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Truths and Rumours on Saint-Saëns Cello Concerto in A Minor, Op.33

An article for cellists and all by David Johnstone

Truths and Rumours on Saint-Saens Cello Concerto in A minor, Op.33

Hello everyone! I felt compelled to write a few words on the A minor cello concerto of Saint-Saëns (Opus 33) because these past few days I have been orchestrating the entire work for orchestra of violoncellos rather than 'normal' orchestra, and on reading extra written information on the work I find that there is actually fairly little attention paid to it; unfortunately even some usual sources for consultation (such as Wikipedia, as at May 2020) do not even have the structure of the work at all clear. Before writing on a personal level therefore, firstly some general notes on the circumstances of the composition...

Camille Saint-Saëns composed his Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33 in 1872, when the composer was 37 years old. He wrote this work for the Belgian cellist Auguste Tolbecque. Tolbecque was part of a distinguished family of musicians closely associated with the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, France's leading concert society. The concerto was first performed on January 19, 1873 at the Paris conservatoire concert with Tolbecque as soloist. This was considered a mark of Saint-Saëns' growing acceptance by the French musical establishment. Sir Donald Francis Tovey later wrote "Here, for once, is a violoncello concerto in which the solo instrument displays every register without the slightest difficulty in penetrating the orchestra."

It is cast in the standard three-movement concerto format although the central movement can hardly be classed as slow...

- I. Allegro non troppo
- II. Allegretto con moto
- III. Tempo primo un poco menos allegro

{Total duration: approx. 21-22 mins.}

The movements follow without pause, as like in the famous E minor Violin Concerto of Mendelssohn. However there often seems to be great confusion in the structure, which is not so complicated. It saddens me to see people still saying it is in one movement when it is clearly not!

Firstly, why did the concerto come about?

THE CONCERTO - THE ORIGINS

Though it seems surprising to today's youngsters, if one transports oneself back one hundred and fifty years ago there were not so many cello concertos of great worth. Many Baroque and even Classical period works had half-disappeared by the 1860s. Boccherini was little played (the formerly world-wide used version of the Bb Major Cello Concerto should really be titled as "Boccherini-Grützmacher Cello Concerto in Bb" on account of so much material and scoring being of the German cellist soloist/teacher rather than Boccherini, but even this did not appear until the mid-1890s); the Haydn D major was more often than *not* credited to our dear Josef but to other composers of the day (especially Kraft) and Haydn's glorious Concerto in C Major was lying in library obscurity until after the Second World War, but that is another story.

Other concerto works such as by Weber, Danzi, Auber, Offenbach certainly had promised but never entered the repertoire for one reason or another. Of course, Schumann's concerto also had a troubled birth, not only for his health problems in the 1850s but for finding a cellist competent to play it; this work only began to come into the repertoire of a larger number of solo cellists as we approached the 1890s. When Saint-Saens tackled his first cello concerto the other ones at that moment in fashion were works by composers little programmed today such as Molique, Volkmann, Reinecke, Rubinstein. Also heard on the concert stage were concertos and concertante works by cellist-composers such as Romberg, Goltermann, Davydov etc. It's worth mentioning in passing that the English composer Sullivan wrote a nice concerto in D Major, championed by Piatti in the 1860s, but was this was hardly taken up at all by the rest of the cello world. Just before Saint-Saëns, Johan Svendsen wrote a nice small concerto (D major) in 1870 but this was not seen breaking any new ground, considered perhaps more as 'salon' music on a large scale rather than as a 'symphonic' concertante work.

Saint-Saens might then be classed as the FIRST shining light in a new generation of romantic cello concerti which could be seen to really work - soon after in history came those by Lalo, E. Hartmann, Herbert, Boëllmann (Variations Symphoniques), the Brahms 'Double' Concerto, Tchaikovsky ('Rococo'), Dvorak, Strauss (Don Quixote), d'Albert and Enescu (Sinfonia Concertante). All these mentioned concerto works appeared in the thirty years after the path laid by Saint-Saens, and of course there were more: Alexander Gretchaninov (1895), pieces by Bruch (4 pieces written in the years 1880, 1891 and 1892), Strauss - Romanze (1883), Elegie of Fauré (1880) etc. That is not to argue that all these works are programmed regularly today in the twenty-first century!

