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THE GREAT CELLO CONCERTO OF ROBERT VOLKMANN (1856-1857)

By David Johnstone

Introduction:

I have to admit that when I was a full-time student in London, the name of Robert Volkmann did not mean anything to me, and this for someone who used to spend almost all of his grant on buying music scores! I believe that the first time that I read his name was in the excellent biography of David Popper by Stephen De'ak. De'ak spoke not only highly about the work itself, but on Popper's genuine interest in bringing the composition before the general public. It made me curious; why dwell on this work and not other contemporary romantic works, such as the cello concertos by Molique or Raff? At a much later date, I did have the privilege of performing works of Volkmann, such as the String Serenades, and these experiences confirmed my initial beliefs that here was a composer who has been treated unjustly during the second half of the twentieth century. This was a composer who was so highly regarded in his day, almost an equal to Schumann and Brahms; indeed some argue that Volkmann is that missing link between those two composers, if you are looking at the progress of German romantic music during the course of the century. What is important to take into consideration is that during his lifetime, not only was Volkmann's music considered the equal of that of Schumann or Mendelssohn, but also was perceived to be more advanced. In that sense he may be that link that we do not know about between Schumann and Brahms.

He was a 'conservative' composer who was much more comfortable in the Brahms circle than the Wagner circle, though his relations were cordial with almost everyone. For example, it is said that when Liszt had a visitor staying with him, and for whom he wished to care especially well for, he played at his home a Volkmann piano trio with Joachim, the famous violinist, and the cellist Cossmann. His music was held in the highest esteem not only by the famous, but also by the general musical public of his time. They were regularly mentioned in the same breath as with those of Beethoven. High praise indeed for a composer whose works today are largely all out of print!

At the same time, he knew well personally Hans Von Bülow, Liszt, and the important music critic Eduard Hanslick. His music was very well received by the critics of the day, and works such as his second piano trio, Op. 5, and the first symphony were well-known and loved by both public and musicians. Given this, it is really surprising then that I did not know his name – the same, I guess, as many of you reading this article! However, history treats some composers well and some badly. For example, although the name of Hindemith is still very much ‘alive’ with us as a historical name, in the 1930s and 1940s he was at the very forefront of current musical trends, along with Schoenberg and Stravinsky; yet he is not talked about in the same importance of the other two today in the world of the 21st century. Another example – for me, Martinu is one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century without doubt, yet performances of his works are becoming scarcer as the years pass (he died in 1959). And so with Volkmann – after the First World War he quickly slipped down the ladder, perhaps not into total oblivion, but to become a rarity or novelty to be performed only now and again. I believe the principal reason for this was that ... as a worthy companion and colleague to Brahms, perhaps Volkmann found fewer answers to the call of *modernity* from the younger generation, than did Brahms or Dvorak. Ironically during the first decade of the 21st century there have been more performances and recordings of his works than in the 50 previous years.

So, before presenting his cello concerto, I firstly I wish to give a little idea of his life, though this biographical information is readily available from other sources.



Robert Volkmann

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Biographical Notes:

Robert Volkmann was born in Lommatzsch, Germany, on April 6, 1815, and he was an almost exact contemporary of Wagner. Volkmann's father was a church music director, and trained his son in music to prepare him as a possible successor. Thus the young Robert Volkmann learned to play not only the organ and the piano with his father, but simultaneously the violin and cello, and by age 12, he was playing the cello part in String Quartets by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. In 1832, Robert Volkmann entered the Freiberg Gymnasium and studied music with Anacker, going on to Leipzig in 1836 to study with C.F. Becker. There, in Leipzig, Volkmann met Robert Schumann, who encouraged him. They maintained contact with one another.

When he finished his studies, he began working as voice teacher at a music school in Prague. He did not stay there long, and in 1841, he moved to Budapest, where he was employed as a piano teacher and a reporter for the Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung. Although composing at this time his music had no outlets. Then, during 1852, his Piano Trio in B minor caught the attention of Franz Liszt and Hans von Bülow, who recognized its quality, and who proceeded to play it a number of times all over Europe. In 1854, Volkmann moved to Vienna, but returned to Budapest in 1858; it is cited that he missed the city during his four years in Vienna. In Budapest he became a good friend of the great cellist David Popper, and Popper was to promote Volkmann's cello concerto more than anyone. Volkmann's compositional talent was also highly recognized by the publisher Gustav Heckenast, who in 1857 bought the rights to publish all Volkmann's works in exchange for regular income regardless of sales. Volkmann was therefore joyously able to fully dedicate himself to composition for over a decade, until Heckenast had to close down his Budapest publishing house in the early 1870s.

