

# The Cello Repertoire

## Advice for students and young professionals

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# The Cello Repertoire – advice for students and young professionals

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*Note: we reproduce this article because we believe it to be very useful for the young cellists of today, with a lot of sound advice and comments being offered ...*

So, what music should you learn to play, and how should you choose it? In the long run, what you want to learn will depend on 1) your ambitions as a cellist, 2) the amount of time that you are willing to spend learning cello repertoire, and 3) the type of cello music that you like to play the most. As I mentioned before, our repertoire can be described as being either solo, chamber, orchestral.

One of the many advantages to playing the cello is the enormous repertoire that we have to choose from. In terms of solo music, for example, few instruments have a larger collection of repertoire: voice, piano, and violin come to mind as exceptions, in large part because they have a longer history of being treated as a solo instrument. In terms of chamber music, the only instrument with a decidedly larger repertoire is the piano. And as far as orchestral music is concerned, how many such pieces can you think of that don't use cellos? Below is a discussion of the repertoire for cello that I consider most important to know. I will start with orchestral music.

If orchestral music is your favorite type of music, or if you would like to spend a considerable amount of your cello playing time playing in an orchestra, then you'll want to learn more complete orchestral works and more orchestral excerpts than somebody who does not particularly care for orchestral playing. I highly recommend the three volumes of orchestral excerpts that Leonard Rose compiled and edited. In addition, it is worthwhile to purchase the complete cello parts to all of the symphonic works of Beethoven, Brahms, Strauss, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky. Many of these can be purchased nowadays in electronic format for very little money. If you hope to play in an opera pit orchestra, you should also purchase a collection of cello excerpts of operas. In addition to the Internet, you can use the bibliography at the back of this book as a resource.

In many ways, orchestral playing can be considered to be by far the most likely life-long performance outlet for amateur cellists. Although the number of full-time professional symphony orchestras in America has decreased, there are a large number of part-time professional orchestras in existence. The membership of the vast majority of these orchestras contains at least some amateur musicians. If you dedicate your life to it, you might still have difficulty getting into a full-time professional orchestra, but if your heart is set on getting into a part-time professional orchestra, you will be successful. Even if orchestral playing doesn't set your heart on fire in and of itself it does have two things going for it: 1) it is a very social activity and a great way to meet new (and often very interesting) people, 2) it does provide a simple way to ensure that you always keep playing and practicing your instrument.

Out of the 200-plus well-known works for orchestra, some get programmed more than others, and some get chosen as sources for audition excerpts far more than others. Below is a list of 12 of the most-commonly-asked-for works for orchestral auditions. Even if you don't like playing orchestral music, you should still make yourself learn the main cello excerpts from these works. Not only are all of these works masterpieces, but you will learn different things from orchestral excerpts than what you learn from the chamber and solo music repertoire, and it is good to be a well-rounded musician.

## Top Twelve Most Requested Cello Excerpts for Orchestral Auditions

Mozart, Symphony No. 35  
Beethoven, Symphony No. 4  
Beethoven, Symphony No. 5  
Beethoven, Symphony No. 8  
Brahms, Symphony No. 2  
Brahms, Symphony No. 3  
Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 4  
Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 6  
Strauss, R., Ein Heldenleben  
Strauss, R., Don Juan  
Strauss, R., Death and Transfiguration  
Debussy, La Mer

In addition to learning these works, you should also listen to as much of the orchestral repertoire as possible.

As with orchestral playing, if chamber music is your favorite type of repertoire to play, you will also never have a shortage of pieces to choose from. As a vocation or an avocation, you are most likely to spend most of your chamber music time throughout your life playing in a string quartet. You would be surprised how much money you can make playing for weddings and special occasions, especially if at least someone in the group has some marketing skills, some business sense, and a hefty dose of ambition. Cello chamber works for just strings include string trios, duos, quintets, sextets, and octets. There are also piano trios, quartets, and quintets, plus a variety of mixed ensembles, some of which include clarinet, flute, bassoon, trumpet, oboe, or horn. There are also a number of chamber works for cello and voice. Don't forget that cello can also play in any piece that contains a basso continuo part. Finally, most of the "alternative styles" playing opportunities that you will have will be in what are effectively chamber music groups.

