

# "Playing the Cello, 1780-1930" by George Kennaway

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# **Book Review: Kennaway, George. *Playing the Cello, 1780-1930*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. ISBN: 9781409438335 (hbk); 9781409438342 (PDF); 9781472400338 (ePUB).**

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Approaches to the history of performance in what one might call the very long nineteenth century are many-faceted. Instructive methods and treatises are important, but much more revealing is the notation of repertory, as the fundamental work of Clive Brown and others has shown. Even more revealing, perhaps, are early recordings, particularly in the prevalence of rubato as an expressive resource, something not generally apparent from notation. This and the routine arpeggiation of piano chords, another aspect not otherwise evident, have been explored by Neal Peres da Costa, and the whole field of early recording by the CHARM group.<sup>1</sup> George Kennaway is a member of CHASE (Collection of Historical Annotated String Editions, centered in the University of Leeds).<sup>2</sup> The fruits of the study of instructive editions are rich, and it has been sad to see conservatoire libraries jettisoning “out-of-date editions” at the very moment when they were becoming primary research materials.

Kennaway’s book is path-breaking in that it is the first to deal exclusively with the cello for the specified period. He aims to provide a comprehensive survey of a field that has been only patchily covered until now. Articles in *Grove online* are still based on sometimes erroneous information from Wasielewski (1888) and Van der Straeten (1914). It is also path-breaking in its scope. Unlike Valerie Walden, Kennaway takes in not only a full range of methods and treatises and the notation of case studies, with discussion of early recordings, but also cultural context in the form of contemporary criticism both professional and amateur, literary references to the cello.<sup>3</sup> He ends with more than a nod in the direction of gender stereotypes, gesture, and the body. All this requires sensitive and knowledgeable assessment (who do concert reviews tell us about, the describer or the described?). As a musicologist as well as a professional cellist, Kennaway is well placed to provide it.

As the title declares, the focus of the book is on *playing* the cello rather than exclusively on specifics of performing style. Accordingly, three initial chapters deal with fundamentals of posture, bow-hold, and left- and right-hand actions. Kennaway is particularly concerned to

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<sup>1</sup> Neal Peres da Costa, *Off the Record* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music, <http://www.charm.rhul.ac.uk/index.html>. A collection of significant articles dealing with performance is edited by David Milsom in *Classical and Romantic Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> <http://chase.leeds.ac.uk/>.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Walden, *One Hundred Years of Violoncello: A History of Technique and Performance Practice, 1740-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).



reflect variety of practice and to put current preconceptions in context. As one might expect, the emphasis through most of the nineteenth century is on this variety, even within “schools.” Illustrations must be treated with care. One, from Bréval’s *Traité de violoncelle* (1804), is plainly adjusted to give the player an appearance of Romantic *Schwung*. Adopting the sometimes idiosyncratic attitudes of early nineteenth-century players, modern cellists could severely compromise tone production. It is a matter of trading advantages and disadvantages in terms of the chosen repertory, and there is certainly wide scope for open-minded experimentation. The general adoption of the tail-pin in the later nineteenth century, valued for sound projection as much as for convenience in higher positions, together with voluminous Victorian gowns, enabled women to come to the fore. The bass viol, let alone the cello, had long been considered “improper” for women, in which case the striking portrait by Jean-Marc Nattier of Madame Henriette de France, second daughter of Louis XV, playing the bass viol must have been shocking to some in the 1750s, while Hélène Dolmetsch *c.* 1895 dressed in “Elizabethan” costume playing a bass viol with a tail-pin looks merely absurd. There is evidence of women playing the cello in the earlier nineteenth century, but it is only in the last decades of the century that notable female virtuosos appear.

