

CARL DAVIDOV – THE ROMANTIC RUSSIAN VIRTUOSO CELLIST

written by David Johnstone

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DAVIDOV, Carl (*also spelt Davidoff –and Karl*)

Born: 1838, 15th March (Goldingen, Latvia)

Died: 1889, January (Moscow)

Carl Davidov was, without doubt, one of the most important cellists of the nineteenth century. As a performer, tales of his wizardry live to the present day. He was born in Latvia, though his parents went to live in Moscow when he was only two years old. His father was a doctor and an amateur violinist. Karl began piano lessons at the age of five, and took up the cello at twelve, with Heinrich Schmidt, principal cellist at the Moscow Theatre. He carried on his further studies under H. Schuberth, in St. Petersburg and showing exceptional promise, but his parents insisted that he first finish his education before embarking on a career as a cellist, and so he completed a degree in mathematics at St. Petersburg University.

Davidov was then offered a place in the Moscow Theatre, which he accepted. He did not stay long however, having conceived the desire of undertaking a tour, which led him into Holland. He then received important theoretical training from Moritz Hauptmann, in Leipzig, for at that point in his life Davidov's intention was to be a composer. Under the positive influence of Hauptmann, Davidov also became one of the first cellists to link cello technique with anatomical and physiological aspects of performance. He was simultaneously under the guidance of Grutzmacher for purely technical cello matters.

However, he was asked to substitute at short notice for Grützmaker in Leipzig (in 1859) in a Mendelssohn trio (alongside the famous violinist Ferdinand David), the event was an amazing success. The Gewandhaus orchestra immediately offered him the possibility of a solo appearance, and he performed his own first cello concerto, Op.5 that he had written in that same year (1859).

From that moment he was clearly motivated to build a career as a cello soloist. When Grutzmacher moved to Dresden in 1860, Davidov, now 22 years old, took his place at the Leipzig Conservatory as professor of cello. Davidoff then succeeded Carl Schuberth as cello professor at St Petersburg in 1862 or 1863, and showing his enormous knowledge also imparted the music history classes as well. He also played at the same time as solo cellist of the St. Petersburg Imperial Italian opera orchestra. In 1865 he married, and was to become the father of two children, Lidia and Nicolas.

He regularly visited the principal German cities, and Brussels, London and Paris etc. and he was acclaimed in every one. Interestingly, he was in these times a little lazy with his practise, but his ability was such that he easily maintained his form! Indeed, he was regularly referred to, not just the public but by most of his contemporary colleagues as the best cellist of his time in the world. He played regularly with the Auer St. Petersburg Quartet, and Alexander II appointed him Soloist to His Majesty. He also held the post of Director of the Russian Imperial Musical Society in St. Petersburg. In 1874 he took part in the celebratory concerts of the Paris Conservatoire.

In 1876 Tchaikovsky and Davidov were both candidates for the post of Director at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and it was Davidov, and not Tchaikovsky, who was awarded the position - such was his reputation. Indeed, Tchaikovsky himself called Davidov the "Czar of Cellists". More than that, he was a man way ahead of his time - a true social democrat before such a phrase had any precise meaning. As a conservatoire principal, his genuine concern at seeing talent not being able to develop itself through the financial hardship of the student led to him instigate a series of special scholarships, student housing, and other ideas to nurture the best talents. In this he was opposed by Rubinstein, supposedly less 'socially interested' than Davidov. Unfortunately, even the best men are only human, and in 1887 he was temporarily forced to flee Russia after being discovered in a scandalous love affair with a beautiful young piano student at the conservatory (even though the Rubinstein piano 'camp' had blatantly taken advantage of their 'good fortune' with manoeuvres to oust him from the principal post). In this forced exile year, he gave a triumphant tour of concerts. When he returned to Russia the following year he made not St. Petersburg, but Moscow his home, and during this last period he concentrated on his valuable Cello Method. In January of 1889, at the age of fifty, he was suddenly taken ill in the midst of a performance of a Beethoven sonata, and he died a few days later.

Apart from Tchaikovsky's glowing tribute, there were many more. For example, Julius Klengel, another leading cellist (and who appears in another article of *johnstone-music*) said:

"I only understood what cello playing signifies after hearing Davidov in St. Petersburg in my youth."

What characterized his playing? Davidov's studies in math and composition surely contributed a great deal to his thoughts on the development of cello technique. In particular, he discovered that virtuoso passages, like those in the Romberg concertos, sounded best when played on the A and D strings, and that the C and G strings should only be played within the lower octave. Therefore Carl Davidov was a fervent opponent of "positional parallelism" – that of staying in a high position with the thumb moving across various strings to avoid changing position - and he often, for example, changed the fingering in the Romberg's Concertos. So Davidov preferred the "linear" principle of playing, with the maximum use of the A-String, which is so richly expressive. He was of the opinion that cellists should learn from the technique of violinists, and advised his students to observe the best violinists carefully. He insisted on the free holding of the bow, again contrary to the earlier schools, and so enabled bowing to be done with a more flexible wrist, and the control of the first finger on the bowing hand to achieve a good crescendo.

