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# Violoncello recital

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

VIOLONCELLO RECITAL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

by

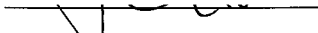
Saulo Moura de Almeida

2003

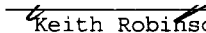
To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Saulo Moura de Almeida, and entitled Violoncello Recital, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

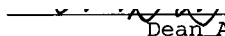
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Date of Defense: April 1, 2003

The thesis of Saulo Moura de Almeida is approved.

  
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Florida International University, 2003

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

VIOLONCELLO RECITAL

by

Saulo Moura de Almeida

Florida International University, 2003

Miami, Florida

Professor Keith Robinson, Major Professor

Program:

- Passacaglia for Violin and Cello ..... Johan Halvorsen  
(1864-1935)
- Cello Concerto in E minor Op. 85 ..... Edward Elgar  
(1857-1934)
- Sonata for Cello and Piano Op. 38 ..... Johannes Brahms  
(1833-1897)

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## EDWARD ELGAR - Violoncello Concerto op 85 in E minor

Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934) was the first important composer from the English Renaissance, which followed a period in music history in which no British composers achieved any international recognition. There is an interesting ambiguity in Elgar's music. While strongly based in German traditions of late Romanticism (mainly Brahms' harmonic style and Wagner's system of *leitmotifs*), the music manages to sound very English, even though his compositions do not relate in any aspect with English folk music. Some people relate his typical melodic lines with the sound of the English language. There is also an expansiveness and a nobility, especially evident in the well-known "Pomp and Circumstance" and in the constant indication of *nobilmente* in his scores, that are very typical of the English way of life.

Elgar is one of the last survivors of late romantic music. His cello concerto, for example, was composed seven years after Arnold Schoenberg composed "Pierrot Lounaire", but it still exhibits a very traditional romantic style.

Elgar's violoncello concerto in E minor, op.85 was his final masterpiece and belongs to the same period of his chamber music works (violin sonata, string quartet and

piano quintet). The concerto was written between the years of 1918 and 1919. It is not surprising to notice that this composition is very characteristic of these chamber works. His orchestration is economical, and the almost continuous solo part does not challenge the performer to project over the orchestral body. This is an extreme example of the romantic cello concerto in which the instruments' lyrical properties are explored to the utmost. The famous cellist, Felix Salmond, was the first to perform the concerto, and he probably influenced its compositional process. He went to Elgar's house several times to advise him on technical problems, and he would also play through the score with Elgar on the piano.

Unfortunately, the first performance given at Queen's Hall on October 26, 1919, with the composer conducting the London Symphony Orchestra did not go all that well. Elgar did not have enough time to rehearse with the orchestra, and this concerto cannot be played without many rehearsals, mainly because of the recitatives and the large number of rubatos and accelerandos. The concerto soon overcame the difficulties of its first performance, and was recognized as one of the greatest works of its genre, compared even with the outstanding B minor cello concerto by Antonin

Dvorak. Elgar was already advanced in years when he started to compose this concerto. The melancholic mood of the music in this period was due to the tragic events of the First World War, and the fact that Elgar had fallen seriously ill in 1918. He first sketched the cello concerto on the same day that he left a London nursing home where he had a septic tonsil removed. He did not proceed with the idea of the cello concerto for nearly one year.

There are four movements in this concerto that are linked in pairs (first with second, and third with fourth). The first, second and fourth movements start with a cello recitative. The recitative of the first movement is initiated by the cello solo exposing the main theme which recurs in each of the succeeding movements (except the third), showing the influence of Wagner (in the idea of *leitmotifs*) on his compositions. After this dramatic recitative, a variation of the theme is stated in the violas, passed smoothly to the cellos, and then repeated by the soloist. At this time, the listener can notice the sad atmosphere that permeates every single bar of this beautiful concerto. A second subject in 12/8 appears first in the clarinets, then in the cello solo, and these two themes represent all the basic material of the musical



argument. Especially in this movement there are a large number of rubatos, stringendos, largamentes, tenutos, and ad libitums.

The second movement starts with a reappearance of the opening (in the same key, but pizzicato). This is followed by a recitative that opens the movement and its main material is used to develop the musical argument. This material is repeated four times in different levels of dynamics. This movement, as opposed to the previous one, gives the soloist many opportunities to show off a lightning technique.

