

**JULES DE SWERT –
BELGIUM'S UNSUNG CELLO HERO**

written by David Johnstone

DE SWERT, Jules (*professionally known as Jules but was officially Pierre-Julien, and the surname was also occasionally spelt Deswert*)

Born: 1843 (Louvaine, Belgium)

Died: 1891

When one imagines an article covering something of the romantic cello in Belgium it would not be hard to guess that it would be probably centred around Adrien François Servais (1807 – 1866) – a great virtuoso of his day with an important catalogue of cellistic works. It would be fair to say that these works are stylistically almost exclusively derived from the ‘salon music’ of the day and thus he produced little of lasting importance in a purely compositional sense apart from the novelty value for the virtuoso-inclined cellists. There is already a wealth of information readily available on this musician – even a comprehensive “Servais Society” which indeed is *well worth* the effort of browsing if one follows this link: <http://www.servais-vzw.org>

However, this short article focuses on the other important romantic cellist from Belgium in the nineteenth century – Jules de Swert – a rather neglected figure, and certainly not at all well-known internationally. I hope this short article will help his cause!

Jules de Swert was a brilliant Belgian cellist and dramatic composer, who was born in Louvain, and made his first public appearance when only nine years of age. His two brothers, Isadore and Jean, were both musicians. He received his first musical instruction from his father Herman Swerts, the chapel master at the Cathedral of Louvain, and afterwards was a pupil of Servais at the Brussels Conservatory in 1856, remaining at that institution for two years. He was Servais' most prominent pupil at the conservatoire, where he was "Laureat," or head of the class, at just fourteen years old. After gaining the first violoncello prize at the conservatory he went to Paris, where he made the acquaintance of Rossini.

After that he began regular journeys, surely to announce and then further his name on the international concert scene. It is known that the concert tours took him through Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Switzerland (at least!), and afterwards he took up varying posts of importance but never sticking a long time in any one! In 1865 he stopped at Dusseldorf, and was for a time engaged there as first cellist (with rank of 'concertmaster'). Three years later he entered the Weimar Hofkappelle as first Cellist, but also with composing responsibilities. Never-the-less the following year - 1869 - he was appointed principal cello (again with title of 'concertmaster') of Berlin's Hofkapelle and the Hochschule's first cello professor. His teaching work is covered a little later in the article, but in 1873, De Swert retired from his teaching in Berlin to be able to compose more. In spite of this, his chief academic cello writings are well posterior to this resignation date, but surely he would have himself classed his academic cello writings as 'compositional' work and not as 'teaching' work.



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Free from regular teaching, he was to live a most successful solo career, as well as performing chamber music with some of the great names of the day such as Clara Schumann and Leopold Auer, with whom he formed a trio. He continued to travel, and to new pastures – for example, he appeared at the Crystal Palace, London, in 1875. During the 1870's he fixed his residence first in Weisbaden, and then in Leipzig. In Bayreuth, at Wagner's request, he formed the orchestra for the controversial Das Ring des Nibelungen cycle performances of 1876, sitting as principal cellist. Strangely, though, no mention of him can be found in the standard Wagner texts.

Then, in 1881, he changed directions once again. He was appointed director of the Ostend Music School and professor at Ghent and Bruges Conservatory, where he was also the cello professor. He still played as a principal cello, in the Theatre de la Monnaie at Brussels, and in 1889 he was made deputy conductor of the Kursaalorkest. However, the publication of his most important academic work “Gradus ad Parnassum” (the mechanism of the modern cello) in 1888 cemented his turning career towards conservatoire life. He died in 1891, and is buried at the cemetery at Nieuwpoortsesteenweg. He was twice married but details are very scant.



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How great in fact was his artistry?

Well, to begin with, what is interesting, to my mind, are those cellist-composers who do not write solely for their own instrument, but can handle an orchestra – with sure orchestration – or even write for combinations in which the cello is simply one of the grouping, or even absent altogether. Jules de Swert differed himself clearly from Servais and many other virtuosi - Servais and Sarasate, for example might have written brilliantly for their own instrument, but by doing so relegated the musical ‘creation’ onto a second level with the need of ‘showing-off’ their own instrument. Therefore the name of de Swert makes for an interesting study. Perhaps of most importance came the production of two full operas, and the only other clear example in this sense (at least in this period) would be the career of the cellist, later composer, Offenbach. Firstly from the pen of de Swert came, in 1878, “*Die Albigenser*” which was produced at Wiesbaden, and with noted success; and later “*Graf Hammerstein*”, from the year 1884, and produced in Mayence.

Amongst other large-scale forms we know from him are a symphony, and some three cello concertos.

