

BECKER, Hugo

Born: 1864, 13th February (Strasbourg, Alsace)

Died: 1941, 30th July (Geiseltal, nr. Munich)

At the turn of the twentieth century Germany had consolidated itself as the foremost cello school of the world. This was especially due to the historic line of the 'Dresden' cello school – founded by Dotzauer, then taken over by Kummer, and through to Grutzmacher (see separate article in *johnstone-music*) – all in Dresden. Grutzmacher died in 1905, leaving the mantle, as it were, to two younger eminent German cellists: Julius Klengel (born 1859 in Leipzig) and Hugo Becker (born 1864 in Alsace). They were both linked by their school's certain common features – both were known representatives of the school and thus "children" of Grutzmacher. As such, they shared similar artistic tastes such as the austerity of interpretation, a rather academic style of playing, and a fully developed interest in teaching and compilation of teaching aids and editions. Apart from being recognized as fine solo and chamber performers, they were to become the most prominent German cello teachers during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, albeit with very different teaching methods and opinions on music. One could say that they formed two summits of the German art of the cello. However, in this article it is Hugo Becker who interests us more, as being more aware of the changing concepts, and it was he who was probably to make a more decisive progress towards the modern age of cello playing that we know today. Klengel, although charismatic, and fully worthy of the name as an excellent teacher and composer, remained rather more rooted in history – for example, his old-style 'portamentos' had not changed even by 1930 when the general fashions had clearly changed (a recording of part of the 6th Bach Suite from 1927 has glissandi almost in every bar!). At this time, Becker was immersing himself in the scientifically objective motivations of the process of cello playing. Questions of anatomy and physiology in playing were very important to him. Although this should in theory lead to a rational approach, Becker's playing was, in fact, more emotional than Klengel's, probably because of his secondary ties with the French and Belgian schools.

Becker, born in 1864 as Jean Otto Eric Hugo Becker, was the son of the famous violinist Jean Becker. His father started teaching him the violin at the age of six, but he loved the cello, and switched over at the age of nine. He must have been a prodigy, for record has it that in 1869, at 15 years old, he had become a leading cellist in the Court Orchestra in Mannheim. When in 1880, the Florentine Quartet dissolved, Jean Becker formed a family quartet with Hugo, his sister Jeanne (piano) and brother Hans (viola). At the age of sixteen made his debut as a soloist with the Mannheim Theatre Orchestra. When visiting London in 1882, Becker took lessons from the Italian violoncellist Alfredo Piatti, and after that from the Belgian violoncellist Jules De Swert with whom he especially studied a number of concertos. In his attempt to master the best violoncello schools of his time, for several months Becker was also tutored by Grutzmacher in Dresden, listening seriously to the advice being offered.

After his father died in 1884, Becker became principal cellist in the opera orchestra in Frankfurt on the Main where he remained for two years. The following year, still aged only 20, he became the leading cello teacher at the Hochschule in Frankfurt. It was there that he formed a trio with the pianist Daniel Quast and violinist Willy Hess. He was a member of the Heermann String Quartet from 1890 to 1906, and from 1895 he also served as a professor at the Frankfurt am Main Hochschule für Musik. At the same time, Becker made many appearances in different European countries, including Russia (1891, 1897, 1902), and in the winter of 1900/01 he made a tour of the United States. From 1891, he played in the London concerts every year, first alternating with Alfredo Piatti, and after 1901, replacing him altogether. In London Becker also played in a trio with Ferruccio Busoni and Eugene Ysaÿe which was very well received by public and musical critics. He gave regular performances in Berlin and Hamburg, on Hans von Bulow's invitation. Becker was a close friend of, and had artistic links, with many outstanding musicians - among these were Brahms, Clara Schumann, Joachim, Reger and Strauss. The musician's versatile talent, his culture and refined artistic taste contributed to his successful appearances both as a soloist and chamber cellist.

In 1902 he became a professor at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. After the death in 1909 of Robert Hausmann (the 'cellist of Brahms and Joachim' - see a separate article in *johnstone-music*), and until 1929, he was professor of cello at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. During this time Becker also toured extensively, playing chamber music, as mentioned, with Eugène Ysaÿe and Ferruccio Busoni in a piano trio, and later with Artur Schnabel and Carl Flesch as the third Schnabel Trio between 1914-21. While his solo concerts lessened as he grew older, Becker continued to play concerts in a trio with Ernst Dohnanyi - Henri Marteau, and also with Arthur Schnabel (later with Carl Friedberg) and Carl Flesch.

