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FRIDAY 14 JANUARY 2022, 6pm
NATIONAL CONCERT HALL

ELGAR Cello Concerto
FRANCK Symphony in D minor

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra
Mihhail Gerts conductor
Camille Thomas cello
Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm



RTÉ lyric fm

Recorded for broadcast by RTÉ lyric fm
on Friday 21 January, 7pm

PROGRAMME NOTES

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85

i. Adagio – Moderato

ii. Lento – Allegro molto

iii. Adagio

iv. Allegro – Moderato – Allegro ma non troppo

Elgar began working on his sinewy and dark-hued Cello Concerto in the West Sussex village of Fittleworth on the eve of the Hundred Days Offensive; the final, decisive Allied push against Axis forces in France during the summer of 1918. It was to be his last major work.

Written for the English cellist Felix Salmond, who had been involved in the late creative flourish of the E minor String Quartet and A minor Piano Quintet that same year, the Cello Concerto received its first performance in the Queen’s Hall, London, on 26 October 1919, with the then 62-year-old composer conducting the London Symphony Orchestra.

A number of factors – not least a lack of rehearsal time and the audience’s excited expectation that it was about to hear music similar in vein to that of the effusive Violin Concerto, written eight years earlier – led to a less than satisfactory reception of the work. ‘No one in the orchestra,’ wrote the critic Ernest Newman, ‘seemed to have any idea of what the composer wanted!’ Even so, Newman also saw that the Concerto was ‘the realisation in tone of a fine spirit’s lifelong brooding upon the loveliness of the earth’. Elgar himself seemed to concur, describing it as ‘a man’s attitude to life’, adding that he regarded it as ‘a real large work, and, I think, good and alive’.

The concerto is remarkable for the weight and emphasis it places on the solo instrument, Elgar scoring the orchestral accompaniment with an almost frugal economy (certainly, compared to the Violin Concerto) that cryptically alludes to states of mind and feeling that can only be guessed at.

Its character is immediately established with a virile questing gesture on the cello in troubling triple- and quadruple-stopped chords that

is answered by the soft balm of an elegiac, siren-like theme on violas supported by soft unison string voices. The cello takes up the melody again, lifting it into yearning relief against the murmur of clarinet and horn before rising to a brief but tumultuous orchestral climax that falls suddenly away to leave the cello alone once more in a lyrical but brittle descent.

A clarinet introduces the second, closely-related subject in a dotted, 12/8 rhythm repeated by the cello. Expressive use is made of an effusive lyricism that teeters and trembles on the edge of a decidedly un-English sensuousness that, in turn, provokes the orchestra into its own brief moment of ecstasy. The movement steps down in measured pizzicato footfalls before flowing without pause into the second movement. Hesitant, solo semiquavers preface an upward rush of strings as cello and orchestra briefly connect before the cello sets off, with scherzo-like vitality, on a scurrying, quicksilver monologue. All too quickly, it loses velocity to disintegrate into an abrupt but unresolved conclusion.

The third movement *Adagio* carries itself with a dream-like quality. It communicates with the eloquent simplicity of a single tune shared between cello and orchestra, both gallantly refusing the temptation towards sentimentality.

A two-bar figure boldly launches the finale with an echo of the concerto's opening flourish and a resigned return to E minor. A transitional restatement of the principal theme on cello leads, via a brief cadenza, into an impassioned exchange with the orchestra that swells and surges with molten energy. It subsides again into a darkly rhapsodic passage on cello, with the intertwining of chromatically rich harmonies and lighter orchestral textures inking in the concerto's unsettling subterranean mood.

A hushed interval, bittersweet and brooding, evaporating as each note is gently wrung out of it, is abruptly interrupted by the cello repeating the opening recitative of the first movement before being borne aloft by a final rhapsodic orchestral flourish in a spirited rush towards an emphatic but defiantly muscular finish.