Now we to fast forward a few years, to the opening years of the twentieth century and up until the outbreak of the First World War what was happening to all these works just mentioned? Which were on 'top of the pile'?! Like often has occurred in football leagues we have a 'BIG 4' - and these were the concerto/concertante works of Schumann, Saint-Saëns, Tchaikovsky and Dvorak. They really came into their own as the four giants - for example, if one looks at the cello performances in the London 'Proms' (I have made a list of virtually every invited cello soloist with his or her chosen concerto work during the first 50 years of this series!) all were regularly programmed with perhaps the exception of the Schumann concerto (which was never-the-less in favour amongst the very 'top' of cello players); and one finds that the concerto of Saint-Saens was the most programmed of all of them in Great Britain up until 1918! After the war we approached a new age and things changed. In between the two World Wars the Elgar concerto became the most programmed cello work on London, followed by Dvorak, but Saint-Saëns continued to hold a noble place near the top.

SAINT-SAËNS CHOOSES THE CELLO

So now homing in on Saint-Saënsand according to Pau Casals the composer (also a most competent orchestral and choral director) was at one moment conducting the Beethoven 'Pastoral' Symphony, and in the preparation rehearsals each time Saint-Saëns arrived at the special extra 'storm' movement (the 4th movement of the five in this Beethoven symphony) he thought "this would be a great idea for a concerto!" And why the cello? Well, he already knew the cello well and had composed for the instrument - the large-scale Suite, Op.16 for example - and envisaged the cello soloist as being ideal to open the storm for the cello deep profound voice. We should imagine a present day movie where someone presses the pause button, and then afresh presses the 'play' and we are directly in action!

That's to say he took the lead offered by Schumann (Cello Concerto), Mendelssohn (Violin Concerto in E minor) and Volkmann (Cello Concerto) by introducing the soloist right from the beginning without any previous orchestral *tutti*. The difference is that whereas all three afore-mentioned examples feature a sweet entry by the soloist Saint-Saens to the contrary launches into a torment and storm from the first bar!

Although Saint-Saens can be generally categorized by exquisite elegance, this entry should surely display certain ferocity, it should 'shake' the audience. Those cellists playing lame 'A' harmonics on the third (and even fourth) phrases should surely think again - this needs vibrancy!

Later, after the famous double/triple stops passage (more on that later) and a sonorous orchestral *tutti*, the soloist enters once again as we move (albeit momentarily) into D Major and the start of the development section. Here the harmonics on the A harmonics are certainly to be welcomed. So why here then, and not before, you will ask? Because once again, as Casals explained, and supposedly related from Saint-Saëns own mouth, by this moment the storm now had totally passed away and the warming sun came shining out. He was thinking again of the 'Pastoral' Symphony but more in this case of the slow second movement (remember the innocence of the little brook?). So the last thing needed is a great tension ...

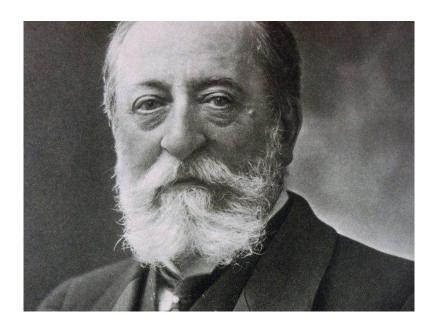
SAINT-SAENS THE INNOVATOR { 1 } - FIRST MOVEMENT

When the craftsmanship harmonic designs of the development section have been heard, and the cello breaks into legato arpeggios we pass a short orchestral *tutti* which prepares the recapitulation, but the cello soloist suddenly decides to 'barge in' quite unexpectedly! 'Hang on', but what is this, this is the lead to the SECOND subject, not the first! What is happening? It is simply the occasionally used romantic way of introducing the second subject in the recapitulation first (what better example than Dvorak's Cello concerto, maybe he was even influenced in this by Saint-Saëns, who knows?) before the first theme is heard afterwards - this formula is always strong for outwardly displaying the tonic tonality. But now, and this is most important, Saint-Saëns goes one step further than Dvorak; the second subject appears as I have described, but then the WHOLE of the second movement is 'forwarded' and delivered to us before the first theme recapitulation to the first movement! From there it is much simpler; straight to the third movement. Even so, much later, towards the end of the third movement and before the final A Major Coda section, some recall is made to material from the first movement for the orchestra; the cyclical elements present are a technique often used by French composers - Franck and D'Indy immediately come to mind.



Camille Saint-Saëns pictured in 1875, three years after having composed his first cello concerto (he would have been 40 years old in this photo)

Below, a photo as a mature man....he is an enigma between the conservative and the progressive!



