

THE ROMANTIC FRENCH CELLIST FRANCHOMME – AND HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH CHOPIN

written by David Johnstone

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FRANCHOMME, Auguste Joseph

Born: 1808, 10th April (Lille)

Died: 1884, 21st January (Paris)

Auguste Joseph Franchomme is today remembered basically for two things; his delightful inventive Caprices which contain an accompaniment of a second cello, and which surely are the first caprices for cello that are readily playable in concerts – and secondly by his close association with Chopin, resulting in some wonderful additions to the cello repertoire. In his own time Franchomme was the most important French cellist of his generation.

Born in Lille, he was first introduced to the cello by a rather mediocre teacher of his native town called Mas. In 1825 he went to the Paris Conservatoire as pupil of Levasseur, but he was soon to retire from his professorship. Norblin became his new teacher, and Franchomme's talent developed rapidly, gaining first prize at the conservatoire.

Whilst studying, Franchomme filled various places successively in Paris. He at first belonged, during the years 1825 and 1826, to the orchestra of the Theatre "Ambigile-Comique." He then went over, in 1827, to the "Grand Opera," but remained there only one year. In 1828 he became solo cellist of the Royal Chapel (Sainte-Chapelle).

He belonged for a longer period to the Italian Opera, but he again relinquished this position after a few years. Franchomme formed a close friendship with Mendelssohn during Mendelssohn's visit to Paris in 1831. He also performed with the Russian violinist Nikolay Dmitriev-Svetchin, and with the young Antón Rubinstein. Instead of the routine of orchestral life, the forward-thinking Franchomme established regular quartet evenings with the famous violinist Delphin Alard. This quartet was rare for a chamber ensemble of its time because it consisted of professional musicians playing as a 'regular' quartet. Interested in the regular promotion of professional music, he was a founding member of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire. He also performed with the violinist Delphin Alard (the teacher of Sarasate) and pianist Charles Hallé (founder of the Hallé Orchestra) in highly successful chamber music trio concerts.

With the exception of a trip to England in 1856, Franchomme hardly left Paris, where he became a central figure of the city's musical life. From 1846 he undertook responsibility for the cello department at the Paris Conservatoire, succeeding Norblin as first cello professor. He died in 1884.

Acknowledged as the most distinguished French cellist of his day, Franchomme advanced the elegant, smooth, light French bow technique developed by Duport, combining with this a facile, accurate left hand and producing an expressive, singing tone. Above all, there was notable praise for his charming 'cantilena'. Contemporary reports spoke of his extracting a full, sympathetic tone, and possessed with an extraordinary intonation. But, on the other hand, there was veiled criticism as to his playing not having sufficient passion or desire.

He was the owner of Duport's great 1711 Stradivari, which he acquired in 1843 from Duport's son for the then record sum of 22,000 francs. This instrument was the cello played by Rostropovich since 1974 to his death.

As a composer, Franchomme published some 55 works for cello, including the 12 caprices, op. 7, and the 12 Études, both with optional second cello, op. 35. These are all delightful musically mature pieces, and are worth exploring more, especially the caprices. Perhaps his most ambitious works were the Cello Concerto Op.33, and the 'Variations'. There were also other numerous other pieces with piano, orchestral, or chamber accompaniment. His works did achieve certain fame across Europe; for example, when Grutzmacher gave his formal debut in the Euterpe concerts in 1849 he chose to play the 'Variations' of Franchomme. There were also sets of nocturnes - three for two cellos (Op.14), three for cello and piano (Op.15) and three for cello or violin and piano (Op.19), no doubt influenced by Chopin (see later in the article), and other 'salon' pieces. He published, jointly with this great Polish composer, a duo on airs from Robert le Diable, another duo with Bertini and a third duo with Osborne. The Chopin link is, by far, the most interesting from a historical point of view.

Of his other writings, the most important surely is the *Nouvelle Méthode de Violoncello*, published posthumously in 1885 (Paris).