Michael Quinn © RTÉ

Symphony in D minor

- i. *Lento - Allegro non troppo*
- ii. *Allegretto*
- iii. *Allegro non troppo*

Though born in Liege, Belgium, César Franck spent most of his life in Paris. He entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1837, later becoming an organist and much-loved teacher. Among his students were d'Indy, Chausson and many other leading French composers. In the midst of this activity, Franck somehow managed to make time for composition. Today, he is best remembered for a handful of instrumental works from the last decade or so of his life, a String Quartet (1889), Piano Quintet (1879), the Violin Sonata (1886), *Symphonic Variations for Piano and Orchestra* (1885) and the Symphony in D minor, completed in 1888.

Many of these late works are cyclic in form, the opening motif providing the basis for much of the development and frequently recurring in subsequent movements. This approach to thematic transformation shows the influence of Liszt and Wagner, though the *idée fixe* of Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique* provides a prominent French precedent. The Symphony in D minor is in three movements. While not unprecedented, symphonies with more or fewer than the conventional four movements were rare in the nineteenth-century repertoire. Franck viewed his unorthodox approach to cyclical form as his contribution to the renewal and development of the classical ideal in a contemporary context.

Franck's orchestration has sometimes been the subject of criticism. It often progresses in blocks of sound for extended periods, an influence perhaps from his organ playing. There are few attempts at mixing orchestral colours in the manner of Berlioz, not to mention Ravel or Dutilleux. There are, nonetheless, many felicities of orchestration, especially in the delicate use of woodwinds; the cor anglais solo in the second movement being an

outstanding example. The Symphony in D minor is also characterised by frequent changes of mood, the music regularly shifting from the impulsive to the reflective and back again, often within a short time span.

Though there are many changes of tempo and character in the first movement, unity is achieved through the use of the opening germ-like motif, first heard on violas, cellos and double basses, with an answering phrase in the first violins. The alternating slow and fast sections at the beginning are based on this motif and treated to extensive elaboration before a new theme in F major is heard in the full orchestra: 'loudly and sustained' being the composer's instruction. Like several of Franck's melodies, this theme undulates around a single note, in this case A. The development section which follows is detailed and rigorously worked out, featuring all the main musical ideas and ranging from full-bodied vigour to reflective contemplation. The return of the opening theme on full orchestra announces the arrival of the recapitulation and the movement moves towards its triumphant conclusion.

The magical *Allegretto* second movement combines the roles of slow movement and scherzo in an ingenious fashion. Referring to this duality, Franck commented that he wished 'to construct them in such a way that each beat of the Andante would equal one bar of the Scherzo, so that after the complete development of the two ideas, one could be superimposed on the other'. The movement opens with sixteen bars of *pizzicato* strings doubled by the harp, creating a mood of calm expectation before the entry of the famous cor anglais theme with its feeling of wistful melancholy. Once again the melody revolves around a single note, in this case F.

The continuation of the theme is entrusted to the clarinet, horn and flute. The light, airy scherzo is introduced by the violins, initially as an accompaniment to fragments of the main melody, but soon takes on an independent identity of its own. Before the end of the movement the main theme and scherzo idea are superimposed, giving the effect of two simultaneous tempi.

Franck wrote that the finale takes up all the themes again as in Beethoven's Ninth. He is at pains, however, to point out that the themes are not merely quoted, but fully integrated into the developing fabric of the music.

The movement opens dramatically with a new swinging theme in the cellos and bassoons, which is soon taken up by the full orchestra. A more muted chorale-like subject beginning in the brass provides contrast. The development of these themes is interwoven with material from the other two movements, including the second main theme of the first movement and the cor anglais melody from the second. The reintroduction of these themes provides a fine example of the principle of cyclic form, a common characteristic of much nineteenth-century music. The coda recalls the opening theme of the first movement, before the finale's main theme brings the symphony to an exultant and exuberant conclusion.

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