SAINT-SAENS THE INNOVATOR { 2 } - SECOND MOVEMENT

Even allowing for the unusual adventures that Saint-Saëns took liberty to in the first movement one can see that he still adheres to the age-old tried formula of 'sonata form': namely two groups of themes in the exposition, a development section, and a reprise (recapitulation) even if part of this reprise is displaced.

The second movement also plays with unusual concepts, at least considering the year we were in. If you think of every cello concerto composed from the beginning of classicism to this very concerto appearing at the beginning of the 1870s then virtually all are in three movements in a fast-slow-fast order. Do remember we haven't yet arrived at Elgar, Dohnanyi, Enescu or Richard Strauss! The only large-scale work I can think of not obeying the usual pattern of three movements including a central slow movement was the concerto of Robert Volkmann, composed in 1860 (therefore appearing just after the Schumann concerto). Volkmann, in my opinion, writes his work in one gigantic movement with three subject groups in the exposition (a la Bruckner!) and Volkmann also incorporated operatic elements (for example, a recitative at the start of the development section) alongside the usual virtuosity aspired to in a concerto.

The second movement of the Saint-Saëns concerto is not in fact a slow movement at all; it is light and dance-based, and has the speed more-or-less corresponding to a Minuet. This to me somewhat indicates that Saint-Saëns was looking not so much to writing romantic yearning of the cello lyricism here as perhaps Schumann had opened up, but was rather looking back in musical history. The movement is, as said, more akin to a gentle *Minuetto* more typical of France in the eighteenth century, and in this way the orchestration is so light - frequently just strings - that the cello soloist has absolutely no problem in proyecting, and certainly no reason to force his/her sound out. Even a hint of a cadenza - that chromatic arpeggio descent - is based on lightness.

Later, towards the close of the movement, there are minimal hints of the grey skies which opened the entire work (cellos and basses in the orchestra), but here they are portrayed as vague memories.

Worth hinting too, that surely his contemporary French composer Lalo was very much aware of this concerto when he wrote his own concerto in D Minor some five years later; his 'slow' movement is also of dance-like material, although in his case the construction is somewhat different - there are two clear halves to this dance movement and both parts are preceded by slower introductions.

SAINT-SAENS THE INNOVATOR { 3 } - THIRD MOVEMENT

The finale is apparently more traditionally conceived than the other two; the first main theme is melancholic and lilting (I feel it resembles a falling leaf), whilst the 'second group' is pure delightful virtuoso 'rococo' for the soloist after the orchestral flourishes of 16thnotes in its brief tutti. Both these themes/groups start in the tonic key of A Minor. Now again, our composer deviates from the norm - we can note the appearance of such a beautiful long episode which starts in F Major which here takes the place of (I mean, is instead of) the whole development section of a typical sonata-form construction. The long horizontal lines of the cello soloist are indeed tender, and yet however, this episode does not weaken at all the coherence of the work as a whole. This idea was also used, if I remember correctly, by Liszt and Schumann. It above all works in this case due to the play on the melodic interval relationships that I will mention a little below (see SAINT-SAENS THE INNOVATOR { 4 }). Moreover, at the end of this episode section there is the opportunity for the soloist to rise from the very lowest note possible (without scordatura I mean!) of the cello to virtually the highest (in harmonics) heard up to this point in cello history!

As pointed out by my colleague, the excellent string quartet and orchestral principal Michal Kaznowski, a few bars before the entrance of this episode the cello soloist has a scale of five notes in C Major... was this an error of the editor and should have been better be in the orchestral cellos and basses, or is it indeed for the soloist? There are two considerations here, one in favour and the other against in my opinion. If the orchestral cellos (basses) play this and not the soloist, the first violins take flight from their 'earthly' depths even more beautifully to connect forward to the soloist entrance of this very episode. However, on the other hand, if the soloist does play this (as it is 'published') then the five scalic notes connect to the first intervallic notes in the episode: the open C is a pedal equally starting both melodic 'cells', but the G ending to the scale resolves to F as second note of the cello melody as we firmly establish F Major.

I reproduce these few bars so you can all decide for yourselves:



SAINT-SAENS THE INNOVATOR { 4 }

There is another element to the structure which I feel important to mention and that is the intervallic obsessions that Saint-Saëns pursued in this creation. Perhaps this was influenced by the meticulous working of little rhythmic and melodic cells by Beethoven himself? Although Saint-Saëns disapproved of many of his contemporaries, especially when he was of advanced age, I see some resemblance to the work of Wagner, and even Schoenberg here, although Camille surely wouldn't thank me for that comment!

