

"Haydn's Missing Double Bass Concerto"
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(Figure 1)

Franz Joseph Haydn's missing "Concerto per il violone"

Detail of Folio19 of the Entwurf-Katalog (Berlin, Preussischer Staatsbibliothek Mus.ms.theor.Kat 607), in Haydn's own handwriting. Reproduced by permission.

Perhaps it seems ironic to write an article about a piece of music that may no longer exist - that has sadly been lost or misplaced over the last two centuries. Yet the truth is that this piece has not been forgotten - it is held up as a juicy piece of bait that somehow justifies the double bass's place in history as a "serious" instrument if a composer of such renown as Haydn composed a solo concerto for it. Bass players (and music historians for that matter) anxiously await the day when this lost gem might be pulled out of some forgotten drawer and dusted off for all to see, hear and play. Although the entire piece may never come to light, there does still exist a tremendous amount of information about it, which unfortunately, until now has not been compiled. Instead, bass players continue to pass on myths, many of which were generated over a century ago, regarding the missing concerto, which would make it harder and harder for them to recognize, should it one day miraculously be pulled out of that forgotten drawer, and end up on their music stand!

In 1761 Franz Joseph Haydn (who was then 29 years old) was offered his first full-time musical employment, as *Hausoffizier* and *Kapellmeister*-Elect to Prince Paul Anton Esterhazy at his court in Eisenstadt. Haydn's contract bound him to compose

music specifically for the Prince and his resident orchestra (which numbered between 10 and 15 musicians) and to oversee the maintenance of the musical archives and instruments. For the next few years, Haydn's musical output was predominantly of secular instrumental music - symphonies and concerti which were performed at the princely palace as chamber music, or during the two official concerts given weekly, called "academies". Almost all of Haydn's concerti date from this period, and were composed not for illustrious imported soloists, but rather for the household musicians which stocked the Prince's orchestra. (A few of those players, such as Luigi Tomasini, the concertmaster and Anton Kraft, the 'cellist were famous in their time, but for the most part, the ensemble in the early days of Haydn's tenure was competent, yet undistinguished.) The missing concerto for the double bass dates from this period.

Fortunately for us, documents from the Esterhazy estate are numerous, and have been described and published in a monumental 5-volume biography of Haydn by H.C.Robbins Landon¹. Consulting these records brings to light considerable information regarding Haydn's double bass player and his instrument. Pay lists for the household musicians are retained from 1761, from which time Johann Georg Schwenda is listed as the "anderen fagotisten, zugleich violonisten", literally, the "other bassoonist, as well as violonist"².

(Figure 2) - Facsimile of the Conventio Musicorum, 1762

H.C.Robbins Landon. Haydn: Chronicle and Works, Volume 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, p.375. Used by permission of the publisher.

It is clear that Schwenda doubled, playing second bassoon OR the double bass in the orchestra. Actually, most of Haydn's early symphonies only require one bassoon, and so we must assume that Schwenda spent a substantial amount of his time playing violone. Schwenda remained on the pay lists, as the only bass player, but in this dual

capacity, until 1767, when he was replaced by Carl Schiringer, who also played both instruments.

Again, since part of Haydn's responsibilities included the care and maintenance of the household instruments, many documents have been preserved which detail their upkeep. The first receipt preserved by archivists is dated 1762, and specifies the balance owed for repairing "the new violone with fish glue"³. In all documents the double bass instrument used in Haydn's orchestra is called "violone"⁴. The nature of this double bass is further clarified by numerous receipts for strings. At this time, the upper strings were made of pure sheep's gut, and the lower ones of gut overspun with silver or copper, and they wore out quickly compared to the modern day all-metal ones that we use. Strings for the violone were specified according to pitch. It becomes evident from looking at these receipts that Haydn's violone was never tuned G D A' E' in the manner that we modern players consider standard, but rather it was tuned to A F# D A'. This tuning has recently come to be referred to as "Viennese Tuning" by bassists, and its use was indeed prevalent in the geographic community centered around Vienna at this time. Often with this tuning, a five-string instrument was used, with the additional fifth and lowest string tuned to F' natural. But in Haydn's case, it is clear that he used a four-string instrument, and one that had either been made especially for him, or at least was purchased new, early upon his arrival at Eisenstadt. It is very important and significant for modern players to make reference to the fact that A' (yes, only a minor third lower than the 'cello's open C) was in fact the lowest note on Haydn's double bass during this time.

