Virtuosi of the European Art Music Tradition and Their Influence on the Development of the Double Bass

by

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Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Music

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2011
Acknowledgments

Thank you to anyone, peer or professional, who has ever taught me anything about music. About anything at all, actually. Thank you to all of my teachers, and, more specifically, to all of my incredible music educators: Nancy Weiss, Lisa Dunaj, Diane Fish, Stephen Uh, Lisa Polito, David Soto, Michael Kerschner, David Lobenstein, Yonatan Malin, Jay Hoggard, Abraham Adzenyah, Jane Alden, Marco Beghelli, Mark Slobin, Sumarsam, Neely Bruce, Dan St. Clair, Anthony Braxton, and especially Angel Gil-Ordoñez, and Roy Wiseman for their endless attention, guidance, and support. Thank you Roy, for sharing your mastery and for your really unbelievable dedication and generosity. Thank you Angel for your invaluable support and guidance in this process. Thank you Sandy and Deb. Thank you to my parents, Madeline and John, for your unconditional love and for your endless support of my every endeavor. Also, for sharing my enthusiasm for and transporting an instrument that was bigger than I was, for years! Thank you to my sister, Grace. Thank you Sophie. Thank you to all of my friends, housemates, bandmates, standmates—my every relationship informs my being and I cherish you all.
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Introduction

Musical instrument jokes are always disparaging, seldom funny to a player of the instrument, but work because of the grain of truth in all of them. As a bassist, I’ve heard the classic countless times—it was recounted to me at dinner just the other night. As soon as the drums stop, everyone runs for their lives; “oh no! It’s the bass solo!” The bas[s]is for this humor—the poor status and perception of the double bass—is at the very core of this work. It seeks to establish the double bass’ condition of a battle for legitimacy; to explore the factors that contribute to this poor perception, in the nature of the history and its dynamic development; and to explore the agents of change therein.

No struggle presents itself in the endeavor to establish the condition of a double bass that fights to earn its legitimacy. It evidences itself in any introductory discourse of the instrument in a musical society. Wesleyan student Matt Sellier ’11 confirmed his attendance to my recital with the note that he couldn’t wait to “hear a senior recital as out of tune as his.” Fiona M. Palmer wrote of 19th century English audiences, “[they] had no reason to consider the double bass as anything more than a cumbersome source of the lowest notes in an orchestra.”1 In The Evolution of the Double Bass in the Orchestra, Yvonne Wingard Scheid refers to the double bass as “a buffoonish, lumbering instrument assigned only to simple bass lines…”2 and also as the “bulky ‘bull-fiddle’ of the symphony orchestra.”2 In the second paragraph of The

3 Scheid 26.
Historical Development of the Double Bass, Irving Hersch Cohen speaks to the “alleged shortcomings of the double bass.” In the first paragraph of A History of Double Bass Performance Practice: 1500-1900, Stephen Sas claims a set of lower standards for the double bass: “…a double bass part executed with accurate pitch and rhythm is often regarded as a triumph, rather than as a common occurrence.” This widespread disparagement has characterized reception of the double bass from the 17th century to present. However, the development of the double bass can also be characterized by an ever-increasing level of execution in performance, an increasing level of implementation of the instrument by composers, and increasing critical acclaim and respect as a solo instrument. The double bass has come a very long way; this is a study of how it got here. Scheid writes that “The contrabass continued to be neglected to a lack of attention and sense of importance, and this neglect only further fueled the ‘it’s only the double bass’ attitude. It is only as the twentieth century approached that the double bass began to be finally recognized as the versatile instrument that it is—when skillfully performed.” This author would confirm that it took skillful performance to earn recognition, but would argue that such recognition was realized at least a half-century earlier, as early as the solo career of Italian bassist and composer Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846).

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6 Scheid 19.
It is sometimes asserted in double bass scholarship, “technical demands on the double bassist made by recognized composers provided an impetus for players to improve their instrumental technique.” Any such assertion, however, is inevitably accompanied by an acknowledgment of the relationship between virtuosi and the advance in playing ability and increasing complexity of orchestral parts. This work challenges the notion of composers providing the impetus for individual improvement, instead proposing a model of individual improvement providing the inspiration and thus impetus for composers. The most notable agents of change in the history of the double bass and its performance practice were individuals. Virtuoso players, exemplified by the Italian bassists Domenico Dragonetti and Giovanni Bottesini, made the most tangible and influential contributions to the critical reception, respect for, and perception of the double bass; to the repertoire, in both the body of solo works and in orchestral part-writing practices, and to the organology of the instrument. They increased visibility and versatility of the instrument in the public view, directly impacted the repertoire through composition and direct effect on composers, and helped to shape the design and construction of both the instrument and the bow.

In this pursuit, this document will examine the historical development of the double bass. By evaluating the condition of the pre-19th century bass[es] and their performance practice, it will establish a context for the rapid development of the instrument and elevation of performance practice that followed. It will identify virtuosi as the most notable moments in bass history, from Johannes Matthias Sperger

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7 Cohen 2.
8 Cohen 2; Scheid 1.
in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century to Domenico Dragonetti and Giovanni Bottesini in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and Serge Koussevitzky, Gary Karr, and Bertram Turetzky in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. It will consider these virtuosi biographically, including the cultural contexts in which they worked as well as their outstanding careers. It will seek to establish a connection between their efforts and the development of the double bass.

This study constitutes a contribution to double bass scholarship because there is not much of it. Says Stephen Sas, “The double bass is the last instrument in the string family to receive critical attention.”\textsuperscript{9} A quick trip to the library confirms his statement. There exists only one comprehensive history of the instrument, Paul Brun’s \textit{Histoire des contrabasses a cordes}; and one comprehensive history of the double bass bow, Christopher Brown’s \textit{Discovering Bows for the Double Bass}. The dominant presence of dissertations as this study’s source material indicates the under-representation of the double bass in mainstream music scholarship. It is my hope that this work, in its attempt to credit virtuosi with their impact, clarify something of the development of double bass performance practice.