His teaching work became much more important to him (see later in the article) and he carried out extensive research in the areas of physiology and anatomy with regard to playing the cello to a degree hitherto unknown in the cello world, finally published as *'Mechanik und Ästhetik des Violoncellspiels'* (Vienna, 1929), which made an enormous impact on professional and aspiring cellists in the years between the two World Wars. His own compositions were more modest, excepting a Cello Concerto in A Major (dates in different sources are given between 1896 and 1898) which has hardly, if ever, been performed professionally.

Becker owned two Strads: The "Cristiani," dated 1720, and one made in 1719, now known as "The Becker." He is most remembered today as a teacher, and for the research in the areas of physiology and anatomy with regard to playing the cello. Among his many students were Mainardi, Grummer, Beatrice Harrison, Herbert Walenn and Gregor Piatigorsky (briefly), for which more complete information is offered later in this article. A good number of his students later themselves became important mentors to some of the greatest cello performers between 1945 and 2000, and beyond! Hugo Becker died in 1941, in Geiseltal, near Munich, in full flight of the Second World War

How did Becker play the violoncello? Luckily by his time, unlike the previous generation, we have far more plentiful and accurate guides from which to base an opinion. For example, Hanslick drew attention to the musicality, delicate taste and impressive virtuosity of the cellist's playing. A St. Petersburg critic wrote of him in 1891:

"Becker is rather a classic than a romantic. The remarkable thing about his technique is the timing and ease with which he surmounts various difficulties. His sound is broad and beautiful in general." He was playing a concerto by Bazzini.

Eleven years later, again in Russia and performing the Haydn D major concerto and Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme, another reviewer from St. Petersburg pointed to Becker's *"virtuoso technique, graceful phrasing, and impeccable intonation."*

Hans von Bulow once said: *"You are the only cellist who plays with virility."* What he probably meant was that at the beginning of the 1900's the violoncello was still generally considered to be a 'spiritual' instrument, especially in Germany, for which it was thought to be suited mainly for expressing sentimental lyricism. In 'salon music' the cello had created an impressive 'niche' which was rather difficult to shrug off, in spite of the serious attempts by Grutzmacher and Piatti, amongst others, to do so.

Becker, from almost the outset of his professional career, had a very different point of view which made him a forward-looking 'modern'. He himself wrote: "*The violoncello is a virile instrument, able more than any other string instrument to embody along with the repleteness of feeling, its chivalrous, vigorous and exalted content.*"

Becker developed his own teaching method, making creative use of the achievements of different schools, and basing himself on his own performing experience. Becker's performing style was therefore distinguished for its nobility, virility, logic and intelligent phrasing. At the same time, he was certainly aware of other styles, and held firm opinions on them. For example, the Russian school, headed by Davidov, impressed him greatly. He had heard Davidov play on several occasions, and was interested to play his works and used them with his pupils. He was even once called "*the true follower of the glorious maestro of the violoncello Davidov*". Other cellists, including the younger Pablo Casals, were not so readily accepted. The Bach Suites had been taught by Klengel to his students regularly before 1899, when Casals first started to programme them with some regularity in concerts, and they were certainly taught as well by Becker in his classes. But the German cello masters hardly ever proposed that they be included in concert programmes, whereas Casals did. One could hardly state therefore, that Casals somehow had 'discovered' Bach because this was clearly not the case. Apart from that, Becker simply could not share at all Casals' idea of so much 'rubato' in the music. Klengel at least appreciated Casals' Bach, whereas Becker did not. Becker played Bach in stricter time, conserving more the dance elements, and with the accents more heavily dominating – it might even be the truth that excepting his 'over the top' ruggedness and abrasiveness perhaps he came far closer to present performance practices! However, even taking into account the general editing abuses of the nineteenth century, it is interesting to note in Germany, at the turn of the century, musicians had already started to take note more seriously of the important Bach repertoire; Grutzmacher had edited a second version of the suites in the 1890's, this time much more close to the 'original' hand-written copies than his 'mutilated' 1860's edition (please see my article on Grutzmacher for more on this!), and Robert Hausmann also made an even more 'faithful' attempt towards the end of his life (1852-1909). There is every reason to suppose that these versions enjoyed widespread use within Germany, and in other European countries. The Hugo Becker edition of the Bach Suites was published in 1911.