Also retained in the Haydn documents are references to the now missing bass concerto. Again, as modern players we may be tempted to speculate that this piece was composed for some visiting big-shot bass player (and here names such as Pichelberger and Sperger leap to mind) - since it's written by Haydn it must be exceptional. But it turns out that in fact, it was none other than our second bassoonist Schwenda who

received the honor. In August 1763, Haydn's copyist Anton Adolph billed the Esterhazy estate for his having copied "parts for a new concerto for Schwenda on the violone".⁵ It is therefore possible to date the concerto with some certainty to 1763. It is also fortunate that Haydn himself undertook to compile a catalogue of his early works, and in doing so mentions this concerto. The catalogue, known as the "Entwurf-Katalog"⁶, was compiled in 1765, organized by genre, and the concerto is listed as "Concerto per il violone" with the additional words "contra violone" written above the entry, and two bars of the first movement are notated.

(Figure 3) - Modern transcription

Looking at this brief musical example, it's easy to see that the concerto is in D major (a sonority that is favored by the triadic Viennese tuning) and the first movement is undoubtedly composed in the fast, Allegro-type style that is characteristic of Haydn's three-movement Baroque-form concerti.

It is difficult to discern whether or not the concerto was EVER played outside the Esterhazy estate. Haydn's contract during this time forbade him to compose for other patrons or to give away copies of his music without the express permission of the Prince. So it seems unlikely that it might have been performed by the well-known bass soloists Josef Kampfer, Friedrich Pichelberger, Johann Dietzl and Johann Matthias Sperger, who traveled all over Europe, and with whom Haydn was undoubtedly acquainted during his career. It is also significant that this concerto, based on a date of 1763, would have been the first such solo concerto for violone (although it was to be followed by more than 30 concerti over the next 45 years⁷). Its early date makes it less likely to have been a staple of the traveling virtuosi's repertoire, the height of which occurred towards the end of the century.

Almost no other references to the concerto, either for its performance or its score are known from the 18th and early-19th centuries. The concerto was listed again (this time "per il Contra Bafso") in the Elssler Haydn-Verzeichnis⁸, compiled in 1805 at the end of Haydn's career, but many entries for this new catalogue were merely copied from the Entwurf listings. The concerto must certainly have been well out of circulation and unknown by the mid-1800's when Fetis compiled his *Bibliographie Universelle des Musiciens*⁹, and attributed two concerti for double bass (in G and F) to Haydn erroneously, and in the process, failed to mention anything about the authentic one in D.

Some other features of Haydn's violone are also worth discussion. During the late 18th century, there were several double bass instruments in use throughout Europe, which varied a lot in terms of size, shape, tuning, numbers of strings, bowing method etc. The instrument typically used in Austrian, German, Czech and Polish ensembles¹⁰ was either a 4 or 5 string instrument, tuned as discussed above. This instrument and its tuning was not new, since the first written documentation of it dates back almost 100 years to 1677¹¹, and in 1694 it was even being played in England. The features of this instrument have a lot in common with the viola da gamba family (and the term "violone" literally means large viol). Typically, the bodies of these instruments were small compared to Italian and French basses, they were gamba shaped and flat-backed, and the peg-box usually had a distinctive point to it.

(Figure 4) - Johann Ulrich Eberle Double Bass, Prague 1734.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, by exchange. Gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Garnett Day, Fred Miller, Mrs. G.C.Glynn and Mr. and Mrs. Jason Berger, in honor of Angna Enters, by exchange. Gifts in memory of June Reid and Deborah Autorino Gift, 1983. (1983.130)

It also appears that players at this time fretted their basses, by tying pieces of gut around the neck at semi-tone intervals. This is described by Leopold Mozart in 1756: "bands of rather thick cord are attached to the neck at all the intervals in order to...improve the tone"¹², and is confirmed in one of the Haydn receipts of 1765, when the court "violon [was] newly strung, with new fret, new velvet, pegs repaired, glued, and a new bow"¹³. Pictures and engravings of players from this time indicate that the instrument was played with a long convex bow, which was held underhand ("German" style).