Implications of this research on modern day music include a continuation of the double bass’ advancement as a solo instrument, the garnering of further attention to the double bass and its timbral and rhythmic possibilities, and a continued encouragement to composers to consider the double bass as not only viable, but exciting and expressive material worthy of their treatments.

\textsuperscript{9} Sas 1
Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846): A Brief Biography

Domenico Dragonetti was an Italian virtuoso double bassist and composer. A successful and charismatic performer, Dragonetti was also a sharp businessman and a passionate collector of instruments, music, paintings, snuff-boxes, and dolls.\(^\text{10}\)

Domenico Dragonetti was born in Venice, Italy, on April 7 of 1763, to parents Pietro Dragonetti and Cattarina Calegari. He also had a sister, Marietta Dragonetti, who he would go on to support financially after leaving his hometown of Venice in 1794. Dragonetti’s early music education is credited to Michele Berini, a successful Venetian double bassist in various theaters and at San Marco. Dragonetti was rejected on his first application to San Marco—his earliest performance experiences were in the streets of Venice. On September 13, 1784, three years after his first attempt, he was accepted as the fifth of five basses at San Marco at the age of 24. He joined the “Arte dei suonatori,” a significant guild of Venetian musicians, and was the principal at San Marco only three months later. This success earned him offers abroad, which he was persuaded to refuse by a prize of 310 lire from the procurators. However, in the fall of 1794, the thirty-one year old Domenico Dragonetti decided to leave Venice.\(^\text{11}\) On September 16\(^{\text{th}}\), 1794, Dragonetti took a two-year leave of absence from San Marco and left Venice for London, England. He further extended that leave by three years, returning to Venice in 1799 only to finalize his resignation.


\(^{\text{11}}\) Ibid.
Though he would return to visit his hometown again in 1809, his 1794 departure marked the beginning of the rest of his London-based career.\footnote{Ibid.}

Fiona Palmer, author of the Grove Music Online dictionary entry for Domenico Dragonetti, calls his career in England “remarkable. Not only did he irrevocably challenge and alter the reception and expectations of his instrument but he also carved out for himself a unique position in music-making in Britain which lasted for more than half a century.”\footnote{Ibid.} Dragonetti’s years in London were an unadulterated success—his career as a soloist and as an orchestral and chamber bassist brought him both fame and fortune. Dragonetti made a lucrative enterprise out of orchestral performance, a then modest-paying job. In June 1846 his balance at Coutts & Co. stood at £1006 12s. 2d.\footnote{Ibid.}

Dragonetti spent his earliest years in London in the 1790s performing his own compositions with great success. One critic remarked that Dragonetti “by powers almost magical, invests an instrument, which seems to wage eternal war with melody, ‘rough as the storm, and as the thunder loud,’ with all the charms of soft harmonious sounds.”\footnote{Bath Chronicle, 14 Nov 1799, in Palmer, "Dragonetti, Domenico."} He traveled abroad from 1808 – 1814, returning to Venice and visiting Vienna. After making a name for himself as a virtuoso solo player, Dragonetti transitioned his career to mainly orchestral and chamber music contexts. The move to orchestral work was a calculated and lucrative one. Palmer writes that “His fees were exceptionally high for an instrumentalist: protracted haggling with the Philharmonic
Society led on the one hand to his absence from the London première of Beethoven's Symphony no.9 in 1825, and on the other to his status as the highest-paid orchestral player from 1831 to 1842.”¹⁶ Dragonetti’s diary reflects engagements at the King's Theatre, the Ancient Concerts, the Philharmonic Society and Drury Lane, various subscription series, benefit, public and private concerts, festivals, and also aristocratic homes.

And yet, as an alien living in London, Dragonetti was denied suffrage and could not own property, residing in a rented Westminster flat. Though never married, there is evidence that he had close female friends in Venice.¹⁷ Among important friends in England were his pupil the 3rd Duke of Leinster, Vincent Novello, John Barnett, Thomas Greatorex, Samuel Wesley, the Cowden Clarkes, Edward Holmes and Cipriani Potter. In Vienna and London, Dragonetti also cultivated friendships with Haydn, Cherubini, Spohr and especially Beethoven, who is said to have written the recitativo from the fourth movement of his 9th symphony with the intention that it be played by Dragonetti in the 1825 London Philharmonic Society premier.

Dragonetti died in London in May of 1846, at the age of 83.

¹⁶ Palmer.
¹⁷ Ibid.
**Giovanni Bottesini: A Brief Biography**

Giovanni Bottesini was born on December 22nd, 1821, in the city of Crema in northern Italy. He was born into a household that was immediately supportive of his musical development. His earliest experiences with music are credited to his father Pietro Bottesini, an active though amateur composer and clarinetist who taught the young Giovanni Bottesini a basic knowledge of theory.\(^{18}\) At the urging of his father, Giovanni Bottesini studied the violin with Carlo Cogliati, a distinguished musician in his hometown of Crema. Also in his early years in Crema, Bottesini played the Timpani with the Teatro Sociale and sang in various choirs. His father further encouraged his musical development when he applied on his son’s behalf to the Milan Conservatory in 1835. This was a decision that would prove monumental in Bottesini’s musical career—it is directly responsible for his study of the bass. The only two remaining scholarships in the Milan Conservatory were for bassoon and the double bass, of which Bottesini chose the latter on the basis of his prior experience with string instruments.\(^{19}\) In only a few weeks of study on the double bass, the young Giovanni Bottesini satisfied the Milan Conservatory governors and began study under Luigi Rossi on November 1st, 1835. At the Milan Conservatory, Bottesini studied harmony, counterpoint, and composition under the tutelage of P. Ray, Nicola Vaccai, and Francesco Basili.

