

# Dvořák: Cello Concerto



Jan Smaczny



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# Contents

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<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	page ix
1 <i>Dvořák and the cello</i>	1
2 <i>Preludes to the Concerto</i>	11
3 <i>The Concerto and Dvořák's 'American manner'</i>	20
4 <i>'Decisions and revisions': sketch and compositional process</i>	29
5 <i>The score I: forms and melodies</i>	42
6 <i>The score II: interpretations</i>	64
7 <i>Performers and performances</i>	86
<i>Notes</i>	99
<i>Select bibliography</i>	111
<i>Select discography</i>	115
<i>Index</i>	116

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*Dvořák and the cello*

## ‘As a solo instrument it isn’t much good’

In one of the more substantial reminiscences of Dvořák by a pupil, Ludmila Vojáčková-Wechte retailed the composer’s feelings regarding the cello:

‘The cello’, Dvořák said, ‘is a beautiful instrument, but its place is in the orchestra and in chamber music. As a solo instrument it isn’t much good. Its middle register is fine – that’s true – but the upper voice squeaks and the lower growls. The finest solo-instrument, after all, is – and will remain – the violin. I have also written a ’cello-concerto, but am sorry to this day I did so, and I never intend to write another. I wouldn’t have written that one had it not been for Professor Wihan. He kept buzzing it into me and reminding me of it, till it was done. I am sorry to this day for it!’<sup>1</sup>

Faced with this extraordinary revelation about Dvořák’s attitude towards one of his greatest works, the astonished reader can at first only echo Ludmila Vojáčková-Wechte’s interpretation of his comments: ‘Maybe this opinion was meant more for the actual “squeaky and grumpy” instrument, than for the composition’.<sup>2</sup> Another possible reaction to his comments is that Dvořák was pulling the leg of a naïve composition pupil; the composer had a sarcastic streak which, as many of his wards found to their cost, he was more than happy to unleash on the unwary. But corroboration for his view that the cello was better suited to orchestral and chamber music (Dvořák admired in particular the use of the cellos in the *Andante con moto* of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, presumably at the opening and from bar 49; on both occasions they are doubled by violas) comes from an account by another composition pupil, Josef Michl, who recounted that Dvořák considered the instrument ‘rumbled’ at both ends of the range.<sup>3</sup> Still more convincing evidence of

Dvořák's qualms about the cello as an effective concerto instrument is to be found in a letter he wrote from America to Alois Göbl on 10 December 1894 while hard at work on the Concerto – Göbl was a close musical friend in whom Dvořák often confided with directness and candour. Apart from enthusing about the virtues of revising compositions (Göbl had just attended, and enjoyed, Dvořák's radical revision of his opera *Dimitrij*), the unusual interest of the letter is the enthusiasm with which Dvořák talks about his new Concerto and of his own surprise at his enjoyment:

And now to something more about music. I have actually finished the first movement of a Concerto for violoncello!! Don't be surprised about this, I too am amazed and surprised enough that I was so determined on such work.<sup>4</sup>

The remainder of the letter quotes the main themes of the first movement, notes that an ocean liner leaves for Europe and wishes his friend health and happiness in the New Year. Dvořák's words to Göbl communicate the delight of the converted and leave little doubt that he was astonished at his new-found interest in an instrument which hitherto he had regarded as an unlikely candidate for treatment in a concerto.

There is, however, a certain irony hovering over Dvořák's newly acquired enthusiasm of which Göbl, as a confidant of the composer, may have been aware. Dvořák's works for solo cello did not just comprise the Polonaise in A major (Polonéza, B 94), composed in 1879, and the handful of solo works he had written or arranged for performance with Hanuš Wihan in 1891; the skeleton in his closet was a Concerto for cello composed much earlier in his career.