Becker also composed music, though he did not have the same internal 'necessity' to do so as did Grutzmacher or Klengel. He wrote a Concerto in A major (dated from 1896 or 1898) and several pieces which did not make any mark in the concert repertoire, although his Mixed Finger-bowing Exercises (incorporating the new Scale Etudes), and Six Special Etudes still retain some teaching value.

Here are some other selected works:

Andante religioso
Three Pieces for Cello with Piano Accompaniment
Scènes d'amour
Deux Morceaux:
 Romance, Duo
Deux Morceaux:
 Valse gracieuse, Duo
Suite 'Aus dem Leben des Waldschatz'

And his principal writings:

Finger and Bow Exercises and Scale Studies, 1900
Mechanik und Aesthetik des Violoncellspiels, 1929 Vienna

His 1911 edition of the Bach cello suites is of special interest. It is close to Haussmann's edition, and its outstanding features are the search for sonorous moments, the bowing of logical phrases rather in a Germanic fashion, and some fingering solutions which do not use necessarily the open strings. In the foreword to the Bach suites, Becker emphasized the necessity of placing technical resources beneath the artistic aim. Furthermore, in the introduction to his Bach Suites, Becker addresses a controversial issue: "*The editor has not included the notorious errors contained in the so-called 'original' written by Bach's wife*" but many today consider that this version should be placed as probably the most authoritative. The only shame with the layout is that he clutters up the music with so many dynamic markings, plus crescendos, diminuendos, accents etc. that if the performer follows the indications he will not think for himself or herself.

He also made new editions of the Kummer and Lee violoncello methods, and six transcriptions for cello and piano published to this day (consisting of two pieces by Schumann plus works by Bach, Schubert, Tartini, and Nardini). Casals played most of these transcriptions, and recorded at least one of them. He also edited the 12 Studies, Op.35 of Franck, fine musical studies in my opinion but little used today.

Becker also made an edition of the Volkmann Cello Concerto, a most interesting work originally written in the 1850's and for many years considered the most superior concerto ever written! It was certainly performed in the second half of the nineteenth century far more frequently than either Haydn or Schumann. In fact, only in the 1890's were the concertos of Schumann and Saint-Saens (A minor) to come to the fore. Unfortunately Becker made an abridged version of the work, certainly not helping Volkmann's cause in the first half of the twentieth century. At least Becker's cadenza to the work is very fine, and most efficiently written for the cello. Incidentally, it was also probably the favourite concerto of all for David Popper, who also wrote some four different cadenzas to the work!

Becker's repertoire basically was formed by featuring the concertos of Haydn, Schumann, Saint-Saens, Lalo, Volkmann, and Dvorak, the Variations on a Rococo Theme by Tchaikovsky, and finally by the concertos of D'Albert and Dohnanyi (Konzertstucke) which were composed for him. D'Albert was the composition teacher of Dohnanyi, and the composer of an A Minor concerto which was considered advanced when it was first heard. The Dohnanyi 'Konzertstucke' of 1904 was not only dedicated to Becker; he gave the world premiere of the work. Perhaps its German title, (and not simply 'concerto'), together with the way in which after the slow movement the third movement is a kind of re-working of the first movement (and which finally seems to peter out) would be the only reasons why the work is not much better known, for the harmonies are gloriously luscious. Finally, in this section, it should be noted that it was Hugo Becker who first edited the Grutmacher 'Daily Exercises' in 1909; they appeared not to have been in print until that time.

As his performing activity lessened, Becker devoted more and more time to teaching, comprehension and generalization of his rich experience as a concert musician and pedagogue. He was both loved and hated – the views about him were very different according to the perspective of different students. Becker taught all the principal cello repertoire, and featured the

cellist composers to a large extent. He wrote that the Romberg's Concertos were "*the best teaching exercise, especially for the left hand*". As previously stated, his admiration for Davidoff was considerable; his concertos and salon pieces were used as studies with his pupils. At the end of his major 'opus' – "*Technique and Aesthetics of Violoncello Playing*", the author gives a brief survey of how the art of the violoncello had evolved. He wrote about the "*splendid triple constellation*" formed by the names of Romberg, Servais and Davydov, and said that the Russian violoncellist developed the achievements of the first two "*according to the spirit of the time and used them to deepen musical expressiveness.*"

He warned his students to reject the etude-like interpretation of a Suite of J.S. Bach with rhythmically monotonous textures, especially in the preludes, which he said will happen "*if a musician cannot read between the lines and find the melodic line alongside the harmonic texture. . . In some cases he will even be able to reveal and recreate the pronounced polyphony.*" As is evident, Becker directed the performer's attention to one of the most important requirements in interpreting the Bach suites: revealing the hidden polyphony; far away from the simplistic view propagated by some who probably wished to lower his reputation in order to promote the name of Pablo Casals.