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Completing the usual six year program of study in only four years, Bottesini left the Conservatory in 1839, at the age of 18, with a prize of 300 francs for solo playing. Bottesini applied this prize plus 600 francs borrowed from a relative towards the purchase of a 1716 Carlos Giuseppe Testore contrabass. Bottesini allegedly found this instrument, which he would then use for the entirety of his career, in utter disrepair buried backstage at a puppet theater.\(^{20}\) The following year saw his enormously successful concert debut at the Teatro Communale in Crema and the beginning of his first concert tour and eventual career as a solo double bassist. After a successful tour spanning from Italy to Vienna, he explored orchestral playing in several theaters in Italy. He settled down in the position of principal bass at the Teatro S. Benedetto in Venice. It was in Venice that Bottesini met Giuseppe Verdi, whose *I due Foscari* was being performed. They forged a life-long friendship, and it was at the urging of Verdi that Bottesini took his next tour as a traveling virtuoso.\(^{21}\)

Bottesini would go on to travel extensively for his entire life and career in the capacities of both soloist and orchestral bassist. He was well received in the courts of Queen Victoria, Czar Alexander of Russia, and the Emperor Napoleon III of France. In 1846 he took the position of principal double bass at the Teatro Tacon. In Havana Bottesini conducted the successful premiere of his first opera, *Cristoforo Colombo*.\(^{22}\) The resulting success brought him on extensive tours on both sides of the Atlantic, in New Orleans, London, New York, and all over Europe, visiting the United States for

\(^{20}\) Slatford, “Bottesini.”

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

the first time in 1847 and England in 1848. In his 1849 debut in London at Ella’s Musical Union, he played some solos and played the cello part in an Onslow quintet, with great success—one member of the audience famously dubbed him “the Paganini of the double bass.” The year after his London debut he went was appointed an honorary member of the Philharmonic Society of New York. He was commissioned to set up a conservatory in Mexico in 1853. He went to St. Petersburg in 1856, and to Paris to direct the Italian Opera in 1857. He held comparable appointments in Spain and Portugal, and founded a chamber music society in Florence in 1863.23

After establishing himself through his extensive and successful tours as a solo bassist, Bottesini shifted his focus to composing and conducting. From 1862 to 1865, he subscribed to the Società del Quartetto di Firenze, where his D major String Quartet was published and premiered at the Concorso Basevi in 1862. His opera Vinciguerra ran for 40 performances in Paris in 1870. In January of the following year, his comic opera Ali Baba premiered at the Lyceum Theatre in London, where he stayed on for a season as music director. He directed the world premiere of Aida on December 24, 1871 at the Teatro Kediviale in Cairo, in honor of the opening of the Suez Canal. At the Norwich Festival in England in 1887, his oratorio The Garden of Olivet was performed. On January 20th, 1889, Bottesini was appointed as the Director of the Conservatory in Parma, Italy at the recommendation of long time friend Giuseppe Verdi. Only six months later, Giovanni Bottesini died on July 7th,

23 Lee 11.
1889, of a hepatic attack at the age of 67. He was buried in the city cemetery outside of Parma, fittingly laid to rest next to Nicolo Paganini.  

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24 Lee 13.
CHAPTER ONE: SURVEY OF THE 17\textsuperscript{th}-19\textsuperscript{th} CENTURY DOUBLE BASS

I. The Instrument(s)

An examination of an instrument’s performance practice necessitates a consideration of the instrument itself: its physical properties, characteristics, and capabilities. Performance practice is best understood in context; physical properties of an instrument govern the physical reality of playing. In the case of the double bass, one is immediately confronted with a complex and controversial organology, plagued primarily by problems of genealogy, classification, and nomenclature. What is the difference between the double bass, the contrabass, the upright bass, the string bass, the violone, the bass violin, the bass fiddle, the bull fiddle, etc? How does the double bass align itself genealogically, as a member of the violin family, or as a viol that got corrupted in the course of history? This confusion can be traced to the coexistence and cohabitation of multiple distinctly different bass instruments up through the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, all seeking to fulfill a similar, if not identical role in orchestration. If physical properties govern the physical reality of playing, the multitude of bass instruments and their respective properties begets a complicated multitude of performance realities. This multiplicity (of physical properties, and consequently of performance practices) persists to the present day, even after the emergence of the modern double bass as the favored bass instrument.
Viol vs. Violin, Violone vs. Double Bass Violin

The debate over the genealogy of the bass—whether the modern double bass is a descendant of the viol or the violin family—can be traced to the coexistence of the two principal double bass instruments of the 18th century: the double bass viol, or violone, and the double bass violin. The multiplicity of terminology is perhaps the gravest of bass multiplicities. The term violone, Italian for large viol, is the least clear of all—it has been used in reference to a variety of instruments from any size viola da gamba to four string members of the violin family such as the cello and double basses. A Grove Music definition of the violone explains that it is an “Imprecise term. In 16th and 17th cent. It., violone meant a viol and later a bass viol, especially the larger and deeper types of instr. such as the viola da gamba. During the Baroque period in Ger., violone meant a double bass, whereas in It. during the same period it meant an early type of violoncello.” 25 Frequently, they appeared in scores with modifiers to clarify, such as contrabasso, doppio, grosso, grande, and grande contrabasso. 26 This study utilizes the term “double bass” to indicate an instrument sounding in the 16-foot range that fulfills a double bass function; qualification as to which bass that was depends on context.

With the end of the Renaissance and the rise of more Baroque aesthetic, viols gradually lost out to violins. Viols served the Renaissance aesthetic of restraint and

26 Sas 30.
balanced polyphony very faithfully, but paled in comparison to the more expressive violin in the “stile rappresentativo in the emerging Baroque period.” This change in ideal is affirmed by Curt Sachs in *The History of Musical Instruments*: “Instruments had to undergo a severe process of selection. Only those could be kept which had a sufficiently wide range and enough flexibility to afford all dynamic shades from pianissimo to fortissimo; instruments were expected to sing like human beings.”

Cohen drives the nail in the coffin: “The demands of the Baroque stile rappresentativo and the fortuitous “golden era” of violin making…. assured the triumph of the violin family over the viols.”