### Dvořák's first Cello Concerto

That Dvořák's pupils knew nothing of his first Cello Concerto (B 10) is not surprising. Few of his friends or contemporaries had much inkling of the true extent of the music he composed in his first decade of productivity (1860–70). Only the First String Quartet (B 8) and the Second Symphony (B 12) were performed in Dvořák's lifetime and none of the music was published;<sup>5</sup> moreover, much of it was lost or destroyed. Dvořák himself was extremely hazy about these works: he was certainly aware that his First

Symphony had been lost – apparently he sent the sole manuscript to a competition in Germany in 1865 and it was not returned.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, so hazy was Dvořák's recollection of many of these early works that several, including some whose manuscripts he still possessed, were entered into a list of 'compositions which I tore up and burned' made in 1887.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, none of his seven lists of compositions, all of which include a range of early works,<sup>8</sup> mentions the Cello Concerto. Dvořák could be disingenuous about the compositional activities of the 1860s, the case of his first opera, *Alfred*, being a prime example: although he had the manuscript of the opera bound, he did not draw attention to *Alfred* in any interview about his early life or include it in any list of compositions. While Dvořák may have harboured a certain embarrassment that his first opera was composed to a German libretto,<sup>9</sup> there seems to be no obvious reason for reticence concerning his first Cello Concerto.

Dvořák completed this first Cello Concerto, in A major, in an unorchestrated piano score with a complete solo part on 30 June 1865, in between the composition of his first two symphonies. The work was dedicated to Ludevít Peer (1847–1904), a friend and colleague in the cello section of the Provisional Theatre's orchestra (Dvořák was a viola player in this tiny band from its foundation in November 1862 to the summer of 1871). Peer was a fine player who was already performing in the theatre orchestra while still only in his late teens and before he had graduated from the Conservatory; his leaving Prague at the end of the summer of 1865, taking the manuscript of the Concerto with him, may on the one hand have stopped the composer from orchestrating the work, but on the other it also prevented Dvořák from destroying it in one of his periodic conflagrations of early compositions.<sup>10</sup>

Along with the first two symphonies and much of Dvořák's early chamber music, the Cello Concerto was written on a large scale; in fact, had it had four movements rather than the customary three, it would have been longer than either symphony, each of which approaches an hour in playing time. In design, the Concerto is a good deal more experimental than the first two symphonies: all three movements are linked, the first two by a brief accompanied 'quasi recitativo' and the second and third by a long portentous bridge passage. Another feature which, in practice if not effect, looks forward to Dvořák's second Cello Concerto is the recall of material from the introduction to the first movement in the

finale's coda. The use of material from the first movement as a kind of clinching gesture in finales was, of course, relatively common at the time, and was to become a major feature in the works of Dvořák's maturity; though the early Cello Concerto is an interesting example of this practice, Dvořák had already tried it in his First String Quartet.

The unorchestrated and unrevised form in which the Concerto survives makes judgement about the composer's final intention for the work difficult. Its huge dimensions may well have encouraged wholesale cutting, as in his revision of the First String Quartet before a performance in 1888; if so, Dvořák might well have turned his attention to the solo cello part: after the lengthy introduction, lasting 136 bars, the cello part only rests once in the first movement and plays continuously in the slow movement; the first substantial break for the soloist comes at the start of the rondo. The relentless nature of the cello part – which, apart from its size, almost always has the soloist in the limelight (often doubling the main melodic line in the 'orchestra') and only rarely takes an accompanimental role – may have reflected the composer's admiration for the energy and vitality of Peer, who was certainly an animated player; it is, however, impossible to escape the thought that Dvořák, had he had the opportunity to orchestrate the work, would have revised the solo part down to a more manageable length and provided a more sensible balance between frontline solo work and accompaniment.

As a competent viola player,<sup>11</sup> Dvořák had more than an elementary grasp of string technique, and there is evident intelligence in the placing of lyrical lines suitably high in the instrument's register. But his approach to other aspects of cello technique is limited: he did not, for example, make any effort to explore the possibilities of multiple stopping, a feature which is such an impressive aspect of the rhetorical language of the second Concerto. Occasionally in the early Concerto Dvořák shows himself adept at extending phrases with mellifluous figuration, just as he was to do again in the B minor Cello Concerto, but rarely does he achieve the subtle integration that makes the later work so satisfying. A comparison between the sequential extensions to the second subjects of the first movement of the A major Cello Concerto and the finale of the B minor Cello Concerto illustrates the point: in the latter, the material for the sequence is clearly derived from figuration in the second full beat of the theme (see Ex. 1.1b, figure *y*); in the earlier

Dvořák and the cello

Ex. 1.1(a) and (b)

(a) [Allegro ma non troppo]  
Meno Allegro

Solo cello

*dolce*  
[*pp*]

x

(b) [Allegro moderato]

Solo cello

*f*  
*fz*  
*fz*  
*fz*  
*fz con 8<sup>va</sup> bassa ad libitum*  
*ff*

y

Concerto the sequential material (see Ex. 1.1a, figure *x*) is an attractive afterthought rather than a true development. Other aspects of figuration are shared between the two works, notably the ornamental articulation of arpeggio figures: rising in the example from the first movement of the A major Concerto (Ex. 1.2a, figure *x*) and falling in the first movement of the B minor Concerto (Ex. 1.2b, figure *y*).