Haydn's missing concerto may also be assessed by placing it into context with the extant concertante violone parts to his symphonies, and with the other known concerti from the Viennese Classical school of composers. This music is familiar to modern bass players, since both the orchestral and solo music make up a portion of our standard repertoire. Whether it's one of Haydn's Symphonies #6-8 with their solo parts, "The" Dittersdorf concerto (actually, he wrote more than one) or Mozart's aria "Per questa bella mano" for bass voice, double bass and accompaniment, most bass players feel they have a comfortable take on the music from this time period. The following performance practice issues may come as a surprise.

During the 18th century, in ensemble playing, the double bass player read from the same part as the 'cellist and the rest of the continuo section. Yet the double bassist was expected not to play the part literally, but to modify his part, and in ways that may seem radical, and unbelievable to modern players. In this early stage of its development, the double bass was a standard and essential instrument for use in theatrical and operatic orchestras, largely because it provided great dramatic effect when it reinforced the bass line by playing an octave below the 'cello. In its function as support to the bass line, it was not used indiscriminately (i.e. all the time). Due to the small size of such ensembles (remember that Haydn's early orchestra comprised a total of 10-15 players) and the fact that it was nearly always an accompanimental instrument, double bass players were expected to more-or-less edit the bass line, using their own good taste and judgment.

Their function was to help punctuate and define the harmonic, melodic or rhythmic structure of the piece, and so although they read from the same music as the 'cello and the keyboard, it was expected that they would radically simplify their part, so as not to interfere with or drown out the melody¹⁴. It should be stressed that this was a widespread practice, and not simply in effect "when bass players couldn't play the part" or "because the 'cellist was playing too loudly" (or any of those other reasons modern players cite when the bass is cut out of the continuo section!), but purely for the sake of making pleasant, balanced, good music. This is also not a reflection that bassists couldn't play lightly back then, but rather that an "educated" musical taste was a preference for the double bass to highlight certain aspects of the score, instead of being an ever-present sonority.

In the middle of the 18th century, composers started to experiment with giving the double bass its own exposed line, which was separate from the regular bass line, and sounded an octave below written pitch. The parts were always qualified by some kind of specific terminology, either "solo" or "concertante" preceded the instrument name, and they were notated on a separate line in the score from the rest of the basso continuo. In many cases, the solo lines in these pieces faded into and out of the rest of the bass line, and the solo part was designed specifically to contrast another solo instrument or an orchestral *ritornello*. The earliest known piece composed in this style is the "Grillen Symphonie" written by Georg Philip Telemann¹⁵ during the 1750's, for nine instruments and featuring solo lines for two "contrebasse concertante". Haydn's Symphonies #6-8 were composed not long after that in 1761, and each has a solo violone part in the Trio of the third movement, which provides contrast to the texture and timbre of the opening of the movement. (They also only require one bassoon...) Haydn's other symphonies that include solo parts for the violone are #72 (dated 1763 by Robbins Landon) and #31 (1765).

Haydn's missing bass concerto is the first of this new genre, and clearly evolves simultaneously with his exploration of the double bass timbre as a solo instrument in the

symphony. Haydn's name then, joins the list, or rather HEADS the list of solo compositions for double bass, which proliferated at the end of the 18th century. Much has been written concerning the double bass repertoire of the "Viennese" school, but unfortunately for English-speaking readers, most of the reliable information is published in German¹⁶. It is beyond the scope of this present article to list and describe a full chronology of the concerto and concertante repertoire, but it does seem worth establishing the facts that the ensuing solo repertoire by Dittersdorf, Wenzel Pichl, Anton Zimmermann, Vanhal, Hoffmeister, Sperger and Mozart was associated with centers other than the Esterhazy estate, and written for a later generation of illustrious double bass soloists. The Haydn concerto is associated with this school thanks to its genre and tradition, but not necessarily as one of the pieces that circulated widely with the traveling virtuosi.