Another desirable trait in the late 18th century that encouraged the supremacy of the violin over the viol was volume and projection. Viols, strung with a higher number of strings, had more pressure on the top of the instrument, resulting in a diminished resonance and consequent lack of volume. The sonic demands of the growing orchestra gave preference to the louder, more expressive violin family. The bass viol, however, was the last to give out, remaining “a favorite instrument both as a melodist and a provider of bass parts for vocal and instrumental forms until even after the time of Handel and Bach.”

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27 “When heard in consort, the viols sound more distinct from one another than do the instruments of a string quartet of violins. This distinctness...fits them for their most important music in the late renaissance and early baroque periods...of which the interest may depend more on the play of parts...and the accompanying of vocal polyphony” Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 462.
28 Cohen 38.
30 Cohen 39.
31 Cohen 39.
The functional similarity and coexistence of these instruments into the 19th century fuels the debate over the genealogy of the modern double bass. Despite some vestigial characteristics of the viol family such as tuning in fourths and sloping shoulders, the prevalence of violin family features in the construction of the double bass, such as the narrow neck, lack of frets, structural support system of a soundpost and reinforcing bassbar, and a high bridge under high tension help to locate the modern double bass as the largest member of the violin family. It would be inaccurate, however, to label it the bass violin, as the violoncello is the bass of the violin family. At the time of the coinage of that term, (before the emergence of the modern double bass), the cello was the standard largest member of the violin family. Bowing is another practice that begets controversy, yet serves to secure the bass’ position in the violin family. Controversy stems from the underhand grip of the German double bass bow, which would seem to be a continuation of underhand viol bowing practices. However, Cohen encourages that despite the position of the hand, “both the ‘French’ and ‘German’ bows are used in a violin type of bowing technique and that a viol style of bowing is not used by any double bassist.” It is important to clarify that Cohen refers to the choice of bow stroke for accented notes—down instead of up—and that the underhand bow grip used by players of the German bow certainly has an element of viol style. The modern double bass is a product of the coexistence of both traditions. It is, as defined by the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*,

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32 Cohen 2.
33 Cohen 3.
34 Cohen 6
35 Cohen 85.
the “largest member of the violin family,” but not without elements of its violin heritage, visibly expressed today in the multitude of instruments constructed with flat backs, gamba corners and the popularity of an underhand bow grip.

Issues of Standardization

The double bass, though a member of the violin family, has experienced throughout its history a unique condition of variety not seen in any other instrument of the violin family. This lack of standardization is effectively highlighted when compared with the historical development of the cello. A cello’s standard tuning, C-G-d-a, was first utilized in the late 16th century, standardized by the 18th century, and is still in use today. The innovation of wound strings allowed for a shorter string length that was also standardized at 69 cm in the late 17th century. An overhand violin family bow grip was standardized by 1750. The double bass, in stark contrast, has experienced no such standardization. Even today there exist multiple string lengths, bow grips, and tunings for the double bass. Scheid writes, “From its very beginnings, there has been much variation in the size and shape of the double bass.” Such variation has delayed the development of a standardized technique and widespread development of facility on the instrument.

The condition of the pre-19th century double bass created a heritage of multiplicity that even modern double basses honor. The variety of instruments, and of sizes, shapes, constructions, bows, string lengths, techniques, practices, etc.

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37 Sas 74.
38 Scheid 4.
amongst those instruments, created a uniquely diverse landscape of double bass performance practice.

II. The Double Bass in the Orchestra

Orchestral bass performance practice before the 19th century can be characterized by low standards by composers, conductors, and players; disorganization and disunity. It is not certain for which bass instrument many parts were written, and to what extent they were faithfully executed. However, an examination of earlier orchestral performance practice is necessary to set the stage for the rapid development of the double bass in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Orchestration and Part-Writing Practices

In the earlier days of double bass instruments in orchestration, the bass was utilized mostly in its basic role of sonic and harmonic foundation. Alfred Planyavsky reports in *The Baroque Double Bass Violone* that “The violone was defamed as the fifth wheel on the string cart whose monstrosity corresponded neither in sound nor in playing technique for anything more than des Basses Gundgewalt (supporting the fundamental pitch).” In the context of the trio sonata, he reports that “Henry Burnett find the use of a double bass in trio sonatas ‘absolutely ludacris,’” and that “According to Stepehn Bonta, the Italians would not have used a double bass in trio

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sonatas ‘because they do not knowingly hold to a Klangideal that is weird or ugly.’”

He offers a voice of support explaining that “Michael Praetorius, the most important German music theorist of the seventeenth century…understood ‘the large double bass, also called violone’ as the obligatory sound carrier of the thoroughbass, whose ‘lovely resonance’ supported the other voices.” Though perhaps regarded with some caution, the double bass began its duty as an essential foundational element as early as the 16th century.

Some of the first parts scored specifically for double bass instruments were written by Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643). Monteverdi specified a contrabass instrument in the following compositions, as compiled by Stephen Sas:

42 Santissimae virgini missa senses vocibus ad ecclesiarum choros ac Vespere pluribus decantandae (1610; Malipiero edition XIV); Concerto: settimo libro de madrigali (Venice, 1619; Malipiero VII); Madrigali guerrieri, et amorosi (Venice, 1638; Malipiero VIII); Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda (included in the publication of Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi, 1638); and Orfeo (Venice, 1609). In a summary of the function of this instrumentation in the work of Monteverdi, Cohen writes, “Essentially, the double bass was used to add depth to the basso part.”