If one looks at so many parts to the soloist line in particular one can see it is largely dependent on two intervals:

1] the 5th (or often inverted as a 4th, especially when the upper note is the 'tonic') and

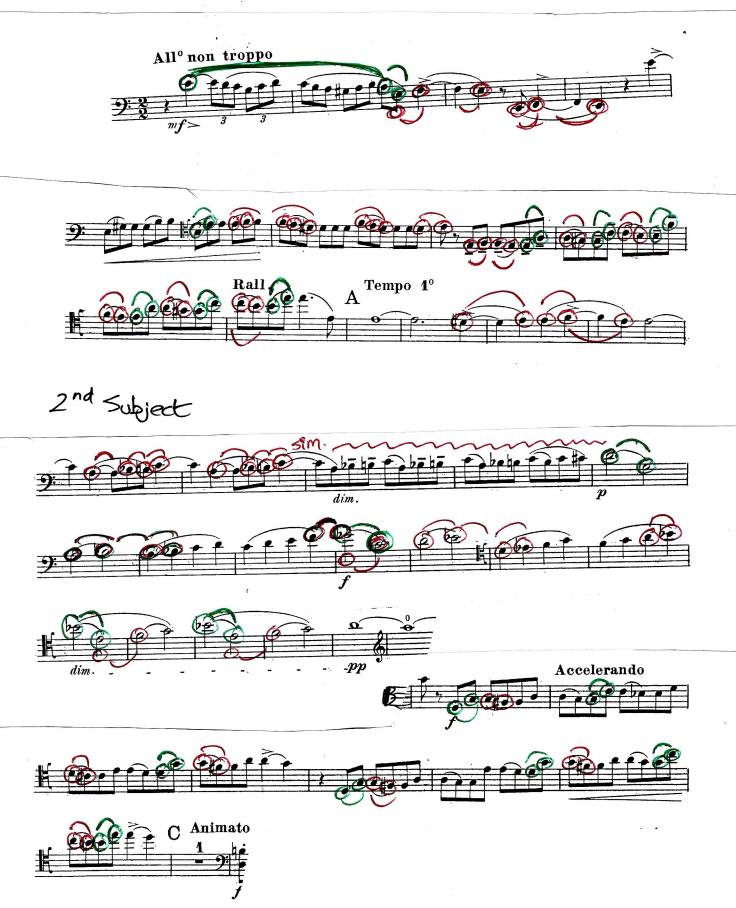
2] the semi-tone

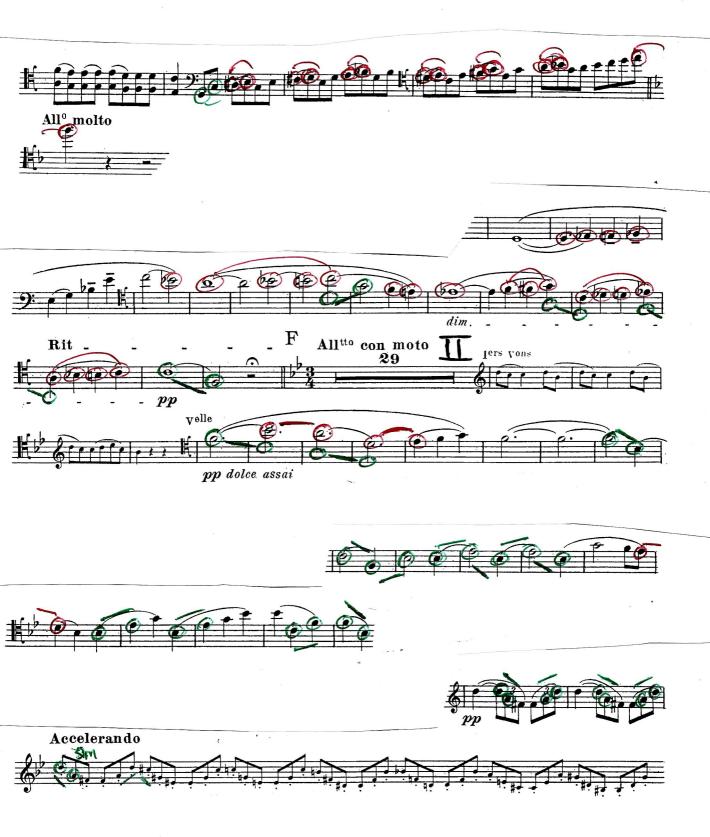
I am going to give examples, colouring the first case in green and the second case in red, OK?!

