

**MAURICE MARECHAL -
THE VOICE OF THE CELLO IN
FRANCE**

Written by David Johnstone

MARECHAL, Maurice

Born: 1892 (Dijon, France)

Died: 1964 (Dijon, France)

Maurice Maréchal was born in Dijon, France. He began studying the cello from around seven or eight years old at the Conservatoire of the same town. He made his public debut at ten. Whilst he was not a prodigy as such, his progress was none-the-less very rapid. He was accepted into the 'Conservatoire de Paris' in November 1905, aged 13, where he studied under Jules Leopold-Loeb (1857-1933). At age 15 he won first prize performing the Davidov Second Concerto. He graduated at the age of 19.

He joined the Lamoureux Orchestra as the deputy principal cellist and, before long, as the principal. Many well-known guest conductors and famous soloists performed frequently with this orchestra, and Maréchal had a marvellous chance to observe their different podium styles and interpretations.

From 1911 he began to give his professional first solo concerts, but in 1912 he had to undertake his military service. He became a drummer in the Rouen 74th infantry regiment band. War broke out in August 1914. Until February 1919, Maurice Maréchal confided his thoughts daily in his diaries (nine books), including tales of tragic events, his hopes and fears. On a number of occasions he acted as a bicycle-messenger; but, as soon as he could, he sought contact with music, reading sheet music and, ultimately, renting an instrument. He came across two like-minded people, good amateur players, with whom he played as a trio.

It was in May 1915 that he took possession of a very strange instrument: a cello, made by two soldiers in a munitions factory. What happened was that two of his comrades were carpenters and woodworkers, and he persuaded them to make a primitive cello from the wood of a gunpowder chest! It was more-or-less serviceable, and with it Maréchal entertained his fellow soldiers throughout the war. A. Lambert said:

"Maréchal needed all his talent to rescue this cube-shaped instrument, which was nicknamed Le Poilu, from derisory and rude remarks"

... and it was with this instrument by his companions that, in 1916, he joined up with the musicians Caplet, Durosoir and Lemoine, already serving together in the 5th division led by General Mangin. A period of time began during which music erased somewhat the horrors of war; the musicians played as a duo, trio, quartet, or quintet, and would, during their rest days, devour the music sent to them by their friends and relatives, or which they would bring back with them from their time off.

He was demobilized after the war, and settled in Paris. He was eager to return to his career as a soloist. Meanwhile, he met a young American actress, Louise Perkins, who was to become his wife in 1920. From that base, he started an international touring career, and Marechal concertized extensively in the 1920s and '30s. He was truly living on the international stage and he performed in concerts throughout ail Europe, as well as Egypt, the United States of America, Canada, the USSR and Asia.

His career was again interrupted by war. When the Germans occupied France in 1940, Maréchal supported the Resistance. He also steadfastly refused all offers to play in Germany, or even on the German-dominated French radio programme concerts. Fortunately, his wife and two children moved to America, away from danger. He concentrated on teaching, succeeding as cello professor at the Paris Conservatoire in 1942 on the death of Dutch cellist Gerard Hekking. However, the war this time around brought with it a period of difficult hibernation for Marechal's musical talents. The interruption to his career was especially regrettable in his case because by the time he resumed his career he was stricken with a progressive muscular disease that took the strength from his bowing arm. He gave his last public concerts in 1950, and spent the rest of his life teaching as Professor at the Paris Conservatory, and appearing as a jury member for international competitions.

He died in Dijon in 1964.

His importance as a cellist in the years between the two World Wars cannot be over-estimated. He was at that time "*recognised as the most complete French cellist, combining the skills of musical intelligence and domination of the instrument*", according to A. Lambert, and this without intending to discredit Paul Bazelaire or the Hekking cellists in any way (see the separate article - VLC 20 - about Bazelaire in *johnstone-music*). Even further than that, Maréchal is credited with having helped establish today's view of French music as beautiful, refined in tone, and making its point by emphasis of shading. This is especially notable in subsequent French cello playing in such artists as Fournier, Tortelier and Gendron, even if they were not direct students. I shall very briefly say a few words of each cello master:-

Pierre Fournier (1906 – 1986) was a pupil of Paul Bazelaire, and later Anton Hekking. He graduated from the Paris Conservatoire at the age of seventeen, in 1923. Maurice Marechal unselfishly called him “*the cellist of the future*”, and he was to become duly known as the ‘aristocrat’.

Paul Tortelier (1914 – 1990) studied with Feuillard and then with Gerard Hekking, and his playing was characterized by a flexible wrist and free bow arm (Franco-Belgian school of cello technique), together with a love for Bach and to make the suites ‘dance’, but also held a desire to promote worthy new repertoire (especially that of French composers) which was very close in view to that of Marechal.

Maurice Gendron (1920 - 1990), another outstanding 20th century French cellist, was a student of Gérard Hekking, Stéphane Otero and Jean Margot and he too shared sensitiveness to phrasing, and a high regard for considerations for each period of musical history that also obviously derived from Marechal.

A famous Marechal student, Christine Walewska, recalls that he stressed musical intuition, even over the express markings in the score.

“Play surrendering yourself wholly to the music you are performing, and with much liberty,”

he advised her (quoted by Joseph Stevenson, in the ‘All Music Guide’).

Maurice Marechal was probably the French cellist in history up to that point who most liaised with the contemporary composers of the day. He reminds one of the wonderful friendship of Franchomme and Chopin (please see the separate article in *johnstone-music* on this story – VLC 17), but this time Marechal had special working relationships and personal friendships with many different composers. For example, he worked closely with the composer Maurice Ravel while the latter was composing one of his least-known masterworks, the Sonata for Violin and Cello. Marechal premiered the work with the violinist Helene Jourdan-Morhange; after the premiere Ravel wrote to congratulate him for “an amazing first performance”. Saint-Saëns gave Marechal carte blanche to “arrange for cello anything you like”, an amazing liberty given that Saint-Saens was quite a ‘stickler’ on many a musical matter! He also played the works of many other composers, prominent in their day, but unfortunately much less known now; Caplet, Durosoir, Tansmann, Ropartz and others. In particular he became especially well-known for championing contemporary French music. He premiered “*Épiphanie*”, an exceptionally difficult and highly unappreciated masterpiece by Debussy’s former associate Andre Caplet. Leopold Stokowski then invited him to come to America and give a first American performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Arthur Honegger wrote his marvellous Cello Concerto for Marechal in 1929 – Marechal, as always, was involved at the composition stage, and it was he who gave the world premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitsky in February 1930. Not only that, it was Marechal who wrote the first cadenza to the work (alas not included in the printed!). Not surprisingly, such a wealth of experience makes for avid reading, and luckily we have a French biography of him titled “*Maurice Maréchal, La Voix du Violoncello*” written by Alain Lambert. ‘The Voice of the Cello in France’ would certainly be an appropriate way of summing up the career of Maurice Marechal.

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