The adagio retains the same mood of the other movements, although it uses completely different materials. There are two main melodies and the second one is recalled in the last movement. It is the heart of this concerto. This movement could be an independent Elegy for cello and orchestra. The orchestration is considerably lighter. There is no use of the brass section and is based on the strings plus clarinets, bassoons and horns. The soloist plays throughout this movement with the exception of two or three bars of an orchestral tutti in the middle.

This movement is linked to the last one through a dominant chord that resolves in the first chord of the next

movement. It starts again with another cadenza-like recitative that introduces a theme that relates again with the theme of the first movement. It is a strong characteristic of Elgar to start the last movement in a resolute way and this concerto is no different. By this time the home key (E minor) is reestablished. A wonderful exposition and a second subject are both composed using previously heard elements. Later in the coda, the mood reverts again to the sad, dense and slow adagio that quotes previous movements in a beautiful and imaginative way. A final statement of the very beginning of the concerto comes before a brief annotation of the resolute theme of the 4th movement which finishes the work abruptly.

## JOHAN HALVORSEN - Passacaglia for Violin and Cello

Johan Halvorsen (1864-1935) was a prominent figure in Norwegian musical life. He received his training mainly as a violinist in Kristiania (now Oslo) and Stockholm. He was a concertmaster in many important orchestras in Europe. Not only a violinist, Halvorsen also was a conductor and a composer. He conducted the orchestra of the National Theater in Kristiania for 30 years (from 1899 to 1929) in which he worked with the music theatre performing symphonic repertoire. He also conducted some of the most prominent orchestras throughout Europe. His main influences as a composer were Edvard Grieg and Johan Svendsen, both Norwegian composers. He wrote Symphonies, Fantasies (Norwegian) and Chamber music in very melodic styles, mainly based on the German romantic tradition, like his predecessors. An interesting characteristic of this great composer was his capability to learn by himself. He only had a few counterpoint lessons and became a great composer. He had just three or four years of violin lessons and became a great virtuoso. He never had a conducting lesson and became one of the most important conductors of his time.

In his Passacaglia for violin and cello based on Handel's Passacalia for Harpsichord (1720), he exhibits some of his virtuosity as a composer, fusing within the same piece Baroque and Romantic textures.

Handel was not only a famed composer for organ and harpsichord, but also one of the finest keyboard players of his time, who engaged in occasional harpsichord contests with Scarlatti during his years in Italy. In 1717 Handel turned his attention to keyboard writing, a style that he not tried since 1706. The Passacaglia has at times been attached to the seventh suite, HMV 432, but in fact it had been written as an independent work. The Passacaglia in G minor reflects Handel's capacity to take a relatively small musical idea and generate variations from that small idea. The piece became very popular and captured Johan Halvorsen's attention almost two centuries later when he decided to use that work as the basis for a cello and violin duet.

A Passacaglia is basically a theme and variations structure over a set of ground bass usually of a serious character. It's origins are in Spain and comes from two words: pasar (to walk) and calle (street). It was used to name a short and improvised ritornello between the strophes

of a song on the harmony I, IV, V, I. It also was a strumming formula used by guitarists to go from the chorus to the verse or vice-versa. In 1627, Frescobaldi published "Partite sopra passacagli" for keyboard and became known as the person who created the passacaglia as an independent musical genre. This music contains many of the characteristics of the numerous passacaglias for all kinds of instrumental and vocal combinations that appeared in subsequent years. This new style is typically in the form of continuous variations over a stabilized harmony, although the bass is subject to considerable variants. The old I, IV, V, I strumming formula is now expanded into innumerable variants, often in the form or elaborations of a descending tetrachord bass (I- V6 - VI6/4 - V) or in the circle of fifths, as is the case of Handel's passacaglia.

An important influence in Halvorsen's career came from Ferruccio Busoni, and his habit of transcribing Bach's music for piano, as well as the recomposition of original pieces. Logically, this influenced Johan Halvorsen to start transcribing music from other composers too. They were friends and probably learned a lot from each other.

