

## Evaluation of the stylistic path of authors of concertos composed for double bass and orchestra in XVIII-XX centuries

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**Abstract:** *The choice of the following subject is conditioned by the artistic practice itself. The double bass not only being today an indispensable element of symphony and chamber orchestras, of different instrumental ensembles (trio, quartets, quintets, etc.), but also as a soloistic instrument, whose expressive possibilities as a soloist and participant in the instrumental dialogue reveals the genre of concerto for this instrument. The concerto has been and remains an object widely explored both by musical practice, through the creation of composers and the work of performers, and by musicological science by examining the most diverse aspects of the genre in numerous studies conducted by researchers in different countries. The dialogic character of narrating, the highlighting of the solo interpretation, and the realization of the principal of the artistic act are most frequently called as specific features of the concerto. The genre of the instrumental concerto is a suitable field for the investigation and experiments of the composers, for the manifestation of the artistic potential of the performers, as well as for the application of the analytical abilities of the researchers.*

Key-words: *double bass, double bass concerto, double bass history, double bass players, double bass repertoire, composers of double bass concertos.*

### 1. Introduction

The history of the double bass includes a period of about four centuries during which they changed: the construction of the instrument, the technical and artistic possibilities, the role it played in the interpretive practice, and also the attitude towards this instrument.

In our times, when the double bass as a solo instrument is becoming more and more prominent, it becomes obvious that, for those who study this instrument,

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it is absolutely necessary to know the history of the double bass, the evolution of the performing arts, and also the composite repertoire for double bass.

Although today no one questions the status of the double bass and its role in the art of music, there is still no full awareness of many facts and phenomena generated by the creation of the most important performers, double bass players, and composers who wrote music for this instrument.

The evolution and assertion of the double bass involved a difficult process, which consists in the somewhat paradoxical nature of the instrument's functions.

For quite a long time, the double bass was considered a predominantly orchestral instrument, predestined especially for the interpretation of the deep harmonical voice and having an accompanying role.

Thus, it was difficult to imagine such an instrument exposed to the main role, namely the soloist, a position from which it would have competed with the cello or even the violin. However, thanks to its deep, vibrant, slightly nostalgic timbre, the double bass has inspired many composers from different times.

The double bass as a solo instrument has enjoyed popularity since the eighteenth century and several composers of that period wrote works dedicated to this instrument. Since the period of Classicism, composers in constant search of unique means of expression find in the double bass many refreshing new sounds, including through exploring new timbres (Warnecke 2005, 45-46).

From the information about the musical practice that reaches us from the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, a rather long period is confirmed in which both the double bass and its predecessor the *violone* were used. On the pages of one of his double bass concertos, the famous double bassist and composer Sperger, replaces "violone" with "double bass" (Michaelstein 1988, 36). In the scores *The Forellen Quintet*, Fr. Schubert changed the name from "violone" to "double bass" (the quintet was written in 1824). Thus, the composers give preference to the new double bass, an instrument with a much louder sound than the old violone (Chusid 1997, 174–192).

The purely instrumental concerto, which began its development in Italy in the second half of the 17th century, first of all takes the form of a dialogue between small groups of solo instruments (concertino) and the orchestral mass (ripieno). This type of concerto is called the concerto grosso. From this, gradually and very naturally, by reducing the concertino to a single instrument, came the solo concerto, which introduces into the musical writing a new element, little noticeable in the concerto grosso: virtuosity in excellence, which emphasizes the contrast between soloist and orchestra and generates a new genre which was unknown to the musician: the virtuoso performer.

From the end of the 18th century, the most frequent concertos became the ones for a single soloist and orchestra, rarely the ones for several instruments: two, three, or four performers. There are also concertos for a single instrument without orchestra, for orchestra without soloists, concertos for a cappella choir, as well as for voice(s) and orchestra. This enumeration demonstrates the extraordinary variety of forms and the diversity adopted by the concerto genre throughout its history, as well as the sometimes-radical differences that differentiate the concertos written by composers during about four centuries.