The next notable milestone bass orchestrator is Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713), in both the trio sonata and the rise of the concerto grosso style. Planyavsky writes that, “As one of the last and certainly most important Italian composers of the trio sonata who used the traditional instrumentation due violini e violone, Corelli

40 Panyavsky 10.
41 Planyavsky 12.
42 Sas 34.
43 Cohen 95.
represents the pinnacle of development in this genre.\textsuperscript{44} The rise of the orchestra and of the concerto grosso form in late 17\textsuperscript{th} century Rome would prove to be another important moment in the history of bass orchestration. John Spitzer distinguishes these new ensembles as orchestras by their “stable instrumentation primarily of the violin family, and the regular doubling of the bass line at the 16-foot register by the inclusion of double basses.”\textsuperscript{45} The foundational role of the double bass in the orchestra is stabilized in this time, even serving to define the instrument and the nature of the orchestra: “The development of a cello and a contrabass capable of supporting a large number of violins and of projecting to a large audience may have helped stimulate the transformation from instrumental ensembles based primarily on continuo instruments into an ‘orchestra’ based on instruments of the violin family.”\textsuperscript{46} The rise of the orchestra was accompanied and even characterized by the rise of the double bass instrument in a supportive role.

Arriving in Rome in 1707,\textsuperscript{47} George Fredric Handel (1685-1759) was exposed to “Corelli’s ensembles, which were perhaps the first orchestras to include large double bass instruments as standard members.”\textsuperscript{48} Handel, too, utilized the 16-foot double bass instrument. The first production of his cantata \textit{La Resurrezione}, composed for his early Roman patron Francesco Ruspoli, employed an orchestra of

\textsuperscript{44} Panyavsky 91.  
\textsuperscript{46} Spitzer 24.  
\textsuperscript{47} Anthony Hicks, "Handel, George Frideric," \textit{Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online} 12 Apr. 2011  
\textsuperscript{48} Sas 82.
20 violins, 4 violettas, 5 violone and 5 double basses assembled by Corelli.\textsuperscript{49} During his time in England, it is understood that Handel had a preference for two double basses.\textsuperscript{50} Cohen suggests that Handel, on account of the active Italian musicians in England, probably worked with double bass violins, and that he “was more fortunate with his orchestral forces [than Bach]...”\textsuperscript{51} Bach’s orchestra is generally understood to have utilized violone double bass instruments, though there is less consensus as to which type he wrote for. Charles Stanford Terry asserts that the type of double bass Bach used was a fretted, six-stringed violone.\textsuperscript{52} though Laurence Dreyfus contends that Bach wrote for multiple violoni: “Although the scholarly literature has generally assumed that Bach used only one sort of violone and that it was a 16-foot instrument, an examination of the original sources discloses that, at different stages in his career, the composer made use of all three varieties.”\textsuperscript{53} Of his part writing, Cohen notes that “Bach effectively used his double basses as the pedals of the organ whether they are doubling the basses in the final “Chorale of the Cantata No. 140 (Wachet auf) or sounding their assigned parts in the Brandenburg concertos.”\textsuperscript{54} It is important to note that though they may have had unequal bass resources, the two Baroque contemporaries Handel and Bach both utilized different double bass instruments in similar supportive, yet limited roles.

\textsuperscript{49} Sas 83.
\textsuperscript{50} Sas 84.
\textsuperscript{51} Cohen 120.
\textsuperscript{52} Charles Sanford Terry, \textit{Bach's Orchestra} (London: Oxford UP, H. Milford, 1932) 8-9.
\textsuperscript{54} Cohen 120.
Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) was among the first to expand this limited role. Haydn is widely accepted as the first composer to truly separate the cello and double bass parts. Though he is not documented as the first to publish distinct parts for the lowest two string voices, his treatment of the double bass in orchestration “provided the actual impetus for this separation to become the norm, instead of an occasional novelty.” The third movement of Symphony No. 6 includes what may be the first symphonic solo for double bass. Similar appearances can be found in the 7th and 8th symphonies (1761), the 31st (1765), 45th (1772), and 72nd (1765) symphonies; and also in the baryton octets Hob. X:1-6, 12 (1775). Symphony No. 49, *La Passione* (1768), marks the end of the usage of basso continuo, and, in his “London” symphonies, Haydn separates the celli, bassoon and bass to create a five-part string section that forms the template of a modern symphony orchestra.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) also explored the potential of the double bass instrument. This exploration is most exemplified by the aria, “Per questa bella mano” (K. 612) for bass voice and double bass obbligato. Some doubt the intention of this move, claiming that it was written for a smaller instrument or that an erroneous engraver transcribed the violinoncello part as for the double bass. In his study of the piece, Max Dauthage notes the successful execution of the double bass virtuoso Pichelberger, with whom Mozart worked and wrote the aria for. In an evaluation of the compatibility of the aria and the modern double bass instrument, he

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55 Scheid 8.
56 Scheid 9.
57 Cohen 123.
58 Max Dauthage, "Zum Geleite" *Der Kontrabass* I (1929) 3.
suggests four potential approaches to playing the obbligato. The variety of approaches, including octave transposition and alternate tuning, indicates a tangible multiplicity of performance practice, inherited by the modern bass.

*Stark Realities of Performance Practice: The School of Simplification*

To the dismay of many, inconsistent execution of orchestral double bass parts was very tangible indeed in orchestras well into the 19th century. Confronted with rapid passages, double bass players often found themselves in an interesting position, neither able nor expected to execute the more rapid passages of the bass part with any sort of meaningful clarity. The predominant solution to this situation was to play only a certain percentage of the notes in a passage; what percentage this was, or which of the notes it consisted of, were left up to the player. The decline of the functional system of figuring bass, called “highly skilled improvisations made by trained artists” by Paul Brun, gave way in orchestral bass performance practice “to a mere simplification of the written bass part by generally incompetent musicians who had only the vaguest notions of the principles of harmony.” Simplification was not an art like that of figuring, but rather chaotic and inelegant: “it became increasingly evident that each bassist simplifying his part according to his own judgment could cause conflict and lead to general bedlam.” Hector Berlioz’s estimation of the practice is especially enlightening:

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60 Scheid 6.
61 Brun 73.
62 Brun 75.
It is a current mistake to write for the most heavy of all the instruments, passages of such rapidity, that violoncellos themselves would have difficulty in executing them well. Hence there result serious disadvantages: some double bass players, too lazy or in fact incapable of tackling such difficulties, give up at once and try to simplifying the passage. But each one simplifies it in a different manner, since they do not all have the same ideas regarding the harmonic importance of the different notes; this causes a horrible disorder and confusion. This buzzing chaos, of strange sounds and ugly snarls, is still further increased by the vain efforts of more zealous or more confident players to master the passage just as it is written.\(^{63}\)

To say the least, the school of simplification was not a very successful performance practice in the orchestra. Despite its intrinsic aesthetic shortcomings, the practice persisted into the 19th century.