His extensive string studies served him well in this transcription of Handel's Passacaglia. The parts extracted

from the keyboard source are very well written for both parts in the duo, written so well that his version has today achieved a permanent place in the string repertoire. The virtuosic style expanded the popularity of the original version. Of course there were some adaptations, and most of the piece after the fifth variation was written by Halvorsen only using the previous harmony. This adaptation utilizes plenty of string crossings, scales, and arpeggios, all increasing in difficulty, energy, and tension, climaxing in the final triple forte adagio measures.

JOHANNES BRAHMS - Sonata in E minor opus 38

Not every romantic composer ventured in the chamber music genre. We can speculate why. The power and colors achieved in orchestral music could not be matched by a chamber music ensemble. Perhaps that is why extreme romantic composers like Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner did not write chamber music. The composers that had the most success with chamber music in the romantic era were the ones that remained close to classical traditions like Schubert, Mendelsohn, Schumann, and Brahms.

Brahms is one of the most important figures among the Romantic composers and his chamber music works could be considered the most representative of this period. He is considered Beethoven's successor (also in the symphony), not only for the volume of his repertoire but the quality (he wrote 24 complete chamber works and at least half of them are masterpieces). Brahms was definitely responsible for the revival of chamber music after the death of Schumann and certainly raised the bar. Some commentators say that Brahms is to chamber music what Wagner is to music drama.

Brahms was for many musicians considered an old fashioned composer for his time. First, because of his

formal practices founded in the works of Ludwig Van Beethoven, and second because of his contrapunctual style influenced by Johan Sebastian Bach. This is not relevant because his music (although constantly looking to the past) was very innovative. Schoenberg used to consider Brahms' compositional style essential to the future of music and followed in his tracks (not so much harmonically, but motivically and structurally).

Brahms was an introspective person, but very original (four of his sonatas are written for low-pitched instruments, like cello and viola). His personality is exposed very often in his compositions. Intense but controlled are two words that define Johannes Brahms.

The cello sonata in E minor is clearly a tuneful work that attempts to synthesize Baroque, Classical and Romantic traditions. Interestingly, each movement has a prominent style.

Brahms began to write this sonata in 1862, but it remained incomplete for 3 years. Originally, it had four movements, with an Adagio placed between the first and second movements. Brahms was certainly one of the most self-critical composers, and he would destroy his music if he realized that he did not like it (as he possibly did



with this Adagio). Brahms was a perfectionist and destroyed hundreds of his creations. However, those that survived were masterpieces.

This sonata comes from a period in which Brahms was writing in a very free way. Works that share more or less the same characteristics that were written in the same period include works like the "F minor Piano Quintet", the "G major string sextet, the famous "Horn trio op. 40", the "Paganinni Variations" and the "German Requiem".

The work is dedicated to Dr. Josef Gansbacher, a friend of Brahms who played the cello. As he was reading through the sonata with Brahms at the piano he complained that he was being covered and could not hear himself. The problem was not Gansbacher's alone. This is something that is part of the music; the piano part can easily dominate the cello solo.

The execution problem related to this work has to do with the registers that Brahms chose for both instruments. The cello is often the bass support of the harmonic structure. These low and middle registers that are explored in this piece do not have the same power of high pitches on the instrument. At the same time he chose some of the most brilliant registers on the piano. The consequences are that

the cellist has to fight for his sound from the beginning to the end of the piece.

It has been said that both the first and third movements are related to Bach's "Art of the Fugue" (contrapuntos 3 and 13 respectively). The first movement is prominently romantic, characterized by dense structures and textures, long phrases, and a very contemplative character. This movement is in the sonata allegro form.

The second movement is more (actually almost completely) classical. The articulations and motivic developments in the A section resemble the style of Haydn or Mozart. Another important classical influence in this movement is the fact that it is a minuet (a typical classical middle movement). There is a motivic connection between the first few notes of the minuet and the first few notes of the trio. The trio exhibits a fresh compositional texture that contrasts with the minuet in articulation, being more legato while the minuet is much more articulated.

The last movement is baroque in style and is a fugue strongly influenced by Johan Sebastian Bach. Despite the contrasting characteristics of the movements in this sonata, the overall result is purely romantic as in his

other compositions. Brahms utilized the masters of the past to create his romantic masterpiece.

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