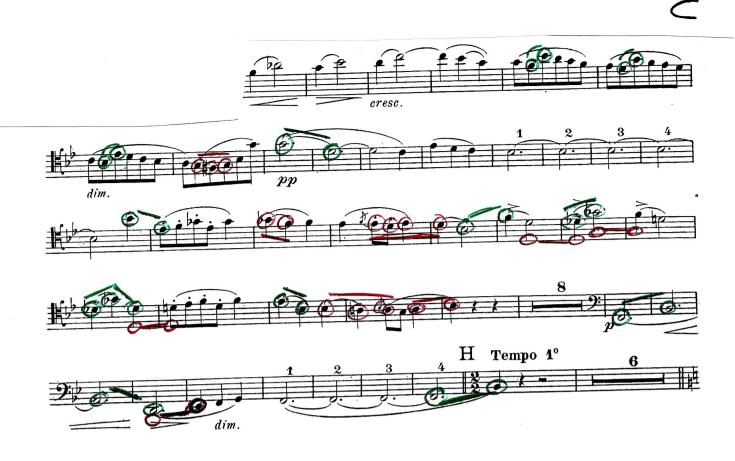
You will see that this is almost obsessive, I feel that it cannot be just a co-incidence for the tens, even hundreds of times he 'hammers' this home, although the general public will have absolutely no idea of what is going on with these interval relationships!!

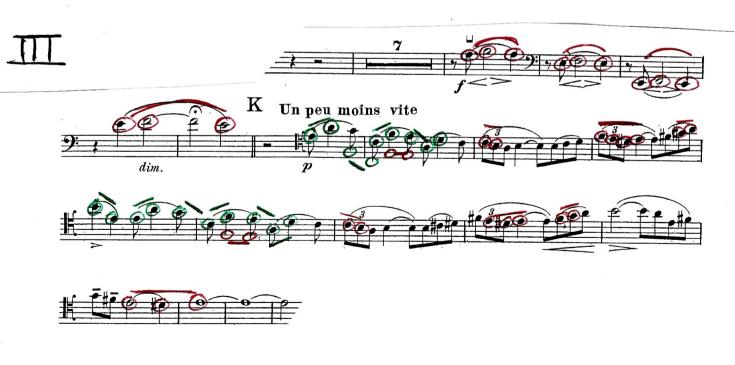
I offer many examples, yet there are many more!

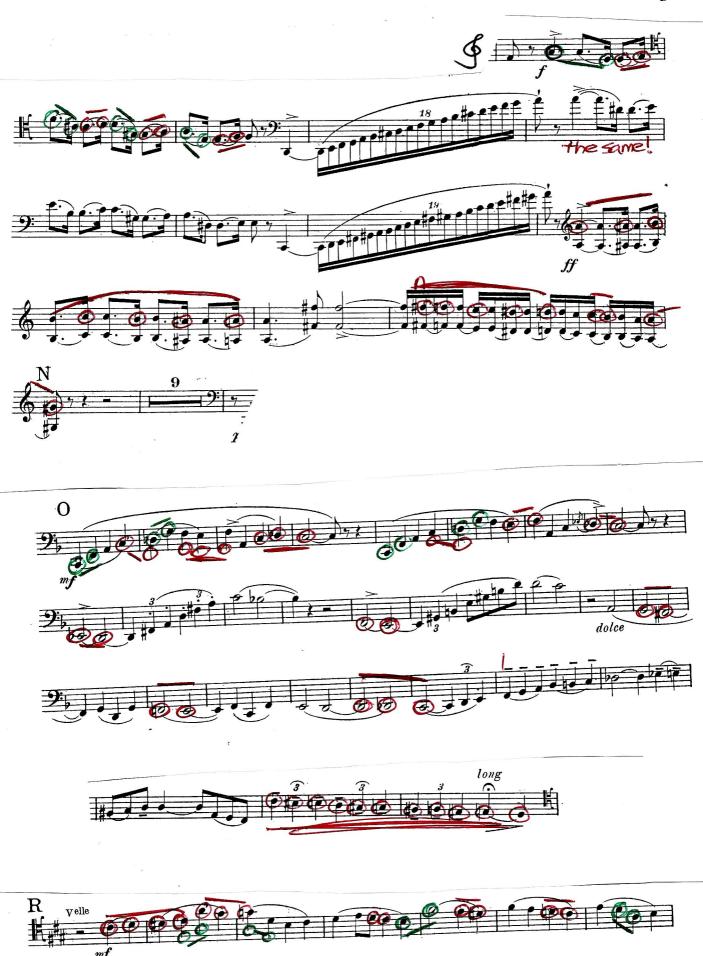
1 st Subject











The DOUBLE-STOPPINGS of the FIRST MOVEMENT

At the end of the exposition in the first movement what is considered to be the original by Saint-Saëns is what is published in virtually every edition (which I reproduce underneath - version 'A'). However this has not been the only way the Saint-Saëns passage has been played in the decades since on the concert platform!

