



Cello

The Brothers Duport by David Carter

I freely admit to being an etude-lover. Just ask my students! I'm happy to hear almost any manner of etude — from Kummer and Dotzauer to Popper, Piatti and Grutzmacher. (There are some, by for instance Merk and Buchler, that seem to have no musical merit whatsoever, and so should be avoided!) Within the repertory of cello study material, the work of the brothers Jean-Pierre (1741-1818) and Jean-Louis (1749-1819) Duport is certainly unique due to its late Classical style and wide range of difficulty. One of the pleasant surprises of arriving at my first teaching job was to discover these etudes, used by my predecessor. I was delighted to explore them, and a little upset with myself that I hadn't used them before! These etudes range from quite approachable to extremely taxing, as much so as the Popper *High School* written just over 100 years later. The *21 Etudes*, published under the name of Jean-Louis Duport but also containing pieces by his older brother Jean-Pierre and by J.P.'s teacher Martin Berteau (1700?-1756), were originally part of a method entitled *Essay on Fingering the Violoncello and on the Conduct of the Bow*, published in 1806. The etudes originally were published with a second cello part, which is unfortunately not available in modern editions.

Mary Cyr, in her article on Duport in the 1980 Groves Dictionary, mentions a cellist named Duport who may have been Jean-Pierre and Jean-Louis' father. Earlier sources by Wasielewski and van der Straeten (see below) mention that the brothers' father was a dance-master; Wasielewski adding that this dance master passed the famous Stradivarius cello that would eventually bear his name on to Jean-Louis. Cyr then goes on to describe the highly successful debuts both the sons made at the Concerts Spirituel in Paris. Jean-Pierre then made his way to Potsdam, on the invitation of Frederick the Great, to play chamber music and teach the Crown Prince Frederick-William II, who would soon be known as the "cellist King." He also had the great honor of premiering with Beethoven the latter's *Op. 5 Sonatas* in Potsdam. Jean-Pierre's playing was described in the *Mercure de France*, April 1762:

M. Duport has produced fresh wonders every day on his violoncello, and has merited renewed admiration. Under his hand the instrument does not appear the same, it speaks, expresses, renders all and with even more of the charm that was thought to be the exclusive property of the violin. [van der Straeten]

Jean-Louis, a pupil of his older brother, was destined to become even more illustrious. He pursued a solo career in Paris, then came to Potsdam to join his brother at the onset of the French Revolution. While Jean-Pierre remained in Germany for the rest of his life, Jean-Louis returned to Paris in

1806, resuming the solo career and teaching many successful students. It was Jean-Louis whom Napoleon heard play, afterwards asking to try the Strad cello and inflicting damage with his spurs. Jean-Louis' playing is described in the *Mercure de France*, 1768:

M. Duport, the younger, a pupil of his brother, played a sonata, which the latter accompanied. His technique is brilliant and amazing, his tone is full and of great sweetness. Boldness and great certainty characterize his playing, and predict the greatest talent. [van der Straeten]

Upon playing for Voltaire, who apparently thought little of the cello, the philosopher commented:

Monsieur Duport, you will make me believe in miracles, when I see that you can turn an ox into a nightingale. [van der Straeten]



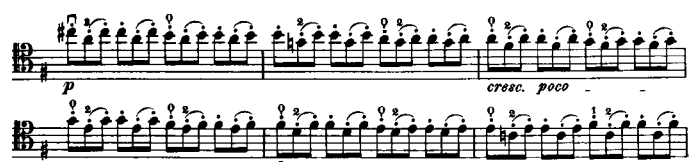
Jean-Louis Duport

Happily, Jean-Louis had great character to match his virtuosity. In the preface to his method, he pays homage to Jean-Pierre: "who was, is, and will always be my master." Finally a brief word about Berteau; he was first evidently a virtuoso gambist, then took up the cello, which he also played with renown. "No one can flatter himself at present on possessing more fire than M. Berteau." [van der Straeten]

Now to the music: though the etudes begin with the formidable looking double-stop study in F major, there are many that less taxing. Perhaps the most approachable etude in the collection is #19, entirely in half position.

#6, by Berteau, is an excellent early etude in thumb position, especially due to the repeating phrases on different octaves. It is easy on the ears. The most challenging part of this etude is the telescoping hand section:

Another approachable (though certainly not easy) etude is #7, which is a tour-de-force for the bow. It can be made even more interesting by using several alternate bowings:



On the moderately difficult side is #9, which introduces more right hand challenges.

The left hand issues include fully diminished chords (what



is this, Popper!?)
and several sections of double stops such as:



Also notable in #9 is its length (6 pages in the International edition!) and its quite lyrical final section.



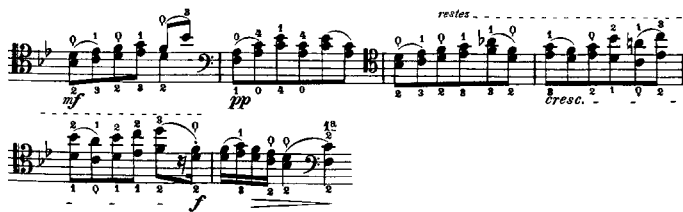
Extensive use of thirds and sixths characterize a group of



the later more challenging studies. An example in a charitable key from #14 illustrates the double stops.

Another harrowing use of thirds comes from #12:

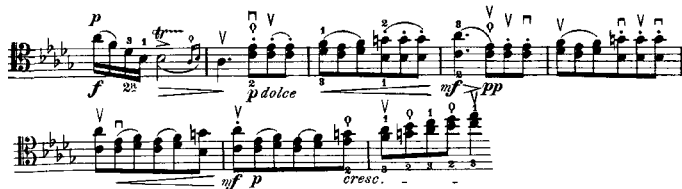
Other etudes explore the more difficult keys, such as #21:



These etudes are a vital part of the moderate-level cellist's



training. Their combination of left and right hand challenges is especially beneficial, and their musical style makes them,



well, almost fun!

Sources

Wasielewski, Wilhelm Joseph von: *The Violoncello and its History*.

Translated by Isobella S.E. Stigand. New York, Da Capo Press, 1968. Reprinted from first English edition, 1894.

Van der Straeten, Edmund S.J.; *History of the Violoncello, the Viol da Gamba, their Precursors and Collateral Instruments*. New York, AMS Press, 1976. Reprinted from the original 1915 edition.

David Carter is on the faculty of St. Olaf College in Northfield. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, Indiana University, and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. †