It would be fantastic if someday this lost concerto were to be found. This idea is not entirely preposterous considering that Haydn's famous C major Cello Concerto was only rediscovered at the Radenin Castle in Prague in 1961. I have recently heard speculation that the missing concerto may turn up as part of the Sperger manuscripts, located in Schwerin, Germany. But I find this possibility remote, since the Schwerin manuscripts have been studied carefully, and described in detail by Adolf Meier¹⁷, and several other musicologists. Further, Johann Matthias Sperger (1750-1812) was a young lad at the time of the missing concerto's composition, and although he came to know Haydn later in the century, by this time there was a sizable collection of solo repertoire available, and it was not common practice to play "old" music. (Anything older than 20 years at this time was considered "ancient".) I find it more likely that this concerto might turn up in a Czech, Hungarian or Polish archive, that might have acquired part of the Esterhazy music library over the years, or have secreted away documents during the World Wars for their protection, and not yet have identified the piece. So it seems especially important that we, as bass players, make note of what the opening of the piece looks like. Perhaps some day,

one of us will beat the musicologists by recognizing it, and pulling it out of a stack of unidentified manuscripts! Here's hoping...

¹H.C.Robbins Landon. Haydn: Chronicle and Works, 5 vols. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

²ibid. Vol. 1, p.375

³ibid. Vol. 1, p.381

⁴The terminology of bass instruments is extremely confusing, and does not always give a precise definition of the instrument's family or features. In general, the term violone does not, in many cases apply to this specific Germanic type. But "violone", "contra violone" and "bass violon" are some of the names by which the German community referred to the specific instrument described above.

⁵Robbins Landon op.cit. Vol. 1, p.647 Sadly, this receipt is only described by Robbins Landon as an addenda, and has been overlooked by Hoboken and other modern-day Haydn cataloguers.

⁶Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Mus.Ms.Kat. 607. Facsimile edition: Larsen, Jens Peter. Three Haydn Catalogues, Second Edition. New York: Pendragon Press, 1979.

⁷Literature concerning this music has been prolific in the past 30 years, especially by German scholars. For non-German readers, the availability of information has been limited and of dubious scholarship. It might be hoped that before long, this material will be available in translation or new publications in English.

⁸Budapest, Furstl. Esterhazysches Archiv, Elsslersche Haydn-Verzeichnis, 1805. Facsimile edition: Larsen, Jens Peter. Three Haydn Catalogues, Second Edition. New York: Pendragon Press, 1979.

⁹Fetis, F.J. Biographie Universelle des Musiciens. Paris, 1861.

¹⁰I should stress, however, it was not the ONLY double bass instrument in use in Germanic lands. For those seeking to define Bach's violone, this particular instrument is NOT appropriate, and the issue is complex and beyond the scope of this present discussion.

¹¹US-Wc. Prinner, J.J. Musicalischer Schlissel. 1677

¹²Mozart, Leopold. Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing. English translation by Editha Knocker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.

¹³Robbins Landon op.cit. Vol. 1, p.423

¹⁴This practice is described in detail, with four pages of examples of how to simplify a 'cello line, in Corrette, Michel. Methode pour apprendre a jouer de la contrebasse a 3, 4 et 5 cordes. Paris, 1781.

¹⁵Solo parts for the double bass (and by this I mean specifically melodic parts that are to be played by the bass instrument sounding one octave below written pitch) do not start to appear in any repertoire until the mid-1700's. Many bassists may be surprised that the Baroque repertoire they know to be for "violone" does not apply to our instrument. As mentioned above, the term violone was used over several centuries

to describe several different instruments. Almost all of the Italian music, written from c.1680 until 1740 that specifies violone, probably applies to the 'cello, and it was intended to be played AT the notated pitch. Sorry!

¹⁶Planyavsky, Alfred. Geschichte des Kontrabasses. Tutzing: Schneider, 1970., Meier, Adolf. Konzertante Musik fur Kontrabass in der Wiener Klassik. Chiemsee: Musikverlag Emil Katzbilchler, 1969., Fink, Bernhard M. Die Geschichte des Kontrabasses und seine Trennung vom Violoncello in der orchestralen Instrumentation. Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 1974.

¹⁷Meier, Adolf. Konzertante Musik fur Kontrabass in der Wiener Klassik. Chiemsee: Musikverlag Emil Katzbilchler, 1969.