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SOLO MUSIC FOR THE DOUBLE BASS

I am frequently asked if the double bass is a solo instrument; whether any music has been written for it and, if so, what it ought to sound like. Therefore it might be useful to summarise my findings, since I have been building a library of music for the double bass over the last fifteen years.

There are many transcriptions of popular cello pieces for the bass, but these must be dismissed if they do not add anything to the original. The only exceptions are some of the sonatas by Vivaldi, Marcello and others: the over-rich, more dignified melancholy of the double bass can blend with a harpsichord accompaniment in a pleasant, antique manner. Only when the bass tries to imitate the brightness and limpid quality of the cello tone, or the instrument's smoothness in connecting wide intervals, does it fail. Or if it succeeds it simply makes one ask: so what?

G.B. Cimador (1761-1805) wrote a concerto for bass. Karl Ditter von Dittersdorf (1739-1799) wrote two concertos and a sinfonia concertante for bass and solo viola. Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1848) wrote several concertos and was the first bass-player to achieve an international reputation. Any of this music is as agreeable to listen to as some of Haydn's lesser works. It is completely devoid of depth - as is typical of many forgotten 18th century drawing-room pieces designed as elegant background music.

The greatest bass virtuoso in the 19th century was Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889). His most important works for the instrument are the two concertos, the Concerto di bravura, a double concerto for violin and bass, the Carnival of Venice and the Sonambula variations. He also wrote an Elegy, a Reverie and a Tarantella - all with piano.

Bottesini's music requires great accuracy in the playing of harmonics - usually at high speed. The themes, developments, modulations and key rotations have to fit in with the natural harmonics available and are subservient to this display of virtuosity. His style may be termed "inferior Verdi" - or perhaps it might be as though Bellini or Donizetti had written concertos for the double bass! The best works are the Tarantella, the Carnival of Venice and the double concerto which are all unashamed display pieces in which Bottesini did not take himself seriously as a composer. However, the sonic effect of so many harmonics is ghostly and curious and therefore worthy of study:

Ex. 1: Bottesini: Second Concerto, first movement

Bass (at real pitch)

Piano

p *cresc* *etc*

Better known as a conductor, Serge Koussevitsky (1874-1951) started life as a double bass soloist and wrote four short pieces for the instrument as well as a concerto. In every detail - themes, harmonies, even orchestration - the concerto is modelled on Tchaikovsky (First Piano Concerto!). Nevertheless, it remains the only truly romantic work for the bass, neither apologetic (like Dragonetti) nor absurdly over-inflated and acrobatic (like Bottesini).

To sum up so far: solo bass music had largely been written by the virtuosi themselves and it suffered from lack of original style. The forms are academic in the worst sense and the styles frankly imitative of music by contemporary composers. The music is only occasionally successful when the musical ingredients and the performer's genius coincide.

The pity is that none of the virtuosi established a school of playing and a tradition of competent players. Dragonetti played in the King's Theatre, London for many years and took refuge in multiple eccentricities. Bottesini travelled to most countries of the world, writing operas and conducting with variable success. Koussevitsky became conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Their music may be termed good "bad music" and this is an important definition since the next era produced chiefly bad "good music".

The double bass was the late developer of the string family and only came into its own in the orchestra at the beginning of the 18th century. Although its structure became more or less standard, players tuned the three or four strings according to individual taste or whim and the tuning E-A-D-G was not laid down until 1832. (For this we have to thank Cherubini, director of the Paris Conservatoire at the time.) As Dragonetti and Bottesini played their solos on three-string basses and varied their tuning from time to time it would be almost impossible to play their music authentically. Modern editions are necessarily modified.

In Czechoslovakia, Germany and Austria today, a tradition has developed in which the bow is held in the palm of the hand - as when playing the viola da gamba. In France, Italy and England a differently-designed bow - identical to the cello bow only larger - is used. I prefer this because I can make a better sforzando attack, but I admit I cannot achieve the cantilena of the German school.

Edouard Nanny (1872-1949) became professor of double bass at the Paris Conservatoire in 1920 and inspired the publication of more music for the instrument than anyone else. His Tutor (Méthodes), in two parts, is by far the most skilful, comprehensive and carefully-graded that I have ever seen. His three books of studies and his concerto and four other pieces have greater technical than musical interest and his transcriptions of popular pieces by some twenty-one famous composers suggest that his conception of music for the bass was rather tied to the expressive and virtuosic ideal of the cello.