While visiting Wien in 1864, Volkmann became well-acquainted with Johannes Brahms, and they became close friends. In letters to each other, they started by "lieber Freund" ("dear friend").

In the 1870s Volkmann began winding down on his life, composing very little. From 1875 until his death, Volkmann was professor of harmony and counterpoint at the National Academy of Music in Budapest, where Franz Liszt was the director. Volkmann died on October 30, 1883.

Analysis of the Cello Concerto:

Written 6 or 7 years after the Schumann work, the A Minor Concerto of Volkmann was one of the most remarkable concertos of its time. At first the critics were divided; some could not understand a concerto cast in a single long movement, with operatic vocal effects, and an unusually gentle yet somewhat eerie final page, whilst others enthusiastically warmed to it. However, it seems that cellists took this work on board almost without reservations. For example, it was probably the favourite concerto of all for Popper, and maybe the concerto that he played the most in public. Certainly, between 1860 and 1890, it was the most famous and highly-rated cello concerto in existence, surpassing those of even Haydn and Schumann; only thereafter (in the 1890s) did the A minor concertos of both Schumann and Saint-Saens begin to come to the fore. However, it was the new concertos by the more 'classically' inclined romantics (as of course Volkmann was himself) that were to supersede this concerto in the first third of the twentieth century— such as Boellmann (Symphonic Variations), Tchaikovsky (Rococo Variations – 1876), Lalo (Concerto – 1880), Brahms (Double Concerto – 1887), Dvorak (Concerto – 1895), Strauss (Don Quixote – 1897), and to a lesser extent those by Enescu (Sinfonia Concertante – 1901) and Dohnanyi (Konzertstucke – 1903/04). Ironically, some of these works are themselves now little-programmed. However, the public resurrection of Volkmann's concerto is long overdue; even though it has been played and recorded in more recent years (a recording by Thomas Blees is a worthy example, showing an excellent 'blend' of soloist and orchestra). There is also an abridged version of the work which I will later refer to, with numerous passages cut out by the then renowned German professor Hugo Becker, but this may well have done more harm than good to Volkmann's cause within Germany, between the two world wars. To his credit, however, Becker's cadenza is both interesting and challenging.

In earlier times, this concerto was difficult to comprehend and to analyze - it is actually written in sonata form, in one great elongated movement (though Volkmann himself often tricked his musical colleagues into thinking that it contained three movements within one, perhaps fearing they would 'frown' upon him if he revealed that he had daringly 'modernized' the concept of the cello concerto!). Structure apart, the work reveals a careful and meticulous dialogue of soloist and orchestra which even surpasses that found in the Schumann concerto.

The exposition contains three different subject groups in the exposition, later allowing numerous opportunities for 'juxtapositions' within a well-knit and well-crafted development section. The first theme, deliberately angular and academic, somewhat resembles the Schumann concerto opening in that it is in A minor and pivots on the tonic ('A') and the 5th ('E'):

The first image shows a musical score for the first theme. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a single line with a treble clef, containing a melodic line starting with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The middle staff is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) for a string quartet, marked *sf* and *Streichquartett*. The bottom staff is a single line with a bass clef, likely for a cello, which has a *p* dynamic marking at the end of the phrase. The tempo is marked *Allegro moderato*.

Even during this first theme, the virtuosity becomes apparent – Volkmann’s high knowledge of cello playing is very apparent:

The second image shows a musical score with a cello line and piano accompaniment. The cello line (top staff) features a highly virtuosic passage with rapid sixteenth-note runs and slurs, marked with *arco piaz.* and *arco*. The piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves) is marked *pp* and *fl.* (flute). The piano part includes chords and rhythmic patterns that support the cello's virtuosity.

The ‘second’ theme, still in A minor, is far more sprightly, and also enters immediately with virtuosic play:

The third image shows a musical score for the second theme. It consists of two systems. The first system has a cello line (top staff) with a *pp* dynamic and a piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves) with *ten.* (tension) markings and a *ritard.* (ritardando) instruction. The second system starts with a *B* section, marked *a tempo* and *ff* (fortissimo). The piano accompaniment continues with *ff* dynamics. The cello line in the second system features a complex, virtuosic passage with many slurs and ties.

The work is enormously virtuosic and coaxes substantial technique out from the soloist, such as passages full of sixths, thirds and octaves, enormous leaps across the strings and chromatic runs racing through all the positions.