Instrumental tutors and method books can provide extreme insight into performance practice of the period. Method books theoretically being a source of pedagogical authority, and their teachings theoretically employed by students of a given era, it can be assumed that the technical approaches to the instrument outlined in method books are reflective of the practical conventions of performance in a given period.

As a strategy to deal with the above-mentioned inconsistency in the practice of simplification, authors of method books and treatises included their own instructions for correct simplification. This strategy effectively functioned as an endorsement of the system; such endorsement of and instruction in the practice of

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simplification in method books only helped to establish it as a standard convention in
the execution of orchestral double bass parts.

The earliest and perhaps most significant “method” in simplification can be
found in Johann Joachim Quantz’s Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu
spielen, in which he wrote about the double bass in the section “On the duties of those
who accompany a concertante part.” In passages to be simplified, Quantz suggests
playing the “first, third, or last note of each figure (determining first which notes are
the principal ones in the bass melody).” It seems that an attempt to standardize the
practice of simplification instead standardized the element of choice on the part of the
performer, still preventing the unified sound of any section of more than one bassist.

The first full length method for the double bass is considered to be the
Méthodes pour apprendre à jour de la contre-basse à 3, à 4, et à 5 cordes (Paris,
1773) of Michel Corrette (1709-1795); organist, composer, pedagogue, and prolific
author of method books, he wrote over 17 methods for different instruments. In
chapter seven, “The notes the double bass has to play,” Corrette suggests that double
bassists play only the lower notes in runs, and to play all the tonic and dominant notes
that appear most frequently without figures.

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64 Though the publication is a flute method, this chapter, with its wealth of
information on the double bass, can be acceptably categorized as bass method
literature.
65 Johann Joachim Quantz in Cohen 113.
66 Sas 107-108.
IV. Early Solo Performance Practice

In Leopold Mozart’s 1756 treatise, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, he writes of the 5 string violone (tuned F-A-D-f#-a), “On this bass it is possible to make difficult passages stand out more clearly, and I have heard concertos, trios, solos, etc., played uncommonly beautifully on it.”67 His report is indicative of the rise of the Austrian violone as a solo instrument. In the mid-late 18th century, the double bass (in the form of the Austrian violone) saw a “time of great regard for the instrument which probably has not been regained until the present day.”68 In addition to the lost first bass concerto written by Haydn, concertos for the instrument were written by Johann Baptist Vanhal (1739-1813), Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739-1799), Anton Zimmerman, (1741-1781), and Anton Hoffmeister (1754-1812).

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68 Sas 88.
CHAPTER TWO: VIRTUOSI AND THEIR INFLUENCE

The most tangible advancements of the double bass have occurred on three planes; physical developments of the instrument and bow, increase in amount and availability of repertoire, and improved critical reception. In each of these arenas we can see the pervasive influence of specific individuals. These advancements are deeply connected to, and often motivated by the work of double bass virtuosi. Their preferences and performance practices helped to shape the design and construction of the instrument and the bow; increased visibility, versatility, and estimation of the instrument in the public view; and significantly enhanced the repertoire, both through composition and by their direct effect on composers.

I. Virtuosi in the Heyday of the Austrian Violone

The first time the double bass captivated a listening public as a solo instrument was in mid 18th century Vienna, as a Viennese school of virtuoso violone players emerged with a novel and astounding treatment of the double bass violone as a solo instrument. This movement, which laid the ground for any solo treatment of a double bass instrument, was naturally fueled by the efforts of extremely talented individuals. Amongst the most notable violone players of the time are often listed Joseph Kämpfer, Ignaz Woschitka, Friedrich Pichelberger, and Johannes Matthias Sperger. Planyavsky writes of these virtuosi, “Through the stimulation of their playing, almost forty concertante compositions appeared in the span of four decades.”69 Brun also acknowledges this sudden and significant expansion of the

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69 Planyavsky 128.
repertoire, “What seems so extraordinary about the phenomenon of the Viennese school of double bass playing is that a huge body of literature including more than thirty double bass concertos as well as a large number of chamber music works with the violone in its solo capacity were composed in Austria...” and the direct relationship of this expansion of repertoire and the virtuosi who performed it, “...by and for the above-mentioned virtuosos.”

Brun suggests that the violone concerto composed by Joseph Haydn was probably written specifically for J.G. Schwenda, who was hired on April 1st 1761 to play the bassoon and violone. Cohen supports this idea of violone virtuosi capturing the attention of Haydn, suggesting that “Haydn’s interest in the instrument was probably due to a small group of double bass virtuosi who were providing the musical scene with an unusual display of skill.”

Along with Schenda, it is probable that Haydn wrote specifically for Joseph Kämpfer. Mozart’s composition for the double bass provides yet another example of composition for a specific virtuoso. According to Erich Schenk, the aria “Per questa bella mano” (K. 612) for bass voice and double bass obbligato was composed for bass voice Xaver Gerl and the above-mentioned double bass (violone) virtuoso Friedrich Pichelberger. In addition to their prompting of the Viennese masters to compose for the instrument, these virtuosi made even more direct contributions to the literature with their own concertos and chamber music parts. Johannes Matthias

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70 Brun 102.
71 Brun 102.
72 Brun 103.
73 Cohen 127.
74 Scheid 11.
75 Schenk 431.
Sperger, the most famous of the Viennese bass virtuosi, himself composed eighteen concertos for the instrument.

