competitive profession.

The glare of my nearly empty diary staring back at me was, in hindsight, not altogether a bad thing. I had time on my hands — time to be ruthless in my own practice about what I was hearing, what I wanted to hear, and how I wanted to hear it. It was a different experience to have this time separate from a college environment. The influences around me had a profound effect on my playing, and informed my development enormously.

After leaving college, one can be forced to do a lot of

things that don't fit with the 'dream' one had in the early years of playing an instrument. However, I think it's very important to realise the good fortune we have of being musicians. Everything I did during my first few years of freelancing was valuable to me, either because of the friends I met, the wonderful musicians who inspired me to think about the music we were playing in a fresh way, the travel opportunities, or the joy of learning a new style of music unexpectedly. These experiences inform everything else from that time forward, which is a wonderful gift. I learned the importance of having time to relish the opportunities that came my way, and to make the most of them. Sometimes someone will remember you from the unlikeliest of places, which can lead to future projects. For example, I played a chamber music concert with someone who asked me to be a guest principal at his orchestra four years later.

When I received a phone call from Thomas Zehetmair in June 2013 asking me to play with his quartet, I thought it might be a joke or some kind of mistake! We met together in Zürich, and they were very gracious and curious about me, since they understandably had never heard of me. Thomas had collaborated with Steven Isserlis a few months earlier, and Steven mentioned my name to him. I had played to Steven several times in masterclasses at the Prussia Cove International Musicians Seminar, and he thought that I might suit the group. I am very grateful to him, as playing with the quartet has been a life-changing experience.

My first tour with the quartet was in March 2014, in which we performed Janáček's *Kreutzersonate*, Schubert's Quartet in E-flat D.87, and Debussy's G minor Quartet from memory. Based on our three-hour session in Zürich many months earlier, I now needed to become a part of this extraordinary quartet with only a few days before our first concert in Berlin. The faith my colleagues had in me was enough to push me forward. Although the pressure was enormous, it became one of the most rewarding experiences in my life. I always look forward to our tours, as I know it will be a special experience that will inspire me in my other endeavours.

Christian Elliott

Recently, the Irish Chamber Orchestra asked me to become their principal cellist. Joining this exciting group has been another highlight for me. The high standard and family atmosphere is infectious, and I look forward to the time I spend there.

As a musician, I always seek to build something telling and beautiful, and there can be no greater gift than sharing that process with others — both colleagues and audiences alike. I hope that everyone can find as much joy in what they do as I have.

Cello Talk

Bold & Beautiful: 12 Cellos at the Proms

• *Guy Johnston*

This summer, I was invited to put a cello ensemble together for a BBC Chamber Prom at London's Cadogan Hall. My initial reaction was, 'Have you thought about asking the 12 cellists of the Berlin Phil?!' They were already otherwise engaged. So I put my thinking cap on and started to consider players and repertoire. I chose 11 friends to join in the fun, all of whom I have known and performed with over the years. Old school and college friends, members of quartets I've joined for one off Schubert Quintets, cellists from orchestras I've performed with and even one of my students from the Royal Academy of Music. It was a real mixture and I think a Proms debut for nearly all who took part. Once the players had confirmed – it didn't take long to get a response; I think they were all as excited to be invited as was I – we began to mull over repertoire options. Lots of ideas began to circulate and in the end the programme was a

12 Cellos with Golda Schultz, soprano

combination of the wishes of the BBC and all of ours. It was a programme of Song and Dance with a South American influence in anticipation of the Olympics. Robin Michael, cellist extraordinaire, chose to arrange a special Bach Motet, while Brian O'Kane from the Navarra Quartet suggested some arrangements of Schubert Songs, Su-a Lee from the Scottish Chamber Orchestra suggested some Piazolla and Justin Pearson came up with the idea of Kaiser-Lindemann's thrilling Bossa Nova which involved drumming our hands on the instruments, shouting, sliding around and generally having a riot!

I didn't like the idea of allocating parts, and so we split the programme up into 4 sections and everyone picked their name out of a hat. There was plenty of variety for everyone! It was slightly complex for all to know where they had to move after each section and to be sure we had the right music on each stand, but thanks to the amazing organisation of Benjamin Hughes, principal cellist of the BBC Concert Orchestra, people knew where they had to move with numbers placed on the back of each chair to avoid confusion! Ben also made a wonderful arrangement of the Swan for our encore.

Trying to get us all into the same room at the same time for rehearsals proved to be incredibly challenging. We are all happily busy, and in the end had quite a limited amount of time together. In fact, the first time we were all present at the same time was the day before the concert! But we had a ball and it was such a joy to see everyone together enjoying this unique occasion and putting everything into such an auspicious event.