If chamber music is your “thing” you will probably have to be more enterprising than if you preferred orchestral music or even solo music. Not only do you have to find your own performance opportunities, you have to find other people to play with (if you are not in a “permanent” ensemble) and you must also match your schedule with those of the other performers.

Unlike the orchestral repertoire, there is very little chamber music repertoire that you absolutely have to know in order to be considered literate in this area. Instead, it is most important that you have listened to as much of the mainstream chamber music repertoire as possible. It is particularly useful to have listened to this repertoire while following along with the score. You probably live within a short driving distance of a library that has a fair collection of chamber music scores. Scores for much of the chamber music repertoire can also be obtained cheaply in electronic format. Be sure that you have heard at least a few of the chamber works by each of the most famous composers.

It is especially important to be familiar with each of the following composers from the classical period:

all of the string quartets by Beethoven.

all of Mozart's string quartets with the Kerchel number above 300.

all of Haydn string quartets from Op. 64 through Op. 76.

The solo repertoire can itself be divided into three categories: unaccompanied, cello and piano, and concerto. Before we address each of these in turn, let us briefly discuss the etude repertoire for the cello.

As with every other aspect of the cello repertoire, the etude repertoire is quite extensive. Some people are more fond of etudes than others. The main benefit to etudes is that they allow, if not force, you to focus and concentrate on a limited number of technical problems. A healthy diet of etudes can advance your technique pretty rapidly.

The primary drawback to spending too much time on etudes is that

- 1) you will hardly ever perform etudes, so you will rarely find yourself polishing them to as high a level as you would other repertoire, and
- 2) they tend to be less musical than the rest of our repertoire, and as such they tend to lead us to play them in a less musical fashion. This second drawback can be overcome in large part if you make it a priority to play even your etudes as musically as possible.

The most important etudes to learn are the following:

Duport, J. Twenty-one Studies.

Popper, D. Studies: Preparatory to the High School of Cello Playing, Op.76.  
High School of Cello Playing, Op. 73.

Piatti, A. Twelve Caprices, Op. 25. (Peters)

Other useful, although less well-known, etudes include:

Servais, A. Six Caprices, Op. 11.

Cossman, B. Concert Studies, Op. 10.

Perhaps the most famous and most popular collections of etudes are the three volumes that Alvin Schroeder compiled. Their popularity probably stems from the fact that they include etudes by a wide variety of composers, and the etudes are ordered approximately in increasing levels of difficulty.

The unaccompanied repertoire for the cello is, in my opinion, one of the most fortunate aspects of the cello repertoire. There are some very significant benefits to unaccompanied playing. For one thing, having to provide every aspect of the music by yourself is truly a character-building experience: it is very good experience for you as a musician and as a performer. For another thing, it is very useful to be able to be a “one-man band”: wherever you and your cello go, you are all set to give an unaccompanied performance. Not having to worry about other people’s schedules greatly decreases the number of times that you have to say ‘no’ due to conflicts, and generally simplifies your life as a performer enormously. Over the years you can save a lot of money in accompanist fees as well!

The most important works for unaccompanied cello, and perhaps the most important works for cello period, are Bach's six suites. You simply must learn them! I maintain that you should eventually learn them all but, at the very least, you should know at least three of the first five suites. The sixth suite, written as it was for a five-stringed instrument but played on a four-stringed instrument, is far more difficult than any of the other suites for this reason; truly it is in a category by itself. You can use part or all of a Bach suite as a central work on any solo recital, as an encore, for a college or music festival entrance audition, or for many music competitions.

Besides the Bach suites, most of the repertoire for unaccompanied cello was written after 1900. The most significant of these works are the three suites by Reger, the Kodaly Sonata, the Hindemith Sonata, the three suites by Britten, the three suites by Bloch, and the unaccompanied work by Cassadó. The repertoire is much more extensive than this. If you really like playing unaccompanied cello, a little digging is all that is required to unearth many more such works.