When I was a teenager I was a pupil for five or six years of the then semi-retired German cellist Martin Bochmann (orchestral principal cello), who himself had been virtually the last cello student of Hugo Becker. According to Bochmann, Becker related to him an anecdote about this passage of music in which Casals was preparing the work in an occasion that the composer was conducting it. Casals mentioned that at the end of this sequence, in order to settle better on the Bb Major '5th' when one arrives at the 'forte' indication, why not precede this with a 7th the previous bar instead of a fifth (that is, F and **Eb**, not F and C)? He said that Saint-Saens certainly 'bought' the idea, but it was not edited. Did Casals slightly exaggerate here? I think probably not, there wasn't much to gain for him in this, it was simply his musical conviction which showed up in courage before the maestro! So Becker played it like this, he said on Saint-Saëns approval. So I have tended to practise it this way (see underneath, version 'B').

And then one step even further.... did Emanuel Feuermann know about this encounter? It was well possible, on account of the German heritage. In any case Feuermann decided upon himself (I am supposing) to make these higher sevenths in *every* bar and not on just on the end occasion that Casals pursued! I haven't heard this way played publicly but it would theoretically be well possible - underneath shown as version 'C'.

Which do you prefer?!

End Exposition - 1st Movement

VERSION



1 B casals/Becker



C-Feuermann



SAINT-SAENS THE INNOVATOR { 3 } - The CADENZA

Could or should a cello concerto have a cadenza played even when the composer apparently did not write one? There are different sides to the coin here. I think we have to go case by case. Dvorak obviously did not want Wihan interfering with adding cadenzas in his big concerto (we know he tried to insert them!). In the Haydn D Major concerto it is quite normal to add flourishes (especially in the last movement). Would Schumann have authorized one (if he had been stable enough mentally)? Would Tchaikovsky have liked something in the second half of Pezzo Capriccioso which is quite often heard nowadays and can sound convincing (for example, performances by Lynn Harrell)? Honegger sort of marks one, but I think he was not bothered either way - that is my take anyway. We will probably never know the answers to most of these cases.

But David Popper certainly played a cadenza to the Saint-Saëns A minor concerto which he regularly performed, and the wonderful thing was that from previously conceived bases Popper half-improvised in concerto performances these cadenza moments even into the 20th century I am told. I suspect he was from far being alone in the case of the Saint-Saens work, but alas we were still some decades away from the real gramophone era where most great works were recorded by most great performers.

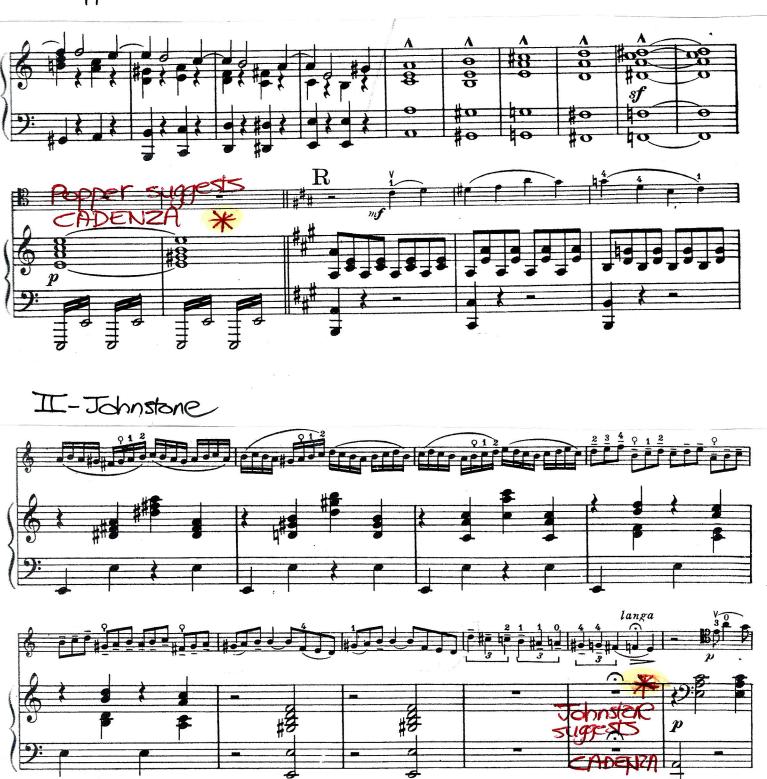
However, and now a delicate moment because it is not meant as arrogance, I would argue that *his* cadenza is not in the right place! It sounds too much, I know! Yet where he suggests one I feel it upsets the musical flow totally; just before the A Major Coda Saint-Saens gives a chord per bar in the old-fashioned manner of 6/4 - 5/3 on the dominant ('E') which pushes forward to open the wonderful release of energy in the major key A Major, therefore propelling us all the way through the Coda. I honestly do not think dear Camille intended the orchestra to stop on the 6/4 whilst the cello 'dabbled' around with silence around!