However, generally he was considered a rigid and dogmatic teacher from the time he succeeded Hausmann at the Berlin Hochschule, but paradoxically he himself argued that a teacher should not unduly impose himself on a student to stifle their artistic growth! It seems a case of when that artistic opinion was close to his (Becker's) there was certainly no problem, but if it differed too greatly it was not at all to be accepted. There were many students who were indebted to Becker, but also those with unfortunate stories. The most extreme case was Piatigorsky, who had a few unhappy lessons with Becker in Berlin – the legend goes that at the beginning he was given pieces far too easy for his level, before Becker suddenly decided after a few lessons that it was time to start working on the Dvorak concerto. Becker then played the first few bars of the work from the soloist's entrance, Piatigorsky listening without word, but not at all liking the aggressiveness of Becker's bowing attack. When finally *forced* by Becker to give an opinion on the teacher's interpretation, he said he thought the master's playing more or less 'rubbish'; he was duly kicked out of the class! Maybe this is an unfair story to tell, because after ending their formal studies, many outstanding cellists from different lands came to Becker seeking his advice and instruction to perfect their skill, and most of them did happily survived considerable time alongside him. Please do read the note of George Georgescu below emphasizing this very point.

Among his many pupils of note were:

Enrico MAINARDI - *the great Italian cellist, teacher and composer (1897-1976) studied at the Milan Conservatory, then went to Berlin where he studied with Hugo Becker. He taught in Berlin, Salzburg, Lucerne and Rome. His pupil Joan Dickson credited him with 'saving her career' when she was 27 years old ...*

George GEORGESCU - *who would replace Becker as cellist in the Marteau Quartet before forsaking the cello for the conductor's podium on account of a hand injury. Later, Georgescu would remark, "All I know, I learned from Hugo Becker."*

Arnold TROWELL - *a New Zealand native (b. 1887) who studied with Hugo Becker and toured Europe before settling in London in 1907. Not only was he to be the youngest pupil receiving instruction from that celebrated teacher (Arnold was only fifteen), but the first to become a pupil without having gone through a preparatory course at the Conservatorium. He duly became Wellington's acknowledged cello genius.*

Joseph SCHUSTER - *his family fled to Berlin during the Russian revolution; after training with Becker he was to become the principal cello of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the youngest cellist ever to hold that post. Later he became principal of the New York Philharmonic.*

Boris HAMBOURG - *who studied the 1898-1903 with Becker.*

Franz HINDERMANN

Roberto CARUANA - *he was a pupil of both Hugo Becker and Julius Klengel.*

Raya GARBOUSOVA - *the great Russian-American cellist (1909-1997) was a student of Becker, Casals and Alexanian. She was a close friend of Feuermann and Piatigorsky, and loved by almost every musician.*

Arnold FOLDESZ - *important Hungarian cellist born in 1882, who was a student of David Popper, Hugo Becker and Robert Hausmann.*

Beatrice HARRISON - *an important English cellist (1892-1965) studied at the Royal College of Music in London, and then with Hugo Becker*

Herbert WALENN - *another important English cellist (1870-1953) was a student of Hugo Becker. He founded the London Violoncello School. He was later the teacher of John Barbirolli, and many professional British cellists (including Douglas Cameron, Colin Hampton, William Pleeth, Vivian Joseph, and even at the end of his life the girl Jacqueline Du Pré) and others from much further afield such as Zara Nelsova.*

Paul GRUMMER - *however it should be stated that he chiefly studied with Klengel; a number of late-romantic composers later dedicated him works.*

Rudolf METZMACHER

Maurice EISENBERG - *certainly shared Becker's thinking as to what made cello technique really 'tick', but later became much closer to the Casal's 'school of influence', publishing an important treatise 'Cello Playing of Today'.*

