



LONDON CELLO SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Merk, of Course

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• *Nancy Green*

When Felix Mendelssohn and his billiards buddy, renowned Viennese cello virtuoso Josef Merk, decided to collaborate on a set of bravura variations for cello and piano, little did they know that nearly two centuries later pianist R. Larry Todd (generally considered to be the world's foremost Mendelssohn scholar) and I would hatch our mad plan to resurrect this work (for which the cello part was lost) whilst sitting at a café suitably called the “Mad Hatter” on the campus of Duke University. While Mendelssohn's supposed concerto for cello (presumably drafted or written for the Italian virtuoso Alfredo Piatti) disappeared and was probably lost forever, we decided that we would try to help this set of variations come to life again and possibly avoid the same cruel fate of permanent oblivion.



Mendelssohn - Watercolour of Lucerne,
Switzerland, (July 1847) , Art Resource, New York

All that is left today of the Mendelssohn/Merk Variations in A Major is a piano part, but not in the composer's own hand. These variations were a virtual mystery until a manuscript copy of the piano part surfaced recently in the Berlin *Deutsche Staatsbibliothek*. The authenticity of the work as an original composition is supported by Mendelssohn's letter of 13th August 1830 in which he speaks of his collaboration with Merk on a set of “brilliant variations,” finished, according to his diary, two weeks later, on 13th September. We cellists are all very familiar with Chopin's *Introduction*

and *Polonaise brillante*, opus 3, written in the same vein, a bravura showpiece intended for aristocratic salons; one wonders how much Mendelssohn may have been influenced by hearing the work of a composer Mendelssohn fondly nicknamed “Chopinetto.” As it happened, Chopin had dedicated the piece to Josef Merk just prior to Merk's collaboration with Mendelssohn on the A major set of variations.

The Mendelssohn/Merk Variations are written in the style of 19th century salon music typical of the era—light and frothy like champagne, not particularly striving for depth or cosmic import. They are (except for a stormy passage in F-sharp minor in the last variation) amusing and light-hearted, but with considerable challenges for both instruments. The piece is fairly substantial in length, (thirteen minutes long), and consists of a theme and four variations with an extended finale, which begins after a short transition and with a theme that, although not strictly a Polonaise, is somewhat reminiscent of the Polonaise of Chopin's opus 3.

The friendship between Felix Mendelssohn and Josef Merk apparently began when Mendelssohn stopped for six weeks in Vienna on his way to Italy. Merk was the leading cellist in Vienna at the time, and the two developed a rapport. Larry Todd has written in the liner notes for our recording: “When Mendelssohn arrived in Vienna, he found Merk performing a poignant Adagio while puffing on a cigar, all the while endeavoring to keep the cigar lit. Merk had begun his musical studies as a violinist, but after a dog bite left him unable to raise his left arm, he took up the cello. According to Mendelssohn, Merk could dispense variations so that the windowpanes clattered and applauded.” He must have been quite an impressive player.



Larry Todd

In the days following our first meeting, Larry sketched out a first draft of a possible cello part to fit with the existing piano score. His past experience in editing and completing several scores (including Mendelssohn’s third piano concerto, in E minor, for Bärenreiter) and his understanding of Mendelssohn’s musical mind and genius (he is the author of what is considered the definitive biography of Mendelssohn, *Mendelssohn, A Life in Music*), made him the ideal person for the task. I was amazed when, just a few days after our fateful meeting at the Mad Hatter café, he already presented me with a first draft of ideas. Over the next weeks we worked together, experimenting and revising details of the cello writing to see if it had the potential to bloom into something convincing.

This unlikely resurrection unfolded over a couple of months, an incredibly rewarding process that required us both to imagine what the actual Merk cello part may have been, as if it were still hanging in the ether, waiting to be plucked by whoever was willing (or foolish enough) to give it a try. In many of the later variations there are several strong clues about the cello part, especially in cases where melodic material appears first in the piano, followed by material obviously meant to accompany the cello, presumably when the piano handed the melody over to the cello. But finding the theme for this set of variations was problematic, because the piano part for the theme offered only a few simple chords, and no hints about what kind of theme Mendelssohn and Merk had devised for the cellist.