These remarkable individuals constitute “the seed of a saturation and profanation of an original idea: to refine the playing of the most physical of string instruments and bring it to a high level of virtuosity.”

They did so, and with success, but not without critics—the public, though impressed, often objected to the aspect of novelty act and to the inversion of common musical order. A uniformly favorable critical reception would have to wait for the career of Domenico Dragonetti.

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76 Planyavsky 130.
77 Brun 103-108.
II. 19th Century Italian Influence: Dragonetti and Bottesini

Unlike the virtuosi of the Viennese violone school, Domenico Dragonetti and Giovanni Bottesini did not enjoy the facilitative features of fretting, small size, thin strings and low tension. They forged immensely successful solo and orchestral careers on more difficult to play double bass violins in the Italian tradition, with high bridges, high string tensions, and low expectations. Daniel Koury writes that Dragonetti “was probably as responsible for a general advance in bass playing as any one man could be.” Their efforts revolutionized the world of the double bass with their experimentation with bows, their effect on the repertoire through composition and relationships with composers, and their massive effect on the critical reception of the double bass and its relative standing in the musical community.

Dragonetti and Bottesini had a direct impact on the organology of the double bass through their implementation of different styles of bow. Dragonetti’s usage of the bow and clear preference for an underhand grip were particularly influential. Christopher Brown, the author of the only authoritative book on double bass bows, writes that “Dragonetti’s early bow was extremely-out-curved, widening as the stick sloped downward towards the tip. It’s length was purported to be just 50cm., with a hair length of about 40 cm…. In England, Dragonetti gradually modified the curve to soften the arch of the stick.” The success of Dragonetti’s career in England was accompanied by attention to and preference for this bow: “Around 1830, Dragonetti’s

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bow was named the official bow of the Royal School of Music, replacing (if only temporarily) the traditional overhand model.”

Brown goes on to affirm Dragonetti’s influence on bass bows:

Dragonetti’s influence in Paris meant that teachers and makers were compelled to make changes to their overhand models. That Gand, the Paris Conservatory violinmaker, asked Dragonetti for a bow to copy, testifies to the Italian’s considerable impact on playing standards of the time. The influence of the Dragonetti bow lasted well into the 20th Century, especially in England, and contributed significantly to the development of the underhand bass bow, known as the ‘German’ bow.

Bottesini preferred an overhand bow grip more aligned with the bowing practices of the violin family. Drawing from Bottesini’s *Metodo completo per il contrabasso*, Cohen paraphrases,

Bottesini felt that the ‘Dragonetti’ bow grasp was not very elegant and actually had the great disadvantage of dulling the sounds… He also pointed out that the form of this bow and its shortness are not suited to the production of sounds of long duration so that slurred or tied notes are almost impossible to play. He did, however, concede that the bow’s one advantage was in its excellent attack in staccato passages.

Though not directly responsible for the design of the French bow, Bottesini is still associated with it (Cohen, “Since he was the most prominent player to use the ‘French’ bow, it is sometimes called the ‘Bottesini’ bow”) and helped fuel the dichotomy between overhand and underhand, “Bottesini” and “Dragonetti.” The differences between the two bows boil down to an issue of power vs. touch. The underhand “Dragonetti” bow provides excellent power and leverage, but lacks the

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80 Brown 39.
81 Brown 40.
82 Cohen 197.
83 Cohen 200.
touch and expressive capability of the “Bottesini” bow. The bows are stylistically faithful to their proponents; the attack of the “Dragonetti” bow was consistent with his trademark power and clarity, while the potential for more legato playing found in the “Bottesini” bow was consistent with his bel canto influences, as control of the bow afforded by the overhand grip mimics the breath control central to the bel canto vocal style.

In addition to their organological contributions, Dragonetti and Bottesini effected a significant enhancement of double bass repertoire, in both the augmentation of solo double bass literature and the development of orchestral part writing. Both composers in addition to players, Dragonetti and Bottesini made significant compositional contributions to the solo double bass repertoire. According to Palmer, a biographical authority on Dragonetti, “The British Library holds 18 volumes of his works (GB-Lbl Add.17726–17833; for a summary of their contents see Palmer, 1997). They include concertos and concerto-like works (including potpourris) with orchestral accompaniment; quintets for solo bass, violin, two violas and ‘basso’; a duo for cello and double bass; variations on popular operatic arias for solo double bass; obbligato double bass parts for operatic arias; and multi-movement pieces for double bass and piano.”

Bottesini was also a prolific contributor to the bass literature—in addition to his operatic, sacred, and orchestral compositions, Bottesini wrote 49 pieces that feature the double bass.85

84 Palmer, “Domenico Dragonetti.”
85 For a complete list of Bottesini’s compositions, see Lee Appendix D.
The influences of Dragonetti and Bottesini on bass repertoire extend beyond their own compositional contributions. Composers’ exposure to the talents of these two great masters changed the way they conceptualized and wrote for the instrument. Cohen writes that “The double bass virtuoso…helped fire the imagination of composers so they would treat the double bass as an independent instrument and not just as an appendage to the basso part.”86 In his attribution of Haydn’s attention to the double bass to a small group of virtuosi, suggests that 1795 concerts with Domenico Dragonetti may have contributed to his interest.87 The most controversial, but perhaps most significant relationship between a virtuoso’s facility and a composer’s output is that of Dragonetti and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). Sas notes their friendship and suggests that Dragonetti’s playing influenced Beethoven’s writing: “The full separation of the double bass from the cello part in his music, as well as possibly the recitatives from the ninth symphony are often believed to have stemmed from Beethoven’s high opinion of Dragonetti’s playing."88 The London Philharmonic society believed not only that Beethoven wrote the symphony for them, but even that the recitatives were written to be performed as a solo by Dragonetti.89 Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) was also exposed to and affected by Dragonetti’s virtuosity. In listing works composed for the double bass and other instruments, Brun