But he inspired some twenty-five French composers to write pieces for solo bass with piano. Leaning heavily on the impressionist style then current, these pieces are in the bad "good music" category - usually very stylish and attractively written but lacking in musical ideas, the substance or content needed to give them the magic which is an indefinable ingredient of all great music. I would single out the following as worthy of study and repeated public performance: Dulaurens: Morceau de Concert; Rivier: Pièce en Ré; Pierre-petit: Thème et Variations; Chaynes: Lied, Scherzando et Final; Bozza: Pièce sur le nom d'Edouard Nanny; Lemaire: Trois Danses.

Still in line with the expressive approach, the American bass-player Gary Karr is the most outstanding of our time. He has made seven records of solos and inspired concertos from Schüller, Wilder and Henze. Since the salient features of Karr's playing are his superb tone quality and tasteful phrasing, it is logical that Henze, whose style is basically conservative, should write a concerto for him.

The first movement of Henze's concerto is lyrical and serene (Ex. 2) and is followed by a brilliant scherzo (Ex. 3).

Ex. 2: Henze: Double Bass Concerto, first movement

Solo bass

Ex. 3: Henze: Double Bass Concerto, second movement

Vivace

Solo bass

The long third movement is a chaconne, as might seem appropriate for the double bass, but the theme consists mostly of wandering chromatic thirds and as the music unfolds this leads to some very thick textures, in spite of many fine details and some alluring sounds. The scoring, using extra woodwind, has great freshness and beguiling subtlety, but in spite of Henze's great skill and his evocative writing, the work cannot be claimed a success. The solo part is much in need of editing, a task which has been rejected by Lajos Montag, professor of double bass at the Academy of Music in Budapest.



Montag's own technique is in the best string tradition of Eastern Europe and his career as a soloist and teacher has inspired many works from composers of the Bartok-Kodaly school. His own excellent Micro-Concerto (which he premiered in Greiz, East Germany, last year) illustrates the influence of a combined gypsy and folk background, refined and concentrated in a brilliant and extrovert manner. It is improvisatory in style, with sudden changes of tempo and some wild accelerandos. Devices such as multiple glissandi, tremolos on high notes, and also declamatory statements, are put to good effect in this most successful work.




The 20th century has seen many fine jazz bass players, such as Scott Le Faro, Charlie Mingus and Francois Rabath, whose pizzicato techniques, combining smoothness with velocity, and original structures of the bass-line have revealed new possibilities. Apart from the ephemeral content of much jazz anyway, its heavy reliance on improvisation tends to produce music that can only be heard once, except when played by unusually creative artists. Nonetheless, the jazz trumpet has improved standards in orchestral trumpet playing and a similar cross fertilisation is at work for the double bass.

Taking up these new developments and fusing them into a modern performing style has been the work of Bertram Turetzky, a professor at the University of California, San Diego. Effects such as flutter pizzicato, wood knock, col legno and sul ponticello are employed as an essential part of the musical fabric, not merely for display. Breaking away from the usual formula of recitals with piano, Turetzky plays with an avant-garde flautist or alone, with pre-recorded tapes of himself, often multi-tracked, or tapes of electronic sounds.

To illustrate his musical innovations, let us first consider Dialogue for Solo Bass by Elliott Schwartz, written for Turetzky in 1966. I quote from some of the composer's very precise instructions:

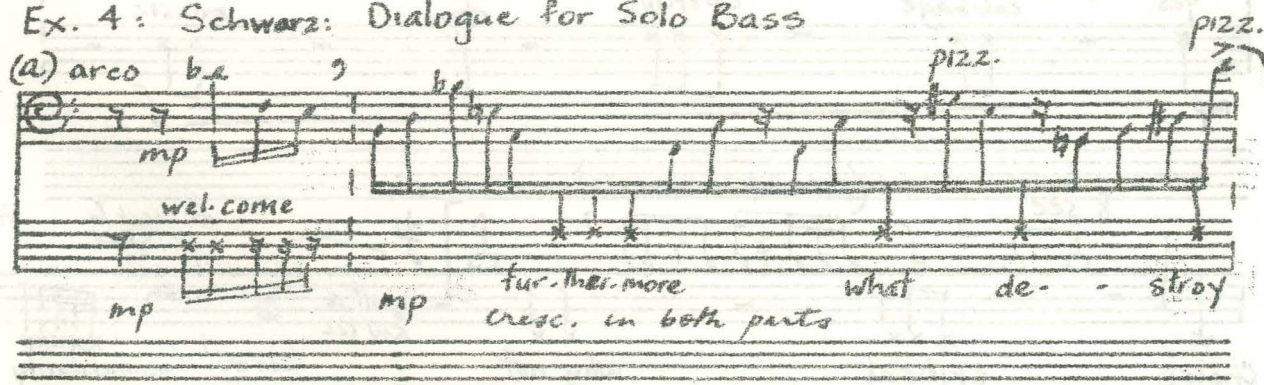
"Although this is a "solo" unaccompanied work, you are to conceive of it as a DUET, one part to be played upon your instrument, the other part to be performed in a variety of ways.