Dvořák: Cello Concerto

Ex. 1.2(a) and (b)

(a) [Allegro ma non troppo]

Solo cello

(b) [Allegro]

Solo cello

*ff* < *fz* *dim.*

Parallels such as these are as much the result of natural instinct – Dvořák always had a tendency to elaborate basic outlines, often to avoid an exact repetition – as the exercise of memory. Broader structural features and aspects of tone, however, may have lodged in Dvořák’s mind more readily than figurational details. Neither Concerto has an extended formal cadenza, and there is little in the way of combative virtuosity or conflict between soloist and orchestra in either work. The return of material from the first movement in the last has already been mentioned, but the first movements of the two Concertos have in common a more unusual structural feature: their recapitulations begin with the second subject, a practice confined in Dvořák’s output to these two Concertos. In both works, the need to short-circuit the recapitulation may well have been prompted by the presence of a large-scale opening ritornello. But if Dvořák was remembering his lost early Concerto when penning the same point in his later work, he avoided any similarity in manner: the recapitulation of the first movement of the A major Concerto is a muted if attractive affair in which the dynamic markings are *dolce pp*; in the B minor Concerto the recapitulation is a highpoint underlined by the use of the full orchestra and marked *ff*.

A final point of contact between the two Concertos also occurs in the first movement. In tone and, to an extent, outline, there is considerable correlation between the first and second subjects of these two Cello Concertos – certainly more than in the comparable thematic

Ex. 1.3(a) and (b)

(a) [Allegro ma non troppo]

Solo cello *f*

(b) [Allegro]

Solo cello *f risoluto*

Ex. 1.3(a) shows a cello solo in G major, 2/4 time, marked 'Allegro ma non troppo' and 'f'. The melody begins with a rising eighth-note pattern (G4, A4, B4) followed by a descending line (A4, G4, F4, E4, D4). Ex. 1.3(b) shows a cello solo in G major, 2/4 time, marked 'Allegro' and 'f risoluto'. The melody begins with a rising eighth-note pattern (G4, A4, B4) followed by a descending line (A4, G4, F4, E4, D4), then continues with a more complex rhythmic pattern involving sixteenth notes and rests, marked with 'fz' (forzando) and a hairpin crescendo.

elements in Dvořák's Violin and Piano Concertos. The most obvious resemblance is in the presentation of the first themes (cf. Exx. 1.3a and 1.3b), both of which are strikingly rhetorical with balanced rising and falling phrases for the soloist. Comparison can also be made between the second themes, both of which have a distinctly vocal quality (cf. Ex. 1.1a and Ex. 4.2b). The second subject of the A major Cello Concerto's first movement was borrowed from the main Allegro of the First String Quartet, also in A major, where it is set in a jaunty  $\frac{6}{8}$  time; in its more easeful, common-time guise in the Cello Concerto its full-throated lyricism undoubtedly looks forward to Dvořák's mature melodic style.

'Its place is in . . . chamber music'

Dvořák's view that the cello as soloist was best suited to chamber music is somewhat paradoxical: if the timbral qualities of the instrument were unsuitable for solo work in a concerto, why should it fare better when taking a solo line in a chamber work? Dvořák's use of the cello in a chamber context is in fact extensive and imaginative, although it is also relatively specialised. Among the works written in the same decade as the A major Concerto there is little to suggest more than a routine interest in the instrument for chamber purposes. Although the cello is far from neglected in Dvořák's first two surviving chamber compositions, the A minor String Quintet (B 7) and the A major String Quartet, there are no notable solos. Some six years after composing the A major Cello Concerto, Dvořák wrote a sonata for the instrument; completed on 4 January

1871, it is known only from an incipit (which indicates that it was in F minor), and an analysis by Otakar Šourek.<sup>12</sup> From this we can deduce that the sonata, in common with the astonishing E minor Quartet (B 19) which precedes it in the thematic catalogue, is marked by a fascination with thematic integration and a boldly experimental approach to tonality. Unfortunately, although Šourek must have had the cello part from which to make his deductions, this no longer appears to exist.<sup>13</sup>