The terms derived from the concerto - *concertare* and *concertante* - define some more general phenomena that characterize the dramaturgy of musical works and a certain type of material development where in the foreground appear the principles of opposition or competition between soloists and ensemble, or orchestra.

The double bass is part of the family of string instruments and is the result of the gradual and progressive exploration of the bass register by string instruments.

The beginning of the evolution of the modern double bass can be considered in the year 1585, when the Italian luthier Ventura Linarolo built a bass gamba with 6 strings tuned in fourths (the four lower strings being identical to those of the double bass) and the fingerboard being identical to that of the double bass while eliminating the frets.

The concerto, being one of the most complex genres of instrumental music, presents the performer with multiple artistic and technical problems. Namely, in the concerto, the performer can manifest in the strongest possible way his/her interpretive abilities, mastery, maturity and originality of artistic thinking. The concerto, as well as the sonata, is a large form that requires the ability to sing in an ensemble (in the case of the sonata however, the ensemble is more restricted).

Because of the virtuosic content, the concerto can be compared to the etude, however, in the concerto the virtuosic sections are part of a complex, multidimensional artistic structure, in which the bright and brilliant expression alternates with the lyrical, contemplative, melodic one. This explains the presence of the concertos both in the repertoire of the most remarkable performers, in various competitions, as well as a part of student repertoire.

## **2. The repertoire of the XVIII-XIX centuries**

Among the most important works, originally written for double bass during the 18th and 19th centuries, we will mention the concertos composed by: Joseph Haydn, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, Johann Baptist Vanhal, Anton Zimmermann, Václav Pichl, Leopold Kozeluch, Franz Anton Hoffmeister, Antonio Capuzzi,

Giambattista Conte de Cimador, Johannes Matthias Sperger, Domenico Dragonetti, Giovanni Bottesini, Johann Joseph Albert, Gallo Sales.

The emergence of such a rich repertoire, composed for solo double bass in Vienna at that time, is linked to the 5-string double bass, also called "Viennese double bass", an instrument with a construction, shape, and size favorable to playing the double bass. An important aspect of this double bass was the tuning, built on thirds and fourths, which corresponds to a major chord: F1 - A1 - D – F sharp - A. Thus, in most compositions we find the tonalities of D major and A major. In addition, the composers frequently used scordatura, a procedure that increases the tuning by half a tone or more (at that time the preferred tonalities were both B flat major and b minor). In these cases, the tuning of the double bass was as follows: F1 - B1 – E flat - G - B or F1 - B1 - (E) D – F sharp - B. The double bass with this tuning was used not only in solo works (usually without the last string), but also in the repertoire of chamber music and orchestral repertoire (Warnecke 2005, 257).

One of the first concertos for double bass was the work composed by Joseph Haydn in 1763, which unfortunately is believed to have burned at the library in Eisenstadt (Hoboken 1957, 15).

The last quarter of the 18th century was marked by the appearance in the Vienna region of several concertos composed for double bass by a series of classical composers, and at the same time by the appearance of virtuoso double bass players who managed to interpret these works excellently.

Many composers of the Viennese school at that time were also excellent performers. They knew very well the possibilities of the tools they were composing for. It is documented that all of the concerto works composed for solo double bass were with special dedication to certain individuals. In turn, outstanding performers encouraged composers to create such works. Naturally, the creative contact resulting from this collaboration, performers and composers, was one of the essential engines for the development of the musical art of that period (Planyavcky 1970, 168).

Many works from that period, as well as the names of the performers, have only become known to the general public relatively recently. One of the first double bass concertos of that period, the Dittersdorf Concerto in D major, was first published by German double bassist Tischer Zeitz only in 1938 and has since become very popular in the double bass repertoire. In the same year, the Concertante Symphony for double bass, viola and orchestra by C. Dittersdorf was published for the first time.

Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739-1799), a contemporary of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, was a remarkable figure of his time. A talented violinist, a well-known conductor, a prolific composer, he also proved to be a skilled historian, leaving autobiographical notes.

Dittersdorf is the first composer of the Viennese classical school to compose several major works for solo double bass. Here we will explore, first of all, the two concertos for double bass and orchestra in D major and E flat major (involving scordatura).