Larry was the mastermind of the cello part; my contribution was to tweak his ideas to make them as cellistic as possible, placing them in registers comfortable for the player, but

also blending optimally with the piano register. Occasionally I offered something a little different, which we would give the test of time, continually polishing the ideas to create something that felt organic and convincing. Sometimes we went out on a limb only to return back to the original idea.



Nancy Green

We envisioned a work that could be enjoyed by as many cellists as possible, and perhaps even enter the standard repertoire for the instrument, much like Chopin’s *Introduction and Polonaise brillante*. But if the writing became too unwieldy for the cellist, we would risk its rejection as an enjoyable piece for a great number of players.

Trying to enter into Josef Merk’s mind and musical imagination became somewhat more real after researching his études and other compositions. Merk’s études use certain bowing patterns, trills and turns that gave an indication of what his strengths were as a cellist as well as his likely preferences in writing for the instrument.

Studying Merk’s compositions (as well being familiar with 19th-century cello writing in general) helped in the task of choosing bowings and articulations. There were several passages where I tried every imaginable combination of slurs and separate notes, while Larry patiently repeated passages again and again. When first listening to our “finished” version, it might be hard for players and listeners to imagine how it felt for us, trying to make our way forward in the dark. I still don’t know how Larry came up with many of his ideas, and if you hear the piano part alone there are several extended passages where the mind still flounders trying to imagine what originally existed for the cello.

At the time we recorded the Mendelssohn/Merk variations, (as a bonus CD to our original JRI Recordings disc of the complete cello works of Felix and his sister Fanny), it seemed to be my personal theme of the day to be working on projects that somehow felt like being lost in the dark and groping for something invisible. I had just finished a disc entitled “Jaguar Songs – 21st Century Cello” for the British label “Cello Classics” which required a lot of multi-tracking, a technique in which I was completely inexperienced. The multiple cello works on the disc had never been recorded (compositions by Venezuelan composer Paul Desenne) so, while working with the click track, layering on the different voices for trios and quartets of celli, I literally discovered the compositions as I recorded them. As the pieces emerged, I would often go back and re-record them with a better

understanding of the composition. I have the image of someone wandering around with a blindfold on, looking for the way forward.

Another project with its share of uncertainty involved two concertos I was recording for a company called Music Minus One: the Saint-Saëns opus 33 in A minor and Lalo Concerto in D minor. Unlike the Mendelssohn/Merk project, where the cello part had to be created, I had fully completed scores with which to work. However, my task was to record the cello solo part separately, to be put together later with an orchestra of sampled sounds (created by Stephen Ware, who resides in England). He uses actual sounds from real instruments and players and creates the entire orchestral part from scratch. I recorded the cello solo parts with great equipment in my own home and with an invisible orchestra that existed only in my head. I agreed to the project only after being assured that the orchestra would be made to follow whatever I did and not the other way around. The performances are uncanny because it's really hard to imagine that the orchestra and I couldn't hear each other and were made to mesh later. To create the tracks for the so-called "minus versions" they simply removed the solo cello line,

and Stephen and I tweaked the orchestra so that the rubati were useful as a tool for other players.

Working on the Mendelssohn/Merk Variations with Larry Todd was a wonderful challenge. When I first listened to the piece as a whole in a practice recording, I actually couldn't help laughing as I reflected on how half of a composition had gradually shaped and transformed itself into a whole. Maybe it takes having experienced the project from the very beginning with no cello part, through all the stages, to be as rewarded as I was by the final product. Contributing to that, the nature of the piece up until the extended finale is extremely light-hearted and somehow befits the image of Felix and Josef playing billiards while Josef puffs on his cigar! This is not deep music, but has its place as pure virtuosic fun, and as a memory of nineteenth-century musical culture.

The CD recording, which includes the complete works for cello and piano by both Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn as well as the Mendelssohn/Merk Variations, is available from JRI Recording (jrirecordings.com) – there's a 10% discount for LCS members with the code LCS01.