



Naxos Interview: Laurence Vittes speaks with Gabriel Schwabe

Gabriel Schwabe's new recording of the music for cello and orchestra by Camille Saint-Saëns with the Malmö Symphony Orchestra conducted by Marc Soustrot allows listeners to hear the whole range of the composer's enormous affection and expertise for the instrument. Complementing the iconically popular First Cello Concerto and the even more beloved The Swan from Carnival of the Animals, Schwabe and his rare Italian instrument also contribute Saint-Saëns' Bach-inspired Suite in D minor and several shorter pieces.

It is the cellist's second recording since becoming an exclusive Naxos artist; his first was a widely acclaimed recording with Nicholas Rimmer of Brahms' Two Cello Sonatas and the world premiere recordings of six Brahms Lieder transcribed for cello and piano by Schwabe and Rimmer.

Gabriel Schwabe was born to German-Spanish parents in 1988, and studied with Catalin Ilea in Berlin and with Frans Helmerson at the Kronberg Academy. He was a laureate at the Grand Prix Emanuel Feuermann and the Concours Rostropovich in Paris. In 2009 he won the Pierre Fournier Award in London.

Schwabe's debuts during the 2017/2018 season will include Beijing, Budapest, Göttingen and Munich; his chamber music appearances will include debuts in Berlin and San Diego. Since 2012 he has been artistic director of the Resonanzen chamber music series in Siegburg, Germany. He recently recorded Schumann's Cello Concerto with Lars Vogt conducting the Northern Sinfonia, and Schumann's music for cello and piano with Nicholas Rimmer.

Gabriel spoke to me earlier this year from Berlin.

LV What cello are you playing?

Gabriel Schwabe It's an old Italian made in Brescia around 1600; but it's so old and there is so little information about the Brescia school generally, we don't know its provenance exactly.

LV What do you like about it?

Gabriel Schwabe I like many things; I've had it for close to three years now and, like all instruments, I'm still getting to know it. It has a special character which sounds very old, with a bit of a nasal quality to it, and lots of core to the sound, which I need for my playing: it's strong, with a very lyrical upper A string.

LV What strings do you use?

Gabriel Schwabe I played on steel strings all my life until a year ago, when I switched to gut. It has been an amazing change; the increase in quality is unbelievable.

LV What's the difference between steel and gut?

Gabriel Schwabe Gut is harder to play, and you have issues with the strings going out of tune, but it's worth it. The playing itself also changes: you have to be much more exact where and how you place your right hand especially, but you get tremendous rewards.

LV Why do you have to be more exact with your right hand?

Gabriel Schwabe That's probably a question for a physicist, but when you play a note on a given position on the fingerboard, you have to be very exact in where you are in relation to the bridge. Gut is much more sensitive to the right pressure and speed of bow, and if you don't hit exactly where you want, the string will let you know. It took me quite a few weeks to get used to it.

LV How noticeable is the physical difference between gut and steel?

Gabriel Schwabe Definitely a lot more flexible, and a lot lighter; when you take the string out of the packaging, it feels like nothing, especially compared to the *steel cables* that we have. It gives the instrument more of a chance to breathe, and really develops its natural qualities, and rings the way it wants to.

LV Have you begun recording with gut strings?

Gabriel Schwabe The Schumann Concerto was the first using gut; the Saint-Saëns CD was still on steel.

LV The Schumann Concerto and the first Saint-Saëns Concerto make an interesting mental coupling; do they have anything in common?

Gabriel Schwabe Structurally, they both have the feel of a through-composed *Konzertstück*, basically in one movement. Musically, they are worlds apart. The Schumann especially is such an individual thing, how you perceive it, what you make of the music; it is a real journey. For a long time I did not understand what the Schumann Concerto was about; I'm not sure I know now, but I'm more confident.

LV What was working with Lars Vogt like?

Gabriel Schwabe It was amazing to work with Lars. He was conducting the Schumann Concerto for the first time. We did lots of work on details, and also with the orchestra. We did the concert first, which was great, and in a concert you get a whole different experience in a recording. We recorded just after that.

LV How groundbreaking was the Schumann?

Gabriel Schwabe Absolutely groundbreaking. To write such a Concerto for the cello, especially if you think about the repertoire at the time, really required thinking out of the box. And it has stayed this way; it has a very special place in the repertoire, through all these years.

LV How do you resolve the thorny questions of tempo in Schumann?

Gabriel Schwabe Tempos in general, in the Concerto and in the duo pieces, are a very special question with Schumann. The wonderful thing is that we have so many metronome markings from him; we tried to look at what he wrote, and see where it would lead us.

LV What did this lead to in the Concerto?

Gabriel Schwabe The first movement was surprisingly fast, as was the second; the third was fast and virtuosic - but not as much as you might think. We tried to adhere to Schumann's markings, to see how many of those tempos made sense to us. Then we made our version out of it; the tempos were always a very good starting point, especially in the first movement, which can fall apart. Following Schumann's markings made the music more fluid and much more coherent - exactly the feeling of the *Konzertstück* it was intended to be originally: one long movement with different sections. Exactly like the Saint-Saëns - formally that is.

LV How did the Naxos relationship come about?

Gabriel Schwabe My agent made the first contact, but then because they were looking for someone to become a house artist for the cello, they had heard about me and got in touch. We listened to what they had to say, and they had a wonderful offer, to be able to record all of the concerto repertoire with different orchestras, and also the chamber repertoire. And Naxos is such a great label, with such great distribution. I am very happy to be recording with them.

LV Who was the engineer on your Schumann concerto?

Gabriel Schwabe The Concerto was done by Stefan Schmidt, who records for Deutschlandfunk; he has known and worked with Lars for many years, and is doing other recordings with him and the Northern Sinfonia. He was familiar with the hall already, and so he and Lars were already a team. It was great that we could get him on board.

LV How big an orchestra did you use?

Gabriel Schwabe Not a huge orchestra. The Northern Sinfonia is not a chamber orchestra, but a small symphonic orchestra, which is nice: If you use too many strings, it tends to get thick quickly; what you need is an orchestra that is transparent in sound, and flexible. Also, in terms of timing and reacting to the soloist, it makes lots of things easier.

LV Did the smaller string section help with the projection?

Gabriel Schwabe It did. Besides that very pragmatic way of experiencing it, which is important, I really liked the sound you get from this smaller group - and besides, that's what Schumann would have had in his day. He did not have huge symphonic orchestras to play his music.

LV And Baroque concertos?

Gabriel Schwabe Baroque concertos? It is a different aesthetic, which makes it interesting. Although I don't have any concrete plans yet, I would love to do that repertoire, especially since my mother trained as a harpsichordist. In fact, as a child, I playing continuo, so I knew the sound of the harpsichord, and even played on a viola da gamba which we had in the house for a while to get to know that important instrument a little bit and know what its sound was like and how to produce it.

LV After the Schumann?

Gabriel Schwabe The Brahms Double Concerto recorded in Berlin, but I'm not sure if I can divulge any other details yet - stay tuned!

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