All his compositions were written for the Viennese five-string double bass, with the tuning: F1 - A1 - D – F sharp - A, which shows the composer's preference for the key of D major. This explains the difficulty of performing the works of Dittersdorf and other composers of the time, on a modern four-string double bass with tuning in fourths. Both Dittersdorf's concertos, in terms of the construction of the separate movements and the structure of the cycle and the musical style, are similar to a concertante symphony. They have the same structure in three movements, the dialogue techniques between soloist and orchestra, cadenzas in the middle of the movements, as well as thematic material played by the orchestra while the double bass plays an accompanying role.

Another important composer who contributed to the promotion of the art of double bass was Johann Baptist Vanhal (1739-1813), one of Vienna's most popular composers of the time. Vanhal played the piano and boasted a favorable reputation as a piano teacher, while at the same time mastering the organ, violin, flute and cello.

His concerto for double bass and orchestra in E flat major stands out among other solo concertos of the time, with an expressive melody and technical elements of virtuosity in the solo part. The work belongs to the typical samples of the Viennese classical school. In all three movements of the concerto, fairly long cadenzas are given. Interestingly, he adds double stops and harmonics for the first time in compositions written for double bass (even before Dragonetti). From a technical point of view, the third movement seems to be the most difficult to interpret because the composer uses many changes of positions, double stops and harmonics. Designed for the five-string Viennese double bass (tuning based on the D major chord), his interpretation on the modern double bass is a real challenge for the soloist. However, this excellent work of one of the Viennese classics deservedly entered the concerto repertoire of modern soloists and allows the appreciation of the talent of double bass players, for whom this beautiful music was written (Herrmann 1957, 3-4).

Another prominent musical figure was double bassist Domenico Dragonetti, a friend of Joseph Haydn and Ludwig van Beethoven. He was a very well-known performer in both Italy and Russia, and also participated in the concerts of the London Philharmonic Society. Beethoven's friendship with Dragonetti would inspire him to write difficult passages for double bass in his symphonies such as: in the third movement of the fifth symphony, the second movement of the seventh symphony, and the last movement of the ninth symphony, which do not double the cello part as they would usually.

Dragonetti has written ten concertos as well as many solo works for double bass and piano. Of the many original works written by Dragonetti for double bass, only three have become popular: *Andante (Theme with variations)*, *Allegro (Rondo)* and the *Concerto in A major*.

The most important of Dragonetti's compositions, which survived to the present day, is his *A major concerto*. As a style, Dragonetti's music is somewhat reminiscent of Mozart's style. Dragonetti's works mark a significant stage in the history of compositions written for double bass, even today having an indisputable technical and artistic value. All these features of Dragonetti's interpretive style are reflected in his works. It is no coincidence that, in all the memoirs of Dragonetti's contemporaries, his extraordinary, almost violinistic, capacity for interpretation in the high register of his instrument is emphasized. It can be argued that Dragonetti was the ancestor, so to speak, of the "vertical" technique of playing the double bass, in which the music is presented mainly in the high registers on the first string.

For many years, this process of using the technical capabilities of the double bass has become a model for later composers and performers (Miller 1967, 46).

One of the most attractive double bass compositions from the era of Classicism is the *Concerto in D major* by Franz Anton Hofmeister. This concerto is close to Haydn's music because of the bright and cheerful nature of it. The solo part is written with special knowledge of the technical and expressive capabilities of the instrument.

Studying all the concertos listed above, the question arises - for what kind of instrument are these concertos written? Some fragments appear in an unusually high register, we also find double stops which are difficult to interpret, as well as awkward and difficult combinations. All this suggests that some of these compositions were written for the six-stringed violone, others for a small double bass with tuning in fourths, but with a higher D string (Hofmeister), and finally for double bass with a fifth string, but with a higher A string (Vanhel, Dittersdorf). Undoubtedly, almost all of these works were created for various types of double bass. Thus, in the second half of the 18th century, the double bass gained wide recognition not only as an orchestral instrument, but also as a solo instrument. During the same period, as well as the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, included the appearance of formidable double bass soloists.

