

CD Review

French Cello

Marc Coppey, *violoncello*
Orchestre philharmonique de Strasbourg
John Nelson, conductor
Audite, 97.802, 2022
(1 CD: 71 minutes) \$19.99

In the nineteenth century, the Paris Conservatoire – now known officially as the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique et de danse de Paris, or by its acronym CNSMDP – was a European centre of virtuosic cello pedagogy. This vaunted status was earned through a series of celebrity professors that cycled through the institution in its first half-century, including Louis Duport, Charles-Nicolas Baudiot, and Auguste-Joseph Franchomme.¹ These teachers and their students cultivated a style of soloistic playing that focused on advanced bow techniques, which became a hallmark of French playing, as Valerie Walden notes.² Such virtuosity provided fertile ground for French composers, who by the end of the century were writing expansive and ambitious works for the instrument, putting it second only to the violin in terms of string solo repertoire. The album *French Cello*, released by Audite and featuring soloist Marc Coppey, presents five of those works in exemplary interpretations, which are contextualized by excellent and approachable liner notes by German musicologist and music critic Michael Struck-Schloen, with English translations by Viola Scheffel.

Coppey is both a product of the Conservatoire and a member of its faculty, and clearly intends to honour this lineage. While elsewhere in his discography and concert repertoire, Coppey is a passionate champion of contemporary and lesser-known works for solo cello, this is not the matter of the day. Press text for the album rightly refers to the concertos by Camille Saint-Saëns and Édouard Lalo as ‘warhorses’, and four out of five of these works are pedagogical mainstays. Both ‘The Swan’ by Camille Saint-Saëns (1886, pub. 1922) and Gabriel Fauré’s *Élégie* (1880) are included in the Suzuki method books for the cello, and the

¹ In his liner notes to the album, Michael Struck-Schloen also highlights this pedagogical legacy (p. 18).

² Valerie Walden, ‘Technique, Style and Performing Practice to c.1900’, *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello*, ed. Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 191. Importantly, David Milsom challenges the notion of distinct Franco-Belgian and German schools of violin playing, a critique that is relevant to the coherence of cello lineages as well; see Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 13–27.

Saint-Saëns and Lalo concertos are often among the first full works in the genre that a serious student might learn. One could almost imagine Coppey committing these interpretations to recording expressly for his students to pore over.

All of these works were written between 1872 and 1892, in the shadow of French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the bloody quelling of the Paris Commune. Composers Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Lalo, and Léon Boëllmann offer distinct responses to this fraught political and economic period, when French wealth and cultural power was gradually recovering after these blows. The self-conscious Gallicism of Saint-Saëns' concerto (1872) counterbalances the internationalist bricolage of Lalo's work in the same genre (1876). However, common values also thread across many works, for example, a concern for motivic coherence in Léon Boëllmann's *Variations symphoniques* (1892) and in Fauré's *Élégie*. It is also worth noting that the *French Cello* is unabashedly a Parisian cello, reflecting the extreme centralization of musical composition and institutions in the capital city where all these composers lived and worked. Indeed, the cover of the album depicts Coppey and his instrument over a soft-focus skyline of Paris, the Eiffel Tower looming magisterially in the background. The Parisian orientation of the repertoire is counterbalanced by the fact that the orchestra is the excellent Orchestre philharmonique de Strasbourg, Coppey's hometown band. The ensemble is sensitively and agilely conducted by John Nelson.

Despite the thorough Frenchness of the repertoire, *French Cello* also reveals that the world of French music is not – and never has been – a hermetic one. The label on which it appears, Audite, is German and liner notes are offered in English and German (but curiously, not in French). The title of the album is in English, suggesting its orientation toward an international audience. Struck-Schloen's liner notes situate the contents of the album within a larger European artistic ecosystem and draw connections between these works and other aspects of French culture, for example describing how the cello at the end of the nineteenth century 'was the musical counterpart of the literary heroes of the time who populated the novels of Balzac, Hugo or Dumas *père* and *fils*' (p. 18). Indeed, the cello plays the role of poet or hero in several of these works, with *recitativo* sections that break into the musical texture and suggest narratives that never fully surface.

Coppey's playing is an excellent demonstration of the French school as it continues today, and issues of historical performance practice are not a major consideration in this thoroughly modern sound world. But it is a marvellous sound world: the key word here is restraint, as Coppey never pushes the sound or harshens any edges. His phrasing is considered, and strongly accented articulations are reserved for only the highest points of drama. Coppey performs on the 'Van Wilgenburg' Goffriller (Venice, 1711), a gorgeous instrument with a warm top, smooth transitions between treble, tenor, and bass, and a beautifully rounded low end.³ On this instrument, he accesses the variety of colours demanded of this repertoire and some of the nasality that give certain passages the effect of spoken French. This speechlike quality is valuable in the opening work, Boëllmann's *Variations symphoniques*, the least frequently heard selection on the album.

³ Matteo Goffriller (1659–1742) was a Venetian maker whose instruments are known for their warmth and large proportions (many have been cut down to a more modest size over the centuries). Several influential cellists have performed on Goffrillers, including Pablo Casals – although Casals' instrument was thought to be by the Cremonese maker Carlo Bergonzi until after his passing.