I suggest it therefore at an earlier place: that is at the end of the development section and episode in F Major. Here the orchestra are not disturbing for they are even playing as the cello soloist naturally comes to rest on a chromatic downward scale onto the 'E'....but now the soloist can use this E as a springboard to a personal cadenza and finally re-finding that same 'E' note to begin the 'recapitulation'. It is not something unusual at all for the romantics; if one looks at both the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in D and the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E Minor and you will find that the cadenza to the first movement is in exactly the same place where I am now proposing for the Saint-Saëns third movement!

Maybe it's best just to see where I mean for these two 'versions' on the next page, and make your own mind up!

Placing of Possible Cadenzas 3rd Movement

I- Popper

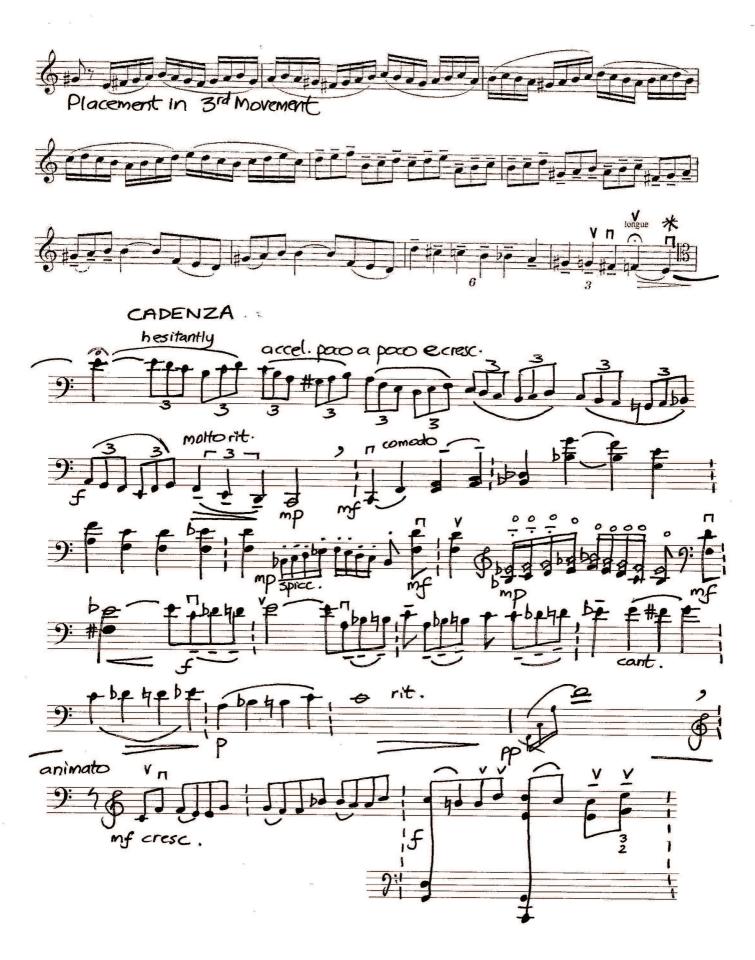


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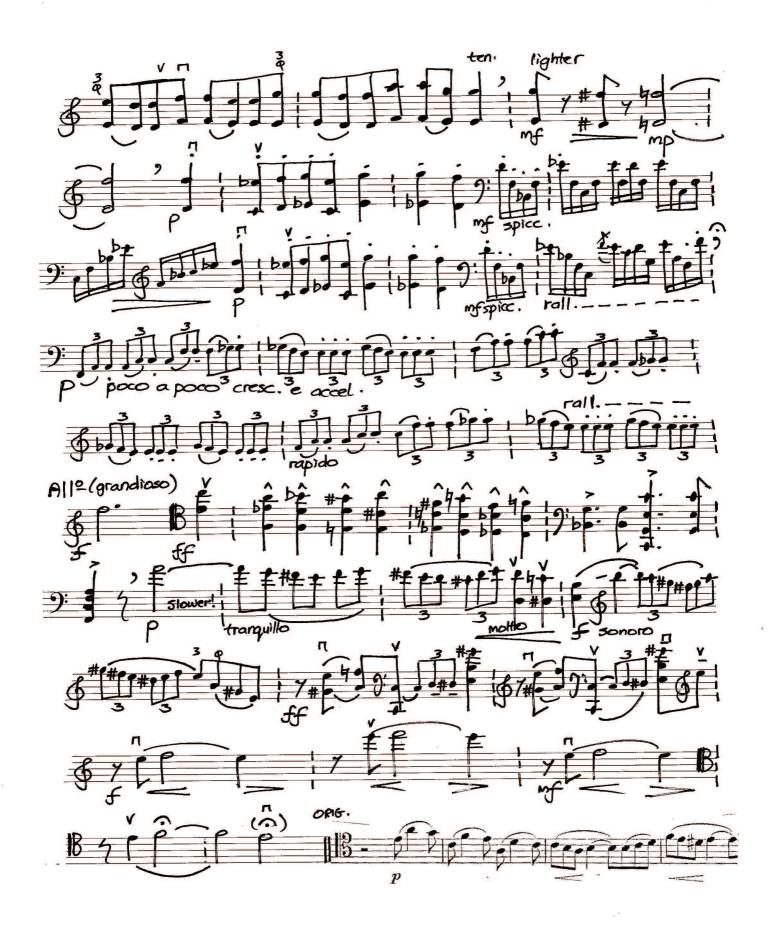
CADENZA

to the third movement of the Cello Concerto in Aminor - Saint-Saëns

by David Johnstone



David Throstone



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CADENZA

to the third movement of the Cello Concerto in Aminor - Saint-Saëns

by David Popper

KADENCIA

KADENZ

Saint-Saëns a-moll gordonkaversenyéhez (op. 33.) zum Violoncellkonzert in a moll von C. Saint-Saëns (Op. 33.)

CADENCE







SAINT-SAENS - CELLO CONCERTO IN A MINOR FOR:

ORCHESTRA OF CELLOS

•••

And now finally to the orchestration for 'orchestra of cellos'.

I always felt that a cello ensemble version with soloist would make a most interesting option for almost everyone of medium-advanced levels! That is to say: music conservatoires, the cello sections of professional or advanced level community symphony orchestras, and certainly to the younger generation of promising cellists who understandably wish to get the feel of what it is really like playing a 'big' concerto but do not (as of yet!) have a concert performance invitation from a full orchestra. So the idea, in part, is for a soloist to gain increasing confidence, by fully hearing the sustaining harmonies in a way in which a piano alone does not offer you.