86 Cohen 135.
87 Cohen 127.
88 Sas 117.
89 Sas 117-118. For a more complete discussion of the 1825 London premiere, as well as Beethoven’s intentions for the recitatives, see Sas 116-120.
includes a duet for cello and double bass that was composed by Rossini on July 28th 1824, for Phillip Joseph Salomens and Dragonetti.90

Perhaps the most tangible contributions of Domenico Dragonetti and Giovanni Bottesini to the development of the double bass were the changes they effected in the perception of the double bass in the musical community. Their exceptional facility on the instrument and musicality in performance exceeded all expectations, shaping audience perspectives and effectively elevating the status of the double bass as a solo instrument. Palmer does not short-sell the impact of Dragonetti’s virtuosity: “He destroyed preconceptions of the capabilities of the double bass, carving a new niche for the instrument and firmly establishing its significance as the foundation of orchestral sonority and ensemble. His distinction as a performer altered the status of the double bass irrevocably.”91 Bottesini, too, awed audiences, earned the nickname “the Paganini of the double bass,”92 and in doing so helped to validate his instrument.

The many aspects of the careers of Dragonetti and Bottesini—solo tours, orchestral and chamber work, composition, and conducting—all served the general advancement of the double bass. The interaction between performance and composition proved extremely effective in the advancement of the double bass. It formed somewhat of a template for later virtuosi to follow in the continuation of the quest for the advancement of a far too neglected instrument.

90 Brun 98.
91 Palmer 61.
92 Slatford, “Giovanni Bottesini”.
III. Virtuosi in the 20th Century: Koussevitzky, Karr, Turetzky

Virtuosi in the 20th century continued this tradition of championing the double bass as a solo instrument and effecting augmentations of the repertoire. The first famous virtuoso of the 20th century, Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951) inherited the condition of the double bass fairly surreptitiously. On account of its neglect, there was a shortage of double bass students in the Musico-Dramatic Institute of the Moscow Philharmonic, such that they offered full tuition plus a stipend to students of the double bass. Lacking in funds and eager to study music, Koussevitzky took up the double bass. By 1901 he was principal double bass of the Bol’shoy Theater Orchestra and had made his solo debut in Moscow. His success as a conductor (most notably with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra) only served to increase the attention he received for his long solo career. Koussevitzky also contributed to the expansion and enhancement of double bass solo repertoire. Quoting the Lourie biography, Scheid suggests that “the inadequacy of the repertoire moved Koussevitzky to write and transcribe more music for the double bass in 1900…” His most notable contribution is his Double Bass Concerto, which Lee calls a “must-learn concerto.” Koussevitzky’s other compositional contributions to the repertoire include “a Humoresque, Valse miniature, Chanson triste and many other works for double bass, in addition to a Passacaglia on a Russian

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93 Cohen 195.
94 Scheid 14.
95 Lee 101.
Theme (1934) for orchestra." In faithful adherence to the pattern of virtuosi encouraging composition, Koussevitzky’s long and successful solo career also inspired composers to give the double bass more attention. Reinhold Gliére (1875-1956), Russian composer and contemporary of Koussevitzky, wrote solo pieces for the double bass that Brun calls “delightful,” and “doubtless inspired by Koussevitzky’s artistry and virtuosity.” The career of Serge Koussevitzky represents another moment of glory and growth for the double bass as a solo instrument.

The quest for glory and growth for the instrument enjoyed a surge in the latter half of the 20th century. Several notable virtuosi have devoted themselves to this ideal, citing respect for and attention to the double bass as explicit goals. Any discussion of the double bass as a solo instrument in the 20th century turns almost immediately to Gary Karr (1941-), extremely successful solo double bassist and founder of the International Society of Bassists. His international solo career not only garnered attention to and demanded respect for the double bass as a solo instrument, but also necessitated yet another augmentation of the literature. Through works commissioned by or written for Karr, the concerto repertoire grew significantly—recent concertos connected to Karr include those of Henze (1967), Gunther Schuller (1968), Wilfred Josephs (1980), John Downey (1985) and Lalo Schifrin (1988).  

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97 Brun 97.
The most notable 20th century champion of the double bass as a solo instrument and as a viable material for composers is Bertram Turetzky (1933-). Famous for both his performances and his book *The Contemporary Contrabass* (1974, 1989), Turetzky’s career can be characterized by the constant imploration of composers to understand the capabilities of the double bass more comprehensively and to write for it more frequently as a solo instrument. He has campaigned extensively and successfully for the study and acknowledgment of extended techniques and the rhythmic and timbral capabilities of the double bass. As a result of his direct communication with contemporary composers, he helped to contribute “a host of avant-garde pieces…which involve the double bass in a leading role”99 to the “burgeoning literature”100 for the double bass.

These modern double bass stars have faithfully continued in the tradition of the Austrian violone and 19th century romantic masters (e.g., the heroic efforts of iconic individuals). Brun writes that

In the United States, the credit for launching and giving direction to this double bass Renaissance belongs to such key-figures as Gary Karr, the double bass icon, Bertram Turetzky, the contemporary music champion, or David Walter, the well-known pedagogue from New-York City, who dedicated their life to establishing the double bass as a major virtuoso solo instrument.101

As evidenced by the pursuits of these key-figures, the massive progress seen by the modern double bass is not, as Cohen’s model would suggest, the result of facility demanded by orchestral composers; but is instead the result of demands placed on and inspired in composers by remarkable individuals of incredible facility.

99 Brun 98.
100 Brun 98.
101 Brun 92.
CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to illustrate the extent to which remarkable individuals have impacted the course of bass history. The part-writing practices of composers were not responsible for the elevation of technical facility on the instrument; rather, the general advancement of the instrument influenced the part-writing practices of composers. As they were exposed to virtuosi, and in turn the capabilities and characteristics of the double bass, they began to incorporate those capabilities into their compositions.
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12 Apr. 2011


Print.


*Oxford Music Online.* 12 Apr. 2011