As stated, in 1846 he was succeeded Norblin as first cello professor at the Paris Conservatoire. Some of the best known pupils of Franchomme were Vidal (the younger), Jacquard, Jules Delsart, Louis Hegyesi, Ernest Gillet and Barbot. But the star would undoubtedly seem to be Joseph Salmon (1864-1913) - after training under Franchomme, the Dutch cellist concertized extensively, particularly in Russia. He premiered Enesco's *Symphonie Concertante* (unfortunately the composition was not received well) and played with the Hayot String Quartet.

For his contribution of a life-time devoted to music, Franchomme was decorated with the Légion d'honneur in 1884.

FRANCHOMME AND CHOPIN

Franchomme developed a very strong friendship with Chopin. Here are some of the musical and personal circumstances:

Chopin originally wrote in a letter to a friend in Warsaw:

"I have written here an Alla Polacca with violoncello accompaniment. It is nothing more than a glittering trinket for the salon, for the ladies. I wanted Princess Wanda to learn it. She is still very young, perhaps 17, and it is perfect bliss adjusting the position of her little fingers."

However, almost ten years later Chopin was to meet another influence in Vienna - the cellist Joseph Merk - who performed the Polonaise with him there and persuaded him at that point to add an introduction to it that would feature his own cantabile playing. Merk seems not to have added much to the Polonaise, although he certainly had the skills to play more challenging music. He was an important performer in Vienna and frequently played Beethoven's late quartets as well as the Triple Concerto. He also wrote some etudes for the cello.

But later still, in Paris, Chopin met a cellist named Franchomme who did add a few brilliant passages of his own to the Polonaise, which he more-or-less borrowed from the piano part (by the way, it was further edited in the 20th-century by the virtuoso cellist Feuermann, but that is outside our scope here). Even as a young man, Chopin had a huge gift for melody alongside a brilliant piano technique, and this first work for cello and piano became known as 'Introduction and Polonaise Brillante, Op.3'.

It was not until 1833, when Franchomme was 25 and already a mature artist, that a serious commission came for a work to be jointly composed by Chopin and Franchomme together. Franchomme had played cello in the Grand Opera himself until 1827, but by this time was serving as principal cellist of the Italian Opera and developing a solo career interspersed with chamber music concerts. The work that came into being was the Grand Duo on themes from the opera 'Robert le Diable'. This popular opera of Meyerbeer had been written and premiered the previous year. This was a wonderful piece of collaboration between the two. The manuscript for their Grand Duo survives with the piano part written in Chopin's shaky hand and Franchomme's more solid one generally for the cello, although it seems as though Chopin was given the chance to sketch out the basic overall structural form. But Franchomme was a fairly respected composer himself, admittedly of pieces to feature himself as cello soloist, and was able to contribute intelligently.

In this 1830's and 1840's Chopin and Franchomme played often together. Both men also had a hand in what we know as the 'Chopin' Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor, Op.65, of 1845-46. In the copy of the cellist, there is a note announcing that the part of the cello was written by Franchomme, but basically dictated by Chopin himself.

In Paris in February 1848, shortly before the '48 uprisings, Franchomme and Delfino Alard participated in a concert with Chopin in the famous 'Salon Pleyel'. In this very programme the cello sonata was performed alongside a Mozart trio. Chopin was barely able to reach '*mf*' in volume levels due to illness from tuberculosis, and that was to be his very last concert performance.

Franchomme and Chopin remained friends to the end. Franchomme helped with his financial affairs and provided support in numerous ways. He was an intimate and true friend of Chopin and was with him when he died. After Chopin's death, he served as a pallbearer in the magnificent public funeral, along with Meyerbeer, the piano maker Pleyel, the painter Delacroix (who had painted Chopin's portrait) and two Polish noblemen in exile. These pallbearers well reflect Chopin's personal and musical influences. Chopin's character and musical tastes were to remain deeply with Franchomme during the rest of his life.

In summing up, we now know that Franchomme was probably the most important French cellist of his time. Unfortunately, he was not to know that the axis of cello playing was changing substantially during those middle years of the nineteenth century, and the prominence of Paris as a cello centre (which had originally promised so much with the Duport brothers) was rather declining, at least if one is to compare it to the new centres of excellence in Belgium, Russia, and above all by the 'Dresden' school in Germany, founded by Dotzauer and expanded by Kummer and Grutzmacher. If that had not been the case, then surely Franchomme's name would be even more important in the cello world today.

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