Unaccompanied cello is certainly not for everybody: some people don't care much for the repertoire, but most such people just don't like to perform alone. If you are one of these people, then you might choose only to learn a few Bach cello suites. You do need to have listened to all six suites. As much as I love the repertoire for unaccompanied cello, I will admit that you can afford to go your whole life not even having heard any of the other works for unaccompanied cello.

If concertos are your cup of tea, the good news is the same as with all of the cello repertoire: there are many works to choose from. They range in quality from poor to masterpieces. The single biggest drawback to playing concertos is the difficulty of finding an orchestra to play them with! If you are bound and determined to play them, then your best bet is to find a competent high school orchestra that is willing to accompany you. Even then, you may only have a few such orchestras within a reasonable driving distance, and it is extremely unlikely that they will want to play with you every year, so your concerto performance options will still probably remain quite limited.

If you are not into playing concertos, then you can “get by” with just knowing the first movement of one major concerto for your entire life. However, I strongly recommend that you learn at least two or three complete concertos, along with the first movements of at least two or three other concertos.

I have listed below what are, in my opinion, the most important cello concertos. If you enjoy playing cello concertos, you should learn them all. If you do not, then you only need to listen to them all.

**Less difficult:**

Haydn C Major concerto

Elgar concerto

Saint-saens A Minor concerto

Lalo concerto

Boccherini/Greutzmacher B-flat Major concerto

C.P.E Bach concerto in A Major or A Minor

Kabalevsky concerto in D Minor

**More difficult:**

Haydn D Major concerto

Beethoven triple concerto

Schumann concerto

Tchaikovsky Rococo Variations

Dvorak concerto

Hindemith concerto

Brahms double concerto

Shostakovich concerto No. 1

Barber concerto

Prokofiev Symphony Concertante

In addition to the complete concertos listed above, there are numerous one-movement concert pieces for cello and orchestra, many of which are quite wonderful.

For many cellists, the majority of their practice time on solo works throughout their lives will be spent learning works for cello and piano. I think it is safe to say that beginning and intermediate cellists spend the vast majority of their practice time learning such works.

I know of no cellists who eschew this repertoire altogether and very few who profess to dislike playing with piano. As with all of the repertoire above, though, you should listen to as much of this repertoire as possible, regardless of the amount that you learn to play. The most important works from this repertory are the following:

**Beethoven: all five sonatas, plus all three sets of variations**

**Brahms: both sonatas**

**Schumann: Fantasy Pieces**

**Rachmaninoff sonata**

**Mendelssohn: Sonata No. 2 in D Major**

**Schubert Arpeggionne sonata**

**Debussy sonata**

**Prokofiev sonata**

**Bach: all three sonatas for viola da gamba**

**Shostakovich sonata**

**Boccherini sonata in A Major**

**Tchaikovsky Pezzo Capriccioso**

**Popper Hungarian Rhapsody**

Many other sonatas exist than the ones listed above, and many of them are wonderful albeit less well known. In addition to the sonatas, there are an enormous number of other works for cello and piano, most of which are single-movement works or themes-and-variations. The main drawback of much of this repertoire is the fact that the piano part is in many cases far more difficult than the cello part. Unfortunately, as with many musicians, there are a surprising number of pianists who are not very good chamber music players, even if they possess astounding technique. Of course, you would like to find a pianist who has incredible technique and who is a skilled chamber music player, but you should be prepared to pay well for their services. There are pianists out there who love the repertoire for cello and piano as much or more than many cellists do—when you find such people, be very nice to them and do not lose their contact information!

Note that the repertoire for each of the categories listed above (except concerti) ranges in difficulty from extremely easy to extremely advanced and challenging. Cello concertos tend to range from moderately difficult to extremely challenging.

You could spend your entire cello-playing career studying only one type of repertoire listed above, but you would be doing yourself a disservice if you do not learn at least a few works from each category. For additional information about the repertoire for cello, search the internet and look at the bibliography at the back of this book.

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