Carl Davidov, furthermore, had good fortune in the 'inheritance' of his Stradivari cello from Count Mathieu Wielhorsky, a Russian aristocrat. It is today known as the 'Davidov', and is the same cello which was anonymously given to the young Jacqueline du Pre.



Carl Davidoff, "Czar of Cellists."

His most famous cello composition, still often performed today, is 'At the Fountain'. He also wrote four cello concertos – Op.5 from 1859 (already mentioned, and it was this concerto that the emerging Klengel also choose for his official debut with orchestra!), Op. 14 from 1863, then Op.18 from 1868, and finally Op.31 written in 1878. For solo cello and orchestra there was also a 'Fantasy on Russian themes' Op.7 (1860), an Allegro de concert Op.11 (1862), and a Ballade Op.25 from 1875. Davidov's compositions, like those of Servais, attempt to experiment with cellistic technique. His 'At the Fountain' (a piece from Op. 20) particularly comes to mind, as the work requires not only finger technique, but also a solid *spiccato* stroke to keep the fast notes even and clean throughout the three-minute piece.

Moreover, he was not only confined to cello music, and neither to simple light salon pieces. It is worthy of note to mention his String Sextet Op.35 (1879), his String Quartet Op.38 (1882), and his Piano quintet Op.40 of 1883. Also, interestingly, Davidov wrote a 'Hymn' for 10 cellos, two double-basses and timpani - to be the model for the Klengel 'Hymnus' some fifty years later !

It has been mentioned earlier in the article that Davidov linked cello technique with anatomical and physiological aspects of performance. We can imagine that the advanced theories on acoustics and harmony of his former teacher Hauptmann's were much better understood by Davidov than most, given his mathematical knowledge. Certainly the physiological and anatomical aspects of playing and teaching that he linked with the cello were the most modern of the age, until Hugo Becker studied in even more depth the subject, resulting in his own important treatise of 1929. Thus it may be claimed that the basis formed by Davidov and Becker laid the path for the type of playing of twentieth-century giants such as Casals and Feuermann.

His important teaching posts have also been mentioned in the life biographical details at the beginning of the article. Amongst his important pupils were:

Hans Wihan, member of the Czech String Quartet, and dedicatee of the Dvorak works Cello Concerto (Op.104) and Rondo (Op.94)
Alexander Wierzbilowicz (of a fine full tone, who succeeded Davidov in some of his posts such as the Auer String Quartet)

Albrecht
Kousnezoff
Muller
Gleen
Werbov
Morosov
Loganovski
Carl Fuchs
Leo Stern

Davidov apparently played very little during the cello classes; instead he preferred to listen, then explain and consider opinions! His principal teaching writing - *Violoncell-Schule*, Leipzig 1888 - is little known today, although it held importance at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The overall view is that he was obviously a most thoughtful player and influential teacher; in fact, the real 'musicians' soloist'. Davidoff played an enormous role in the creation of a transition towards modern cello playing, though he was probably unaware of it. His works, and especially the cello concertos, were programmed and studied by the great majority of professional soloists in the next generation and are still sometimes included in conservatoires up to the present day, which is a sign of respect towards this sincere artist and sincere human being.

DAVID JOHNSTONE

List of compositions by Carl Davidov

Works with Opus number

Opus 5, Cello Concerto No.1 in B Minor (1859)

Opus 6, Souvenir de Zarizino 2 salon pieces (Nocturne - Mazurka) for cello and piano

Opus 7, Fantasie from a Russian folk song for cello and orchestra (1860)

Opus 11, Allegro de Concert, for Cello and Orchestra (1862)

Opus 14, Cello Concerto No.2 in A major (1863)

Opus 16, 3 Salon pieces (Mondnacht, Lied, Märchen) for cello and piano.

Opus 17, Souvenirs d'Oranienbaum (Adieu - Barcarolle)

Opus 18, Cello Concerto No.3 in D Major (1868)

Opus 20, Four Pieces for Cello and Piano

No.1 - Sonntag Morgen (Sunday Morning)

No.2 - Am Springbrunnen (At the Fountain)

No.3 - An der Wiege (At the Cradle)

No.4 - Abenddämmerung (Evening twilight)

Opus 21, Die Gaben des Terek (The Gifts of Terek) Symphonic poem

Opus 23, Romance sans Paroles in G Major

Opus 25, Ballade for cello and orchestra or piano in G major (1875)

Opus 27, Symphonic Sketch for orchestra

Opus 30, 3 salon pieces

Opus 31, Cello Concerto No.4 in E minor (1878)

Opus 35, String Sextet (1879)

Opus 37, Orchestral Suite

Opus 38, String Quartet in A major (1882)

Opus 40, Piano Quintet (1883)

Opus 41, 4 Silhouettes, for Cello and Piano

"Poltawa", Opera after Puschkin (began in 1876, unfinished)



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