It can be equally well played by an accompanying cello quartet or by a larger ensemble of ensembles (in which case please always play divisi when opportunities arise; there are a number of them occurring regularly so having more voices is always enriching!). What I have basically done is to go half-way between using the piano reduction and the general orchestral score, literally checking every phrase. But that way it is well useful to see which type of version works best for cello ensemble. The work is transcribed in full without any cuts, and although stating 'rehearsal cello ensemble' it is suitable for all formal and informal performances, and should work perfectly.

The result is in the web 'Johnstone-Music' for download at a symbolic price (2€ per movement which includes all the individual parts). The third movement includes the two cadenzas of Popper and Johnstone.

See (click) here, alphabetically listed under surname of the composer: https://johnstone-music.com/product-category/5-7-cellos-quintetos-sextetos-and-septetos/?lang=en

Hear another SAINT-SAENS work that I previously arranged with cello ensemble! This probably sunconsciously helped my present work!

Two performances of this are shown underneath -

[1] Allegro Appassionato Op 43, Saint Saëns – Javier Martínez Campos, Classe d'Excellence Louis Vuitton
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAdwDrtjuKE
and

[2] "Grup de Violoncells del Conservatori de Música de Tarragona" – Solista: Iñaki Etxepare

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10PkjX35_3I

Enjoy the music!

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Also both general musical and cello based articles, directories of famous historical cellists, and many other items of interest

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