By contrast, the third theme is really what we expect from the normal 'second' subject – tender, cantabile, gentle, though not without its own technical difficulty:

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a string instrument, likely a cello. The first system shows a melodic line in the upper staff and a supporting bass line in the lower staff. The upper staff begins with a 'rit.' marking, followed by 'pp' and 'dolce'. The lower staff starts with 'p' and 'rit.', then 'pp' and 'rit.', and finally 'p' and 'un poco piu moderato VI.'. The second system continues the piece, featuring 'accel.' markings in both staves, followed by 'rit.', 'in tempo VI.', and dynamic markings 'pp', 'f', and 'p'. The notation includes various rhythmic values, slurs, and articulation marks.

Furthermore, this development starts with opera-influenced recitative passages, and proceeds with it during a whole mini-section, and which (for the cello) was certainly a novelty at this time:

The first system shows a cello part with a tremolo and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is marked "a tempo" and "mysterioso". The second system is marked "Allegro vivace" and includes dynamic markings such as "mf", "p.", "acceler.", and "cresc.".

The harmonically sublime transition back to the recapitulation, decorated by cello arpeggios, is of the highest musical order (close even to the most mature Brahms).

The first system is marked "poco" and "Tempo I. (Allegro moderato)". The second system features a cello part with arpeggios and a piano accompaniment marked "cantabile" and "pp Quart.". The third system includes a page number "10. Pag." and dynamic markings "pp".

There is a glorious opportunity for a well-developed cadenza towards the close. Volkmann himself wrote some four different cadenzas for the work, and there were also at least two other regular cadenzas known and used – of which perhaps that by Popper was the most highly regarded (curiously rated higher than Volkmann's own cadenzas!). David Johnstone has also written a cadenza for this work (in 'A Manual of Cadenzas and Cadences for Cello', published by Creighton's Collection) and his is an attempt at a faithful re-working of some of the material as presented by Volkmann initially, with the inclusion of a small quotation of the 'tremolo' part from the Becker cadenza. It is altogether quite a substantial creation, the need here being for a fully romantic outpouring of real substance from the soloist, before arriving at a more relaxed and introverted *coda*. Perhaps 'eerie' would be a better description than 'relaxed'...

The image shows a musical score for a cello and piano piece. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. The top staff is for the cello, and the bottom two staves are for the piano. The cello part begins with a 'quasi improvvisand' marking and a long, flowing melodic line. The piano accompaniment consists of sustained chords and arpeggiated figures. The tempo is marked 'ten.' (ritardando) throughout. The piano part includes the instruction 'colla parte' in the middle section. The piece concludes with a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking in the cello part.

In summing up so far the work structurally and technically, one can assert with confidence that this is a most interesting work that certainly deserves more regular performances.

Later Considerations

The first printed score of the concerto was only published in 1905 by Schott, who had bought the original rights from the Hungarian company Heckenast. But this was already a shortened version made by the cellist Hugo Becker. Such things were common at that time – learned musicians sought to genuinely ‘improve’ a work with their tinkering. One only has to remember the number of versions of Bruckner symphonies formerly available, and many of them were not authorized by the composer himself. The Boccherini Cello Concerto in Bb Major (reworked by Grützmacher) and the Rococo Variations of Tchaikovsky (reworked by Fitzenhagen) were but two polemic problems for cellists in the following century, even if today the ‘two’ versions can live alongside one and another. Therefore the orchestral parts and the solo part were soon adapted to Becker’s score.

However, in 1942, Schott published a “new” version that they endeavoured to sell by stating on the cover that it was a “free adaption” by the cellist Enrico Mainardi. I do not possess this score, but I understand that it was very much an improvement in that it recuperated some of the original material by Volkmann that was lost under Becker’s ‘butchering’. This “improved” version was played in Germany and across the world and even recorded. However, recently, and due to the painstaking work of the astronomer and Volkmann expert Dr Daniel Christlein we now have, once more, the ‘original’ work as Volkmann wished, with some three minutes of extra music as compared to the revised Schott score, and some minutes extra again from the Becker ‘truncated’ version. Dr Christlein also reconstructed the orchestral parts we now have.

One more anecdote: David Popper (1843–1911), who was equally at home in Prague, Vienna and Budapest, and loved above all the two important cello concertos that dated from his own youth: those of Schumann (published in 1854) and Volkmann (published in 1858). Later, Popper became a highly successful teacher and produced some important cellists. One of his greatest pupils was the Hungarian Arnold Földesy (1882–1940), who was appointed solo cellist of the Berlin Philharmonic in 1915. Under the conductor Nikisch and his successor Wilhelm Furtwängler, Földesy played most of the important cello concertos with the orchestra. In 1924, he left the orchestra to pursue a solo career. In that same year, Földesy recorded the Volkmann concerto op. 33 (amongst other works) on six records of the VOX company. It was the world premiere recording of the work.