Boëllmann, who studied at the École Niedermeyer and worked as the organist at Saint-Vincent-de-Paul before a premature death at age thirty-five, is known primarily to organists. His work captures some of the grandeur of so much French organ writing of the period, and Coppey is an adept champion of the piece's sweeping generosity. While little performed today, Boëllmann's *Variations symphoniques* was undoubtedly a success in its day. Indeed, Hippolyte Barbedette reviewed the work's premiere quite favourably in *Le Ménestrel*, describing the piece as

so well done and so interesting. The main idea is noble, and nobly expressed. Mr. Boëllmann's orchestration is colourful without being noisy, and never drowns out the principal instrument; even better, he always foregrounds it. The interpreter, Mr. [Joseph] Salmon, was beyond all praise, and that the public rightly showed him their pleasure by recalling him to the stage three times.⁴

The work continued to remain in the repertory for decades after, only falling into obscurity after the First World War. For example, a concert by René Schidenhelm in 1898 was praised for its balanced programme that included the Boëllmann alongside the concerto by Antonín Dvořák that was 'still little known in France'.⁵ The Belgian cellist Cornélis Liégeois tackled its technical difficulties with aplomb at a concert in Le Havre in 1902,⁶ and Pablo Casals performed it at a concert in Angers in 1903.⁷

Coppey effortlessly tosses off the Concerto No. 1 by Camille Saint-Saëns, and the result is an impressive reference recording. There is much to praise here: minute details of Saint-Saëns' score are fastidiously attended-to, and ensemble issues with the orchestra that often emerge in this work's ebb-and-flow are much less problematic than in other interpretations. The opening of the middle movement is a particular highlight: gorgeous, prayerful and pristine. Coppey's interpretation is not one of hotheaded youth, and some listeners may wish for greater forcefulness and freedom in the recitative-like sections of the finale. As a result, the 'hero's journey' quality of its minor-to-major trajectory feels almost too easily won.

The most compelling interpretation on this album is that of the Lalo concerto. Despite the fact that the work sits firmly within the canon of cello concerti today, this piece's quirky, eclectic quality has not always been universally loved, and has also lent itself to drastically differing interpretations as traced by George Kennaway.⁸ Coppey begins the opening movement with baritone grandiosity that rightly connects this work to the world of opera and ballet. Tempi are judiciously chosen and tend toward the slow, but never feel overly dragging. The

⁴ 'Saluons au passage les Variations symphoniques de M. Boëllmann. On est heureux de rencontrer ... une oeuvre si bien faite et si intéressante. La pensée est noble, et noblement exprimée. L'orchestre de M. Boëllmann est coloré sans être bruyant, et n'étouffe jamais l'instrument principal; bien plus, il le fait toujours valoir. Ajoutons que l'interprète, M. Salmon, a été au-dessus de tout éloge, et que le public lui a justement manifesté ses sympathies en le rappelant trois fois'; Hippolyte Barbedette, 'Concert Lamoureux', *Le Ménestrel* 4 December 1892, 389.

⁵ E.D., 'Correspondance spéciale: Paris', *Revue musicale Sainte-Cécile* 7 May 1898, 109.

⁶ 'Salle de la Lyre Havraise: 1er Concert Cornélis Liégeois', *Revue comique normande*, 6 December 1902.

⁷ *Angers-artiste*, 28 February 1903, 332.

⁸ George Kennaway, *Playing the Cello, 1780–1930* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 228–33.

tight coordination between soloist and orchestra required of the second movement is present in spades, and the result is a quicksilver delight. The finale is positively witty, and here Coppey lets go of some of that Gallic restraint as he leans into the work's Spanish influence and theatrical drama. Here, his embrace of expressive portamenti give extra emphasis to key points of the phrases.

Two short works, both mainstays of cello repertoire, round out the album's offerings. Coppey's interpretation of Gabriel Fauré's *Élégie* is more moody than tragic. The opening is a study in legato bow technique, and Coppey's delivery is so smooth as to be almost featureless. The middle section, while stormy in the orchestra, offers not quite the harshness or heartbreak that you often hear in interpretations of this work. Such restraint serves him well in 'The Swan' from Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, perhaps the most famous cello solo of this – or any – period. The tempo here is unusually slow, which gives Coppey's swan an impressive wingspan and allows him to show off that astounding mastery of legato bowing. The result is simply lovely.

Throughout the album, the sound of the cello is too present in the mix, and this is a particular shame for this repertoire, as these composers were exceptional orchestrators (although the version of 'The Swan' offered here was orchestrated by Conservatoire professor Paul Vidal). In his concerto, Saint-Saëns' elegant counter-melodic meandering in the winds is particularly compromised. Moments where the string section overpowers the soloist in live performance are diminished, such as the end of the first movement, where orchestral intensity provides an essential effect that is missing. In a more balanced mix, the soloist is heard to tame the forces, like Orpheus, leading us into the sanguine second movement. But this is hardly an issue exclusive to this album. The soloist reigns supreme in much contemporary recording practice, even for an instrument of such modest volume as the cello.

In all, this is a well-presented album of late nineteenth-century French cello concertos and other solo works that will appeal to general audiences, cello students, and historians alike. It is my hope that the inclusion of the Boëllmann *Variations symphoniques* in a group of beloved mainstays will inspire others to take up this marvellous work. While the liner notes do not have the scholarly orientation that mark some releases, they are accessible to wider audiences and do an excellent job describing some of the connections between works and the larger context in which they were composed.

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