The first concerto, in D minor, Op. 32, is virtuosic and very extroverted, clearly showing the great confidence of de Swert as a cellist and as a musician. The fact that it is dedicated to no less than Leopold II, king of Belgium, would support this.

From the very opening of the soloist, after the orchestral introduction, one can see the solo cellist in full splendour:



Virtuosity is absolutely rampant! – these are small *unrelated* snippets which appear later in the work:



and ...

A musical score for piano and violin. The piano part is in the lower register, featuring a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The violin part is in the upper register, playing a melodic line with various articulations. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f* and *rit.*, and a *rit.* marking at the end of the passage.

and ...

A musical score for piano and violin. The piano part features a series of chords and moving lines in the lower register. The violin part is highly technical, with rapid sixteenth-note passages and complex rhythmic patterns. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f* and *rit.*.

and ...

A musical score for piano and violin. The piano part is highly rhythmic, featuring a series of chords and moving lines in the lower register. The violin part is highly technical, with rapid sixteenth-note passages and complex rhythmic patterns. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *cresc.*, and *Q Allegro*.

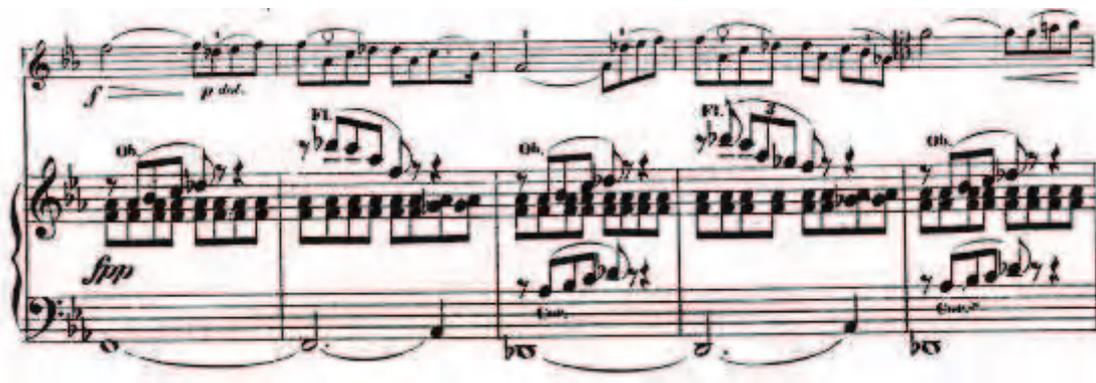
The second concerto, in C minor – Major, Op.38, was also dedicated to a king – Charles I of Wurttemberg . However, this is different writing from that of the first concerto. There is virtuoso writing of the same demands; just look at this extract in the cello part!:



But .. there is much more maturity in the structure and perhaps less extravagance for its own purpose, and this one can especially notice in the harmonies, which are very beautiful and show Wagnerian influences.



The orchestral instruments are much more involved in the musical dialogue too:



A musical score for a cello and orchestra. The top staff is the cello part, starting with a forte (f) dynamic and a piano (p) dynamic. The middle staff is the first violin (Vl.) part, and the bottom staff is the first viola (Va.) part. The score features complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as sfz (sforzando).

Yet, for all this, it is apparent that we are dealing with a cello ‘superstar’, someone comfortable with passages that are equal, or more difficult than, those found in the Dvorak B minor concerto. Yet de Swert’s would have been written some time before that other masterwork. How many cellists, if truthful, would not flinch if they had to face publically performing?:



A musical score for a cello and orchestra. The top staff is the cello part, and the bottom staff is the first horn (Horn) part. The score features complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as p (piano), f (forte), and mp (mezzo-piano).

Although de Swert is credited with a third concerto, I have not been able to ascertain where this sheet music might be.

The two cello concertos show just how a virtuosic cellist was Jules de Swert. Other works of his also display that vein, whilst also displaying a tight structural control. Perhaps the most spectacular to analyze would be his wonderful 'Great Fantasy' on themes from Gounod's Faust.

The music starts with a slow orchestral introduction –

Grande Fantaisie
sur des motifs de l'opéra
Faust de Ch. Gounod.

Introduction.
Andantino, J. de Swert Op. 9.



The image shows the beginning of the 'Grande Fantaisie' by Jules de Swert. It features two staves: Violoncello (Cello) and Piano. The tempo is marked 'Andantino'. The piano part begins with a series of chords and arpeggiated figures, while the cello part has a few initial notes.