"AUXILIARY SOUNDS. Specific rhythms are indicated by  etc. These sounds are of your own choosing, made on your own instrument (slapping, tapping etc.), vocally (whistling, clicking etc.) or by any other means (stamping feet, snapping fingers, rapping bow on music stand etc. etc.). No more than two successive  should be alike.

"INAUDIBLE VISUAL ACTIONS. Rhythms are indicated by  etc., and the actions should convey precisely articulated rhythms. The actions are of your own choosing, but should be abrupt (quick motion), "mechanical" and robot-like: turning your head from side to side or up/down, extending an arm or leg, suddenly sitting or standing etc. etc. Perform the action quickly and then "freeze" it for the duration of the  . No successive  should be alike".

In order to perform this piece the player must add up the number of auxiliary sounds (44) and visual actions (18) and make a list of sounds of indeterminate pitch that he can make, together with drawings of various poses to describe his chosen visual actions. Then he must incorporate these into the piece, making sure that they fit naturally together and also that they make an effective "counterpoint" with the "straight" played part. The piece is a test of the player's inventive ingenuity: the bolder one plays the theatrical part, the greater the effect of the work. I give part of my own realisation below as an example of how this may be achieved:

Ex. 4: Schwarz: Dialogue for Solo Bass



(a) arco *mp* *b.e.* *pizz.* *pizz.*

wel. come

mp *fur.ther. more* *what de- - stroy*

cresc. in both parts

5 sec. GRAD. move to sul point at least 6 secs. mp < ff > pp etc.

at least 6 secs. f mp pp

sea - - - - + rest

N.B. At times passages in one part are to be unsynchronised with passages in the other part. The free passages are bracketed. Points of attack and lengths of silence are chosen freely within the duration of the brackets.

(b) pizz. 15 secs. arco

yes cabbage carefully now music

mp f fp f

8 sec (percussive sounds) at least 6 secs. 4 secs.

choice critical why not Leroy! momentarily etc.

Logs for two or more double basses by Paul Chihara was also written for Bertram Turetzky. It is the fifth in a series of "tone pictures" dealing with trees and it makes more musical demands than the piece by Schwartz. The piece consists merely of one phrase and two slightly modified variants of it, as follows:

Ex. 5: Chihara: Logs

These phrases are repeated continuously with slight deviations each time: alterations in emphasis, nuance, vibrato and micro-tonal adjustment. One or more sub-phrases, such as those in Ex.6, may be interjected or repeated in any order. The piece should "breathe", i.e. it should be in some natural physical rhythm. It is quiet and slow (dynamic range : pp to mp) and it lasts from eight to ten minutes.

Ex. 6: Chihara: Logs, sub-phrases

One critic has said that Logs "reveals the composer as a sensitive lyricist". But the point is, surely, that the performer is composing the counterpoint, length and structure of the piece. In addition to mastering his instrument and interpreting and projecting whatever he plays, the performer of this piece must have a working knowledge of contemporary compositional procedures since it could be realised in any style he chooses - including no style at all.

Lastly, Là ou ca passe, by the Rumanian composer Alexandre Hrisanide. This work consists of a drawing, divided into twenty sections, each one an abstract pattern of some sort. Each section is numbered and a key appended to the piece gives instructions as to what each pattern on the drawing shall represent in performance. For example: No. 1 asks for "indefinite atmospheric noises", No. 2 for "phrases a la Richard Strauss". No. 8 is "sing bird notes pianissimo" and No. 10 asks the player to "read from any book some words aloud". Thus the player is asked to provide a whole range of activities in his realisation: conventional and unconventional performance on his instrument, musical and extra-musical activities independent of it.

In this piece the composer does not even provide a clue as to what note the player should start on, or indeed whether the sound should be pitched or no. If the player can perform this work to the satisfaction of composer and public, then he must be a composer in his own right. If his realisation comes alive as effectively as the drawing surely does then we are back, with small differences, to the problem which faced Dragonetti - who had to compose his own music for the bass because virtually nothing had previously been written for it.

But more is at stake than just the devolution of the composer's role to the performer. Là ou ca passe can be played on any stringed instrument and in time all instrumentalists may have to face only verbal instructions or drawings. It seems contradictory, at a time when scholarship and insights into the mystery of creative composition are at such a peak, that an anarchist school, headed by John Cage, should exist. Yet evolution is a painful process, and if the arts are in a process of democratisation, i.e. a situation in which every person must be a responsible artist and accept the implications contained in the meaning of the word democracy, then this step is the biggest and most painful of all.

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