

The composer, bearing the noble “von” in his name, who near the end of the 19th century crystallized his musical energy, inspiration and youthful enthusiasm in the form of a cello sonata, is Gerard von Brucken Fock. In 2012, while re- searching for a project exploring and intending to reveal the extraordinary works of this talented man, I discovered an interesting and unpublished ‘sonate voor piano en violoncel’ from 1884 in the

*Nederlands Muziek Instituut* in The Hague. On August 23, 2013 (one hundred and twenty-eight years after a private performance in Paris) Larissa Groeneveld and Frank van de Laar gave the world première of this work in Zutphen. Born in 1859 into a prominent family in *Ter Hooge*, near Middelburg, Von Brucken Fock was one hundred percent Dutch but with German-Frisian roots. He began to work on his Cello Sonata in Berlin while studying composition with Woldemar Bargiel, a stepbrother of Clara Schumann, and Friedrich Kiel at the *Musikhochschule*. After abandoning his studies, back home in Middelburg, he finished the work at the age of twenty-four. Half a year later he performed the work for the *Nederlandse Vereniging* in Paris together with Ermerins, a student of David Popper. Disappointed with the lack of attention and press coverage for his work he returned to Zeeland. In 1885 he married Marie Pompe van Meerdervoort despite his artistic anti-bourgeois stance against marriage. While his decision to write a sonata for cello was likely influenced by his cellist brother Emile and the cello sonatas of his mentor Friedrich Kiel, it was soon followed by two viola sonatas, written for his own second instrument. This new work was called “a jewel” by a reviewer following a performance in Utrecht (Tivoli) in 1886. Until 1892 Von Brucken Fock composed predominantly chamber music as well as works for piano and several compositions for violin and

piano. He performed the latter with the violinist Carl Flesch who greatly appreciated these compositions.

In 1888 Von Brucken Fock turned his interest to the supernatural. He was initially attracted by spirituality, and later by faith. He had the desire to be a prominent composer but was hampered by his own insecurity and shyness. From 1888 to 1891 Von Brucken Fock was a music critic for *De Amsterdammer*. His inimitable reviews described Amsterdam’s music life in the early years of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. His attacks on Richard Wagner were notorious. The ironic tone of his writing was that of a temperamental artist thirsting for beauty who was unable to find his way in life. Following a failed attempt to earn a living as a piano teacher in Leipzig (1891) and a short-lived phase as a farmhand in Kruiningen where he nearly perished from a cut on his finger from a scythe, Von Brucken Fock and his wife departed for Paris. To her astonishment, he then joined the Salvation Army where he packed army helmets and was given the nickname ‘La Maréchale’ by his leader, a daughter of William Booth, and was called on to assist on conversion missions throughout France. This resulted in a marital crisis, one of many to come. Dejected, the couple returned to the Netherlands where Willem Mengelberg had just joined the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. It wasn’t until 1901 that Von Brucken

Fock received the attention he deserved. His friend Röntgen promoted his work by performing some of his piano music at one of his own famous Messchaert-Röntgen evenings. In 1903 Röntgen introduced the *24 Preludes* opus 15 to Edvard Grieg who later wrote: “I find the preludes of Von Brucken Fock very promising. Nothing in the pieces is without meaning. He must have a future there.” The insecure and idealistic artist experienced periods of great inner struggle and sought refuge in an obsessive and rigid form of Christianity.

Von Brucken Fock achieved his greatest results when his inner urges were free to guide him. It is for this reason that his works for solo piano, his chamber music and songs are probably his most successful. His musical qualities, in these works, find their most complete expression. From around 1930 Von Brucken Fock seemingly became aware of this phenomenon and returned to his earlier work, generally characterized as more vital and pure. In 1931 he revised his 1884 Cello Sonata, the

original version of which was never made public. From passages in the composers' own *Levensherinneringen* (1934) we can conclude that revisions took place primarily to some of the voice leadings and to enrich certain harmonies all resulting from years of compositional experiences and various other influences (Richard Strauss). The first movement of the Cello Sonata is composed in a full-bodied Brahmsian style, containing

a magisterial development and ending passage. In other movements there are clearly audible influences from Beethoven. The work is generally characterized by its clear structure, prominent musical discoveries and the contrasts between noblesse and divertissement. The composer did not shun the high register and positions of the cello. The Cello Sonata by Von Brucke Fock is certainly one of the best written for cello and piano in the 19th century in the Netherlands.

Von Brucke Fock also composed several symphonies, orchestral songs (performed by Mengelberg), oratorios (e.g. *De Wederkomst van Christus*) and a *Requiem*. Between 1924 and 1931 he composed over one hundred and fifty preludes, all intended for personal use and not for publication. The world-famous singer Jo Vincent made her debut in the Concertgebouw in 1925 performing songs by Von Brucke Fock. His last great achievement came in 1934 with the premiere of his monumental *Requiem*, a concert he missed due to illness. Von Brucke Fock, who was also a gifted painter, was greatly disappointed about his lack of recognition at the end of his life. In 1952 the composer Hendrik Andriessen concluded: "The Netherlands has forgotten an important man: Gerard von Brucke Fock. Is it not a tragedy that history sometimes casts a shadow on such beauty?"

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