The eighteenth-century violinistic bow-hold with slanted left hand was surprisingly durable. It was basic to the technique of the great player and pedagogue Bernhard Romberg. With all its disadvantages, it was still current in the 1930s and was even later being advocated by William Pleeth. Fingering is of cardinal importance for early keyboard music, but how seriously should one take the variety of practices prevalent among cellists from 1780 to 1840? “Modern,” systematic fingering had been advocated by John Gunn in 1789, yet many players in the nineteenth century continued to use three-fingered scales. There is no room for pedantic “correctness” here; players were flexible and pragmatic and that is the most correct one can be. The move to the big sound towards the end of the nineteenth century is probably the feature that most divides us from previous practice. The priority of wrist and fingers gave way to arm and weight. The exceedingly frilly and sophisticated galant violin bowing technique of Leclair, Geminiani, or Tartini developed further with nineteenth-century virtuosity, though cellists, other than Adrien-François Servais, seem not to have gone as far as violinists. The change to a heavier style exactly matched changes in singing technique and piano action.

Moving on to overtly expressive features, two chapters deal with the contentious matters of portamento and vibrato, contentious because here again there was a large variety of practices, and it is difficult to know how much the instructions in treatises and editions reflect actual playing before the development of sound recording. Throughout the nineteenth century, many disparaged the overuse of portamento on the cello, not to be used as commonly as on the violin. Romberg was exceptional in the early nineteenth century for his relative enthusiasm for it, perhaps because of his idiosyncratic violinistic left hand. Friedrich Dotzauer (1824) limited it to solo playing, disparaging its use in the orchestra. Here, as in other aspects, the opposite extreme was represented by the notorious Friedrich Grützmacher, whose editions of Bach and Mendelssohn represent the high watermark of personal, instructive editing. Grützmacher’s pupil Diran Alexanian, on the other hand, was much more restrained in portamento, a warning against making assumptions about teacher-pupil traditions. Towards the end of the century, cellists such as Josef Werner (1894) began prescribing ways of avoiding shifts, but it was the advent of sound recording that seems to have resulted in the drastic re-

duction of its use, as it did with rubato. All sorts of spontaneous freedoms in live performance can seem intolerably mannered when the tensions and atmosphere of the occasion are removed.

Similarly with vibrato, nineteenth-century cello methods discuss it far less often than do those for violin. In this case, there is not only variety of usage among players but also a great variety of types, more even than in the old French viol technique, including *Bebung*, *ondulé*, bow-vibrato, Dotzauer's *Pochen*, and with various speeds, all in the service of the expressive moment. It was generally associated with strong emotion rather than being an indispensable part of tone production, as Alfredo Piatti said: "we cannot *always* be in a passion." There was also class distinction, associating its overuse and that of portamento with sentimental salon music and lower-class cello playing generally. Hugo Becker (1929) thought its erotic associations quite out of place in serious classical music and even compared it to alcohol addiction. My own impression is that it was the continuous, rapid and thrilling vibrato of Jascha Heifetz in the 1930s that popularized its universal use, even in orchestral playing, where it can give a common, routine effect to the sound.

In the later part of this period, the evidence of recordings is very different from the impression given by written records. All but two of the pre-1930 cello recordings in the Pearl collection use constant vibrato, some wider than others. There seems little correlation of players' age or school with the amount or type of vibrato, and, by the 1930s, it had in any case become more uniform. At the same time, the frequency of portamento declined considerably in the 1930s and especially after World War II. Kennaway compares nine recordings of cello arrangements of Schumann's *Träumerei*, in the process refining on the conceptions of some more superficial writers on twentieth-century performance. This is a particularly valuable part of the book in that his view is of different artistic personalities and practices co-existing synchronically, rather than a grand diachronic narrative. Accordingly, in the case of *Träumerei*, it is the youngest player (Rosario Bourdon) who uses narrow vibrato at expressive highlights in the nineteenth-century way.