Ludwig HOELSCHER

Johannes HEGAR

Eleonore SCHOENFELD - *who lived from 1920 to 2007, and is considered one of the most influential cellists of the 20th century. Her teacher was Karl Niedermeyer, a pupil of Hugo Becker*

Martin BOCHMANN - *a former principal orchestral cellist in Germany who later settled in England. He was the most influential teacher of David Johnstone - the present writer - who studied six years with him! His sons, Christopher and Michael, are very active professionally today.*

TECHNIQUE AND ESTHETICS OF THE CELLO (Treatise, 1929)

Hugo Becker expounded all his views in the book '*Technique and Esthetics of Violoncello Playing*', which was written in collaboration with the physiologist Dr. Dago Rynar. Fascinated by the achievements of physiology at the beginning of the century, many music teachers began searching for the physiologically justified playing movements and the most natural performing devices. Thus, Becker's attention was directed to the scientifically objective reasons for a musician's movements as he is playing. The planned work was in collaboration with Dr. Dago Rynar (who played the cello and was familiar with Becker's school), and who was a follower of the thinking of Steinhausen – up to a point Becker and Rynar worked together on the grand treatise, but the principal author of the entire book was surely Hugo Becker, and this would especially be true of the second part dedicated to the aesthetics of the art of the violoncello.

What makes it so valuable is the search to conceive of the technical and aesthetic problems as a united whole. As a concert musician and professor, he based his book on the artistic and methodological analyses of the greatest cello works in music, from the classical 18th century composers (Bach, Haydn) to his contemporaries (Richard Strauss, Reger, Hindemith). It is this part of the book which is of topical interest today. He preferred the classical masters at an earlier stage, because he believed that until the classics were absorbed one could not solve the problems in contemporary music. He gave performing analyses of the concertos by Haydn (D Major), Saint-Saens, Dvorak and the violoncello part in Don Quixote by Strauss. In the analysis of the Dvorak concerto, Becker referred to his own interpretation, which came with many written examples.

He also analyzed the cello obligato part in the symphonic poem 'Don Quixote' by Richard Strauss. Becker had performed it under the direction of the very composer, and he paid special attention to the literary study of the main character of the symphonic poem as well as to the score as a whole. His own personal interpretation was apparently always geared to recreating the image of Don Quixote at all moment. Having received the manuscript of the analysis that Becker sent, Richard Strauss replied:

"Dear friend! Your valuable work about Don Quixote gave me the greatest joy. If I unfortunately no longer have the chance of seeing the ideal interpreter of Don Quixote, who is a true master of the violoncello himself, standing in front of the orchestra, his analyzing and teaching work left for his pupils and colleagues is the best legacy that the author of this curious piece could wish for. I thank you a thousand times for it, and hope that your creation will soon be published and serve as a valuable aid for all cellists, if they are only able to comprehend it and bring it to life. But of course, all the beautiful analyses are unable to replace the wonderful original interpretation which I always remember with gratitude and delight.

*Yours sincerely,
Richard Strauss."*

Becker also gave many examples from sonatas by Boccherini, Valentini and Locatelli, sonatas by Beethoven, Brahms and Strauss, concertos by Schumann and Saint Saens, pieces by Davydov and Popper, Reger's Second Suite for Violoncello Solo (which was dedicated to him), as well as from many other cello and chamber music compositions.

It is a shame that there has not been an English version readily available, for it would still be as interesting and appropriate to cello study in the twenty-first century as it was when it was first published in 1929 – but alas, it is only to be found in German.



Hugo Becker

SUMMING UP

Becker's book was very highly acclaimed by such artists as Pablo Casals, Enrico Mainardi, Ernst Cahnbley, and also by many other outstanding cellists. Maybe it is true that the aesthetics of concert performing, and indeed the art of the cello itself, have been guided to even higher levels since the time of the treatise as this becomes an inevitability as the decades pass, but the book is still of enormous interest to contemporary cellists (both performers and teachers), for its advice on musical styles and the general methodical approach to the teaching and performing of music. I would like to maintain that Hugo Becker, not only one of the greatest cello teachers of the first half of our century but one of the greatest that the cello has ever known, was the crucial Germanic gateway to modern twentieth-century cello performance, and whose descendants (musically speaking of course) are now the *pupils of the pupils* of Becker – making them 'grandchildren' or even 'great-grandchildren' - and are to be found all around the world!

DAVID JOHNSTONE