- After the cellist entry, the soloist is 'left alone' and develops an *arpeggiated* cello cadenza. This gives way to a main theme which I would classify as the chief theme of a 'first movement' (although not officially cast as a three movement concerto work). I produce just the first phrase:

Andante.



The image shows the 'Theme' section of the 'Grande Fantaisie'. It features two staves: Violoncello (Cello) and Piano. The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The piano part begins with a series of chords and arpeggiated figures, while the cello part has a few initial notes.

Now, what really differs de Swert from others (such as Sarasate who *also* wrote a Faust Fantasy, but no disrespect intended), is the way he unravels the variations on this theme. These have the musicality of Tchaikovsky ('Rococo Variations'), great virtuosity, but are also punctuated by orchestral interludes which give a symphonic feeling.

The first variation:



- reminds one of the very first variation in the Tchaikovsky work – yet the de Swert work came first! After an orchestral interlude, the second unfolds:



And another orchestral interlude, before the next variation:

12

Var. 3.
Allegro.



After this variation the orchestral *tutti* is this time of much longer proportions, before arriving at which is virtually a slow movement – here it is, from the actual solo cello entry:



It is a substantial section, almost an entire movement within itself. Finally there is a clear break, or cut off, before a launch is made into the 'Finale', which is to all intents the assumed third movement of this *unofficial* concerto. It is boisterous, and does not have anything to envy with some of the most virtuosic works of the era.

Here are but two short examples:



and –



I have centred somewhat on this work, for I feel that stylistically and technically it lies somewhere half-way between the little-known virtuoso cello works of C-M, von Weber and the Tchaikovsky Rococo Variations. Furthermore, I believe that this type of writing would have been sure influences on the writing developments of figures such as Fitzenhagen, Davidoff, and even Klengel. The shame is that we have few concert programmes saved from this era, so it is enormously difficult to appraise how often de Swert's name appeared on programmes by other cello virtuosos, or even in the conservatoire class outside of Belgium.

However, not all of de Swert's produce was on such 'spectacular' scale as I have been highlighting up to this point. It must be remembered that the 'salon music' era was rather dominant at this time, especially among publics away from the large cities, and indeed there is much evidence to say that some rather 'third-rate' composers achieved brief fame through it. Therefore it should be of no surprise, and is to be expected, that de Swert would have written plenty of 'drawing room pieces' – many of the even greater composers also did just that, such as the Hungarian dances and rhapsodies by Brahms and Liszt. In de Swert's case this meant that he numbered in his *opus* some romances, other fantasies, and duets for two cellos. Interestingly, some of the smaller solo cello pieces came with piano or orchestral accompaniment. This was obviously very useful for him whilst bearing a reputation as a first class virtuoso cellist. One has also to remember that frequently a visiting solo cellist was not just contracted to play a major concerto; often he or she were expected to play a couple of shorter pieces alongside. Sometimes he/she would play a solo programme with orchestra consisting *entirely* of shorter pieces, hence the value of works such as the Popper Hungarian Rhapsody, the Bruch Kol Nidrei, or the Glazunov Chant Menestrel. These were interesting days and epitomised what playing for the public *really* meant!

Apart from his own compositions, he re-edited a collection of old Violoncello music and arrangements of classical compositions. These were part of Schott's 18th-century Kammersonaten series, and the cello authors came from de Swert's generation, and the following one, and included famous names in the cello world such as van Lier, Alfredo Piatti, Arnold Trowell, Ernest Cahnbley, William Whitehouse, and Walter Upmeyer. In this selection one basically sees a tendency towards the English school, except Upmeyer who played in the Bayreuth Orchestra.

The most remarkable story of arranging/transcribing surely comes from his association with Franz Liszt. Firstly, it is most interesting that SIX original "Consolations" (small pieces for solo piano) were arranged for cello and piano by JULES DE SWERT, something initially rather difficult given that Liszt's piano music was so very 'pianistic'. But, then more interestingly, Liszt gave such very high praise to Jules de Swert's musicality and dedication in making these pieces possible to play on the cello. Liszt even wrote him a letter saying that he preferred his new versions to his own originals for piano ! That is indeed quite remarkable praise coming from an absolute 19th-century 'superstar' as was regarded Liszt. I have a hunch that Liszt was rather impressed by the way that although there are six pieces, Jules links up pieces 1 and 4 with a special transition passage that he wrote himself, and which nobody would realize that it's not actually at this moment the music of Liszt himself ... so the pieces go in a 1-4-2-3-5-6 order when played publicly in their entirety.

His arrangements of Chopin are also, to my mind, of the highest order. Let us consider this following Etude, of which the opening is pure 'class' in the ambience in the best French romantic tradition:

ETUDE DE F. CHOPIN
(Op. 25. N° 7.)