The final chapters deal with social and cultural context, mainly the question of the "gendered identity" of the cello. Debates about gender in music generally go back to the 1980s, but, so far, they have not impinged on performance studies to an equivalent degree. Kennaway first examines perceptions of the cello as an instrument, then, in one of the most original and suggestive parts of the book, how perceived gender characteristics may work out in performance. At the beginning of the period, the cello was definitely a "manly" instrument, its character grave, earnest, sublime, not exciting the passions with the wild and violent movements of the violin. Throughout there was a question about its suitability for women, particularly in Britain. As late as the 1930s, the BBC Symphony Orchestra banned female cellists, prompting Ethyl Smyth to reflect that, in her lifetime, first it had been riding bicycles, then riding astride, and now the ban on the cello was "the drowning clinging to a spar" (188). Augustus John's portrait of Madame Suggia must have had an influence. It may not have been a particularly close likeness, but that is not the point. What he was painting was her intense physical relationship with the instrument and the magnificently heroic effect. Havelock Ellis thought the cello the perfect instrument for women; there is much sub-text in descriptions of the gender characteristics of instruments.

This all coheres into practical usefulness when it comes to the character and projection of musical ideas. Kennaway takes as case studies works of the Bohrer brothers, Romberg, and Lalo. The violinist Anton Bohrer's string quartet was praised by Berlioz when they gave the first performances in Paris of Beethoven's late quartets. The Duos Anton wrote with his cellist brother Max in the 1820s and 30s are quite another matter. There is nothing of the earnest, cantabile nature of the cello, but a demonstration that the cello could match the virtuoso techniques of the violin in a circus act of transcendental execution. This is the opposite end of the spectrum from the high priests of German classicism, and there is a broad range of intervening hues. Real insights come when this point of view is adopted for works of more substance. Kennaway offers astute assessment of Romberg's Concerto Op. 3 in D, then convincingly applies Vincent d'Indy's (1909) gendering of themes to the first movement of the Lalo Concerto (1877) in order to see what possible performance implications there may be. D'Indy's classifications have naturally provoked much comment, and they certainly tell us more about social and cultural attitudes of their time than about anything else, but they do belong in the same world as Lalo. Taking criteria developed in recent gender literature, Kennaway shows features that might justify identifying D'Indy's "seconde féminine." He then examines the first recordings of the Concerto (by Suggia, Cassadó, Navarra, and Nelsova, with a look also at Jacqueline Dupré) to see if any of this is evident in performances. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in spite of the wildly different personalities of the players, there is little evidence of that sort of character contrast in any of the performances. Is there a whole dimension of character contrast, which could be explored with subtlety and depth, that we have been missing?

It is difficult in a brief review to convey the sheer range of types of source and performance covered in this book, all with admirable openness and fair-mindedness. Where does it all lead in a world where professional musicians look for quick rules of thumb and follow-my-leader fashionability? The answer cannot be just, say, Brahms Symphonies with little vibrato, Urtext tempo, and self-conscious, clip-on portamentos. One view I would take issue with is that, in the case of Baroque music, "authenticity" in the 1980s stood for the elimination of personal interpretation in performance and that the performance of Baroque repertoires has since then become more experimental. This was not the experience of Bruce Haynes, a leading contributor throughout that period, who vividly demonstrated with sound clips that the 1970s and 80s were a period of startling progress in flexibility and nuance, progress that has since been rowed back from in what Haynes calls "strait" performance (as in straitjacket).<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that there are no groups doing remarkable things now. The case of Baroque music is misleading in that the instruments are so different from modern ones, and themselves suggest, not to say dictate, performing style. The craft of music and the nature of musical expression differed as well. There was surely a watershed around 1800 when music moved on to a much more personally emotional plane and the nature of musical projection changed. The twentieth century then brought its own overlay. Listening now to, say, the Hungarian Quartet's highly regarded Beethoven recordings of the 1950s, one is struck by the technical solidity but also by the sameness of high-powered sound through vastly different moods, except for the one moment in Op.132 where the vibrato is switched

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), with associated website.

off. We have come a long way since then, but not as far as some would have us believe.<sup>5</sup> Kennaway has provided a superb resource for talented and curious cellists who seek to develop their own imaginative response to the music of the long nineteenth century.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Clive Brown, "Performing 19th-Century Chamber Music: The Yawning Chasm Between Contemporary Practice and Historical Evidence," *Early Music* 38 (2010): 476-80.