Although there is an expressive cello solo line in the Andante introduction to the early B-flat major String Quartet (B 17, ?1868–70), this is something of an exception. Dvořák begins to take more interest in the cello's solo role in chamber music in his works where the string parts are joined by the piano, or in compositions – such as the String Quintet with double bass in G major (op. 77, B 49) and the String Sextet in A-flat major (op. 48, B 80) – in which the presence of another bass instrument allows the cello more liberty. In his first surviving work for piano and strings, the First Piano Quintet (A major, op. 5, B 28) of 1872, the cello part is marked 'solo'; it is the first instrument to be heard after the piano introduction, a feature shared by Dvořák's much more celebrated A major Piano Quintet (op. 81, B 155) composed some sixteen years later. In the slow movement of the earlier quintet the cello often takes an expressive lead and in the finale it introduces the main second subject. There are similar solo opportunities for the cello in the slow movements of the B-flat major (op. 21, B 51) and G minor Piano Trios (op. 26, B 56) of 1875 and 1876, where the instrument is used in its tenor register and marked *espressivo*, and in the First Piano Quartet (D major, op. 23, B 53), where it initiates most of the significant material in the first and last movements.

As Dvořák's style matured during the 1880s, there is little sign of any revulsion or embarrassment attached to the use of the cello in chamber music: the cello has significant solo opportunities in the slow movements of the F minor Piano Trio (op. 65, B 130) and the Second Piano Quartet (op. 87, B 162), and its role at the start of the Second Piano Quintet is well known, though on balance in this work Dvořák shows slightly more preference for his own instrument, the viola. The one composition of the keyboard accompanied variety in which the cello does not take such a prominent role is his Bagatelles (op. 47, B 79), for two violins, cello and harmonium; the trio sonata instrumentation necessitates a somewhat

different disposition of forces, with the cello articulating and energising the bass.

Dvořák's surviving solo works for cello and piano are something of a miscellany. The Polonaise, composed for a concert in Turnov on 29 June 1879 and first performed by the cellist Alois Neruda (1837–99), is an attractive blend of lyricism and virtuosity. The fact that Dvořák did not give the work an opus number nor attempted to have it published – unlike the other items in the concert, including the Bagatelles and the Mazurek for violin and piano (op. 49, B 89) – should not be read as a negative judgement: it seems the piece went missing shortly after the concert. The work, however, survived in a copy which Neruda gave to the young cellist Wilhelm Jeral, who eventually published it in 1925 (Dvořák may have been cutting his losses when he used a secondary melody and the theme of the central section of the work for the scherzo and finale respectively of his String Quartet in C major (op. 61, B 121) composed two years later).

If it had been to hand, Dvořák would doubtless have made use of the Polonaise when casting around for solo items for an extensive concert tour of Bohemia and Moravia made from early January to the end of March 1892 (arranged by the Prague publisher Velebín Urbánek and intended as a kind of farewell to his fellow Czechs and the concert societies he had visited in the previous fifteen years). The centrepiece of the tour was a set of six *Dumky* for Piano Trio (known nowadays as the Piano Trio in E minor, op. 90, B 166, 'Dumky'). Although the *Dumky* were rich in solo opportunities for the cello, Dvořák needed some make-weights to play with his violinist, Ferdinand Lachner, and the cellist Hanuš Wihan. Lachner performed the Mazurek and the piano and violin version of the Romantic Pieces (*Romantické kusy*, op. 75, B 150), but, in the absence of the Polonaise, there was nothing for Wihan. Dvořák filled the gap in a matter of three days (beginning on Christmas Day 1891) with the Rondo in G minor (op. 94, B 171), an arrangement of two of the first set of Slavonic Dances (nos. 8 and 3, B 172) and another arrangement, *Silent Woods* (*Klid*, B 173) from the piano duet cycle *From the Bohemian Forest* (*Ze Šumavy*, op. 68, B 133). All four works show Dvořák very much at home with the cello as soloist. The tessitura is high, with Dvořák exploiting the singing qualities of the instrument; he also shows a fondness for focusing on Wihan's capacity for high-pitched

trills in the Rondo (the Rondo and *Silent Woods* are discussed in the next chapter, where the role of the orchestral versions of these works is considered). As Dvořák played the accompaniment to these pieces while he toured nearly forty towns in Bohemia and Moravia, the potential for more extended treatment of the cello as a solo instrument cannot have been lost on him.