à Mme Dolcia de Csarada. Transcrite par JULES DE SWERT.

The image shows a page of a musical score. At the top, it is titled 'ETUDE DE F. CHOPIN' with the subtitle '(Op. 25. N° 7.)'. Below the title, there is a dedication 'à Mme Dolcia de Csarada.' and the name of the arranger 'Transcrite par JULES DE SWERT.' The score is for Violoncello and Piano. The Violoncello part is written in bass clef and begins with a 'Lento.' tempo marking. The Piano part is written in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and also begins with a 'Lento.' tempo marking. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, fingerings, and dynamics like 'pp' and 'Ped.'. There is also a small 'Ob.' marking in the upper right part of the score.

When virtuosity is called into play, it is always done to shape the harmonically implied musical outlaying and is never banal:

The image displays a musical score for piano and orchestra. The top system shows the piano part with a treble and bass clef, and an Oboe (Ob.) part. The bottom system shows the piano part with a treble and bass clef, and a Viola part. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *f*, *ff*, and *p*. The Oboe part is marked with *Ob.* and the Viola part with *Viola.*. The piano part features complex harmonic structures and dynamic contrasts.

Interestingly, you may have observed that this was conceived either with piano or orchestral accompaniment too. We are always talking about works which function as concert pieces, for he was primarily concerned with expressive communication to the public. For this reason it seems all the more strange that his name is so very unjustly forgotten. I believe he was simply not interested to write 'dour' academic study pieces; that would have been against his conscience. When, in later life, he did produce some 'academic' work, it was perhaps more geared towards the physical mechanism of playing the cello, rather than series of 'pointless' exercises, one coming after another.

His most prestigious teaching post, as previously noted, was at Berlin. The centre of German cello playing at that time was centred upon Dresden (please see the separate article in *johnstone-music* on the roll of Grutmacher – VLC 10). However, German violoncello playing received a fresh impulse in Berlin by the opening, under the direction of Joachim, of a section of the Royal High School, in October 1869, for performance music. It was the Belgian cellist Jules de Swert who was first invited to give the cello instruction at the above-named Institute. Then Wilhelm Müller succeeded him from 1873-1876 in this position. Both masters were, however, at the establishment rather too short a period to pave the way for any important musical results. One might mention that these were first attained by means of Hausmann's appointment (please see the separate article in *johnstone-music* on Hausmann – VLC 13) who since the year 1876 was working as teacher of Violoncello playing at the Berlin High School.

De Swert's most special students therefore did not come from Berlin, but from the Ghent Conservatoire later in his life – above all it should be pointed out the name of Jean-Baptiste (Alphonse) Dubois, who was born in 1870 and died in 1938. He gained the '*premier prix*' for cello in 1890 under Jules de Swert, and then initiated an illustrious career as solo performer, chamber music player, conductor and teacher. He also occasionally wrote, one of his few known compositions being an *Elegy for Cello and piano* dating from 1925.

Jules de Swert's own pedagogic writing was not prolific, but of importance – especially in the Low Countries.

He wrote a treatise on the violoncello, in the form of a Cello Method, which was published in Novello's Music Primers in London, in 1882. Perhaps of even greater importance were the three books of etudes dealing with the mechanism of the cello, whose full title was *Gradus ad Parnassum ou le mécanisme moderne du violoncelle*, Op. 50. This was published in Leipzig in 1888.

Also worth noting are his decorations, the most important of which are:

Knight of the Order of Frederick of Württemberg

Knight of the Order of Christ of Portugal

Order of Merit of Prussia

Unfortunately, too little has been documented about Jules de Swert. We do not even know exactly how he played – with what kind of sound – but it might be estimated that he followed in the Belgium cello school and so in the line of Servais: quite a large sound, a free position-changing left-hand and possibly a ‘wider’ vibrato. As with the case of other cello artists from his period there is little to help us – yet with solely one generation later at the beginning of the twentieth century all was to change, where we do indeed have plentiful information on the artists, their lives, their way of playing, with whom they played, press reviews etc. This, in my opinion, is all the more reason for a small remembrance in the 21st century of a worthy romantic cellist-composer as was Jules de Swert.

I basically feel that the differences in artistry between the very famous stars (the Paganini's, Joachim's, Sarasate's) who are easily remembered in history, and the very cream of the *perceived* 'second' tier who are soon forgotten, are often so minimal - I believe that it is our duty to offer our grain of sand in the great ocean, and do what we can to champion these so worthy causes!

DAVID JOHNSTONE

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