Volkmann's other Works

Most of Volkmann's compositions are either for solo piano or ensembles including piano. It was his Piano Trio in B minor that first brought him renown. During his 4-year stay in Vienna, Volkmann composed his Variations on a Theme of Handel, String Quartets No. 3 and No. 4 in E minor, and the Cello Concerto in A minor.

Almost all of Volkmann's orchestral works date to the time of his association with Heckenast. These include an Overture for William Shakespeare's play "Richard III", an Overture in C major, the Symphony No. 1 in D minor (which was a major success when premiered in Moscow) and the Symphony No. 2 in B flat major, dedicated to the Russian Musical Society.

Volkmann believed that a composer should be satisfied with creating in the listeners' minds the desired mood and impression by purely musical means; if the contours of the action and the plot are recognized by the listener, this should be considered a happy coincidence.

When Volkmann's Symphony No. 1 was played on a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio Two request show, in early 1998, it was remarked that "It sounds almost like a forgotten work by Brahms... almost."

Unlike the serious first symphony, the Symphony No. 2 is rather more cheerful. Robert Volkmann's grandson, Hans Volkmann, remarks: "*After Haydn, naïve cheerfulness was only extremely rarely chosen as the basic mood of an entire Symphony.*"

Given that his first piano trio largely helped to 'put him on the musical map', here are some words about the work:

The Piano Trio No.1 was composed in 1842-3 during his first sojourn in Pest, but not published until he moved to Vienna in 1852. The trio begins with a stately Adagio introduction which builds slowly in tempo and emotion and seamlessly leads to the main movement Quasi Andante. The heavily accented first theme is reminiscent of Beethoven while the second theme is lighter, almost playful. The second movement, Allegretto, is a scherzo and again shows the influence of Beethoven. The slow movement, Andante, is for the most part a calm pastorale, straight forward and simple, although the middle section provides a clever contrast in both tempo and emotion without becoming overly dramatic or stormy. The finale, Allegro con fuoco, is clearly the show piece of the trio. It contains three excellent themes, all of which provide excellent contrast. It begins with a highly dramatic and rhythmically swaying subject which suddenly, without any development, gives way to an exciting gypsy theme. Just imagine - Brahms himself later borrowed this technique many times !!

Volkmann's three String orchestral Serenades are highly romantic and cheerful works. Although the composer himself labeled them 'modest', perhaps for their playable character, they were very much loved by performers and general public (perhaps by this very *playable* conviction that they hold). Having said that, they are not quite so simple, structurally speaking, as they might sound, and the high-class craftsmanship is obvious at all moments. The lighter orchestration of using only strings heralds back to the original ideals of the serenade during Mozart's time. Volkmann was probably also influenced by the two Brahms serenades of 1858 and 1860, but Volkmann's became far more popular than those of his friend during the second half of the nineteenth century! The first two serenades of (in C Major and F Major) mix symphonic concept with dance and march movements, but the third serenade in D Minor not only features a cello soloist (which features the orchestral principal cellist, and not usually an 'invited' soloist) but is of an almost continuous movement whilst made up of contrasting sections.



List of Principal Works (+ dates where possible)

Orchestral Works

- Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Opus 49 (1862/63)
- Symphony No. 2 in B-flat major, Opus 53 (1864/65)
- Serenade No. 1 in C major, for strings, Opus 62 (1869)
- Serenade No. 2 in F major, for strings, Opus 63 (1869)
- Serenade No. 3 in D minor, for cello and strings, Opus 69 (1870)
- Overtures
- Cello Concerto in A minor, Opus 33 (1853-55)
- Konzertstück in C major, for piano and orchestra, Opus 42 (1861)

Chamber Music

- Piano Trio No. 1 in F major, Opus 3 (1842/43)
- Piano Trio No. 2 in B minor, Opus 5 (1850)
- String Quartet No. 1 in A minor, Opus 9 (1847/48)
- String Quartet No. 2 in G minor, Opus 14 (1846)
- String Quartet No. 3 in G major, Opus 34 (1856/57)
- String Quartet No. 4 in E minor, Opus 35 (1857)
- String Quartet No. 5 in F minor, Opus 37 (1858)
- String Quartet No. 6 in E-flat major, Opus 43 (1861)
- 5 Pieces for Cello and Piano, Op.21 (arrangements of Leopold Grützacher)

Vocal Music

many Lieder

Piano Music

- Sonata in C minor, Opus 12
- Variations on a Theme of Händel, Opus 26
- Lieder der Großmutter, Opus 27
- Hungarian Sketches, Opus 24 (4hdg., 1861)
- 3 Marches, Opus 40 (4hdg., 1859)
- Sonatina in G major, Opus 57 (4hdg., 1868)
- Little Pieces for 2 bzw. 4 Hände

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