### **3. The evolution of the genre of double bass concerto in the 19th century**

The eighteenth century paved the way for the successful development of the art of double bass. At the beginning of the 19th century, there was a general interest in playing the double bass, and double bass classes were set up in several conservatories in Europe.

The Italian musical art of the first half of the 19th century developed in the spirit of a patriotic liberation movement, in which the broad masses participated. Italy's musical culture reached a peak during this period. This progress also had a positive effect on the art of double bass. The most important representative of the double bass performing art in nineteenth-century Italy was the great virtuoso Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889). This brilliant artist was probably the only one in the history of the art of the double bass who hardly played in the orchestra. Composer and conductor, Giovanni Bottesini was per excellence a virtuoso soloist (Доброхотов 1974, 69).

Nowadays the name of the composer Bottesini is associated primarily with his wonderful compositions for double bass. It was in this field that he stood out best, remaining in the history of music as a brilliant master and initiator of the new expressive possibilities of double bass interpretation.

It is known that Bottesini wrote several works for double bass solo, along with another instrument (*Grand Concert Duo, Capriccio on themes from Rossini's songs*). He shows that the art of double bass was at a very high level in Italy, and Bottesini could find worthy partners not only among violinists but also double bass players.

Among Bottesini's best-known double bass compositions are: the three concertos for double bass and orchestra in A major, F-sharp minor and B minor (two more concertos remain in manuscript), *Grand Concert Duo for violin and double bass, Fantasy on themes from the works of Donizetti "Lucia di Lammermoor", Fantasy on themes from the works of Bellini "Somnambula", Variations on a theme by Paisiello, Venetian Carnival, Melody, Elegy, Tarantella*, etc. (Доброхотов 1974, 70).

Obviously, most of the works (concertos, duets, fantasies, variations, etc.) were performed by Bottesini with the orchestra. The composer's creation, together with the deepening of the lyrical element, clearly reflects the national characteristics of the song and virtuosity, designed to reveal a new musical content. Romantic art appealed to the masses of listeners hence some features of oratory entered the realm of music. It is no coincidence that Bottesini was called the "Paganini of the double bass" because of many similar features between these two great talents. Both artists performed only their own works in concerts, composed approximately the same instrumental genres (concertos, variations of virtuosity on the themes of Italian folk works, and small pieces based on the Italian national melody), pushed the limits of the expressive capacities of their instruments, and showed themselves as brave innovators constantly looking for and implementing virtuosic techniques that no one could imagine until then (Martin 1983, 6-31).

In Bottesini's legacy, his concertos for double bass and orchestra occupy a place of honor. By the nature of the music, these three-movement concertos involuntarily evoke an association with Paganini's violin concertos. The brilliance of

virtuosity combined with pure Italian melody, make these creations the most significant examples of the concerto written for double bass in Italy.

His double bass concertos were written in the style of 19th century Italian opera, exploiting the qualities of the double bass in an unusual way until then. His double bass works boasted virtuosic passages and great leaps to the highest registers of the instrument, fully exploiting the realm of natural and artificial harmonics. In the 19th century Bottesini's compositions were considered difficult to approach, however, starting with the second half of the 20th century his works started to be frequently interpreted.

The art and name of double bassist Giovanni Bottesini entered the history of interpretive art and remained a symbol of mastery and inspiration. The promotion of Bottesini's music in the art of double bass today, the active interest in the creation of this 19th century musician, confirms the importance of his versatile activities, not only as a true master of music, but also as a remarkable example of the sacrifice for art.

Today, when many double bass players are able to overcome the technical difficulties of Bottesini's best works, which have been included in the current repertoire of double bass players, the importance and significance of his phenomenon for the development of double bass art becomes clear.

If we follow the activity of some notable double bass players from the 19th century, their achievements in the field of solo performance, pedagogy, composition, as well as the orientation towards orchestral and chamber works created by the greatest composers, we see that the double bass culture of this era reached a very high level in Europe.