We were unexpectedly invited onto the Andrew Marr Show to perform an arrangement of Brahms's *Hungarian Dance* the morning before the concert. It really set the day off with a bang and after our brunch following the show, we made our way to the Cadogan Hall and rehearsed for the rest of the day to our hearts' content. We also managed to arrange an informal run through of the programme to a small group of friends to give us a better chance on the day. The concert was so much fun, and the connection between all of us and the audience was clearly felt by all. It's not often you get to experience an occasion like this, and I gather it sold out within two hours of going on sale! We planned ahead and were given permission by the hall to leave our cellos after the concert so that we could all fit into the pub round the corner afterwards. We drank the place dry of prosecco and swiftly moved on to the champagne before finding some food for those who were left. It marked the end of an unforgettable experience, although perhaps beginning of something we'd all love to repeat in the future. Now we just need a few concerts, and possibly a name!

Members' News & Views

• From the London Cello Society:
We wish to thank Ian and Jean Graham-Jones, who have recently donated their library of cello ensemble music to us. We are grateful to them for this gesture.

Ian and Jean both studied at the Royal Academy of Music in the late 1950s. Jean received her LRAM and ARCM in both cello and piano. She also examined for the Associated Board for many years. The collection is a result of 40-odd years of teaching cello, both in schools, college and particularly with adult ensembles. It also contains some of Ian's arrangements for cello ensembles, devised mainly for adult students.

If you find yourself moving house and wish to divest yourself of cello music, please do not hesitate to contact us. We will take good care of your collection and put it to use for the next generation of cellists.

• From Robert Elkeles:
I started learning the cello aged 59 and am now 74. Whilst in recovery from an accident, I realised that all I did was work (hospital medicine) and at retirement I would have no interests. When I started, a colleague told me that I would never do it. I have been trying to prove him wrong! He was probably correct but playing gives me a huge amount of pleasure as well as an aim in life.

I am a member of the Evening Rehearsal Orchestra of St Albans. The orchestra encourages members to volunteer to play a solo with them. I recently played the second movement of the cello concerto in C minor by JC Bach. It took many months of hard practice on my own, with my teacher Margaret Powell and with my accompanist Rodney Rivers, to learn the movement to a standard sufficient to play with the orchestra. Playing with an orchestra is different to playing with a piano since it is more difficult to hear oneself in the surrounding sound. This concerto does not seem to be played frequently or to be well known, which is surprising. It is beautiful and technically demanding, at least for me! It is scored for strings but our wonderful conductor Martin Georgiev (who is also a composer) produced parts for the whole orchestra. I can thoroughly recommend this concerto to members.

• From SJ Music:
LCS members might be interested to look at all the cello music published by SJ Music, a small music publisher offering a wide range of music for string players, including cello studies, solos, duets, and various pieces for cello ensemble. LCS members can get 20% discount off normal prices by using the discount code lcs2016 (till the end of September 2016) at checkout when buying from the website: www.sjmusicpublications.co.uk

• From Lionel Handy:
Having recorded a CD of Bax's cello and piano music in 2012, I was very pleased to be asked to record his concerto. I had studied it at RAM and given performances of this rarely played work some years ago including the only performance in 1983, Bax's centenary year. My search for a suitable companion work to complete the CD included many British composers but eventually I heard of a possible concerto by Stanley Bate [1911-1959]. There were no parts available and only vague details of a possible solitary performance in the US in the 1950s, where Bate lived for a time. After some research I found Bate's original manuscript in the RCM library. I asked a colleague to put all the orchestral parts and full score on Sibelius—luckily Bate's manuscript was very clear. Although I had no reference except the viola concerto, my hunch was that the Bate would be a good partner to the Bax: two British concertos written within twenty years of each other. The concerto is a late work dating from 1953 and has echoes of Vaughan Williams, with whom Bate studied at the RCM, and Martinu. Lasting just over 22 minutes the three movements contain some beautiful cello writing amongst some very difficult passage work. I found this a very challenging but rewarding project and I recorded the two concertos in 2014 in Glasgow with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. It is now available on the Lyrita label. I am happy to offer any LCS member a special £12 deal.

I am about to publish my transcription of Albert Sammons' classic book The Secret of Violin Technique, a concise series of exercises for advanced players and soloists who don't have time for long studies but need to maintain their technique with maximum use of practice time. I have had to make many adaptations from the violin original and it should be of great interest to cellists. My pupils have already found it of huge benefit! It will be published by Spartan Press.