#### **4. Concerts for double bass appeared in the 20th century**

The composers of the 20th century also had a considerable contribution to the enrichment of the double bass repertoire. Among them we would like to mention: Stefan Bolesław Poradowski, Virgilio Mortari, Nikos Skalkottas, Victor Bruns, Eduard Tubin, František Hertl, Boris Papandopulo, Lars-Erik Larsson, Heinz Röttger, Harald Genzmer, Wolfgang Meyer Men-Tormin, Nino Rota, Jean Françaix, Andrei Jakowlewitsch Eschpai, Schuller, Hans Werner Henze, Wilfred Josephs, Lalo Schifrin, André Previn, Usko Gunther Meriläinen, Eugene Hartzell, Rolf Urs Ringger, Günter Neubert, Richard Rodney Bennett, John Harbison, Nikolai Kapol, Erich Urbanner, Hartmut Schmidt, Gavin Bryars, Frank Proto, Oleg Grigorjewitsch Jantschenko, Barry Guy, Frangis Ali-Sade, Anders Koppel, Dimitri Smirnow, Claus Kühnl, Francisco Obieta, Moritz Eggert, and Edgar Meyer.



Among the most famous representatives of the musical art of the 20th century, we find Sergey Kusevitsky, a remarkable double bassist and soloist, as well as one of the greatest conductors of the first half of the 20th century. A prominent figure in Russian music culture, Kusevitsky was an active participant in the musical life in France, England and the United States in the 1920s through 1940s.

After the success with the small works he composed, Kusevitsky decided to write a concerto, which fully corresponded to his creative needs. To create a work of this magnitude, the help of a professional composer was needed. Kusevitsky received support from the young Reinhold Gliere, from whom he took composition lessons. Thus, was created a concerto for double bass and orchestra, which gained international popularity and became a jewel of the repertoire of double bass players around the world (*Асоров* 1981, 21-22).

In Kusevitsky's concerto, both the melodic and technical possibilities of the double bass are perfectly revealed. The technique of double stops that the composer uses in his creation is very efficient and at the same time, impressive! In the history of double bass performance, the Kusevitsky concerto opened a new and significant page.

The 20th century comes with new advances in the art of double bass. The evolution of improvements to the instrument, in particular the application of steel strings and the string clamping system, brings the technical possibilities of the double bass to a more advanced level than ever before, therefore inspiring more and more composers to write solo works for this instrument.

In the middle of the 20th century and in the following decades, many new concertos for double bass were written, among them: Nikos Skalkottas's Concerto (1942), Eduard Tubin's Concerto (1948), Lars-Erik Larsson's Concerto (1957), Gunther Schuller's Concert (1962), Hans Werner Henze's Concert (1966), Frank Proto's Concert (1968), etc.

Regarding the art of double bass interpretation in Romania, we find a situation similar to the one we found earlier in the important double bass schools in Europe.

Throughout the 20th century, the double bass in Romania was mainly an indispensable participant of symphony and chamber orchestras, as well as of various instrumental ensembles that existed here for several decades of this century. As a solo instrument, the double bass became known to the Romanian public, especially in the second half of the last century, thanks to the activity of young local performers such as Ovidiu Bădilă, Wolfgang Güttler, Catalin Rotaru and Dorin Marc, as well as by virtuoso instrumentalists from other countries who toured in Romania.

The concerto for double bass, which requires a special mastery from the performer, was not approached in national composition, as the Romanian composers preferred to write works that were less complicated and smaller in size.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion we can say that the most important idea of the concerto genre is certainly related to the affirmation of the soloist's personality and the multilateral discovery of his individuality.

The contribution made during the centuries of the interpretive art by exceptional performers, such as: Josef Kämpfer, Friedrich Pischelberger, Johannes Mathias Sperger, Domenico Dragonetti, Giovanni Bottesini, Serge Koussevitzky, Gary Karr, and Ovidiu Bădilă, showed that the double bass has a "personality" pronounced with extraordinary artistic, technical and expressive qualities. Therefore, after a long period of affirmation, the double bass acquired the status of a solo instrument, managing to overcome the very reserved, sometimes even skeptical attitude of the performers, of the composers, and also of the audience.

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