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# A Lyrical Pairing

Rossini's Duetto for  
Cello and Double Bass

BY JEREMY MCCOY

ONE OF THE GEMS of the double-bass chamber-music repertoire is Gioachino Rossini's Duetto per violoncello e contrabasso. Rossini (1792–1868) is best known as the composer of several of opera's most recognizable classics, but he also produced a number of charming instrumental chamber works throughout his lifetime.

The son of professional musicians, Rossini's prodigious musical talent was fostered by his father, a horn and trumpet player, and his mother, a singer. While a young student at the Bologna Conservatory, Rossini wrote a collection of sonatas for a quartet comprised of two violins, cello, and double bass. These pieces demonstrate the 12-year-old's early appreciation

for the double bass as a chamber instrument. By his early 20s, Rossini had already achieved international acclaim as the composer of a few highly successful operas. In 1823 he accepted a post as director of le Theatre Italien in Paris and spent the next seven years in that city and in London. It was during one of his extended sojourns to London that Rossini wrote his Duetto for cello and double bass, which is excerpted here.

Another celebrated Italian expatriate living in London at that time was the double bassist Domenico Dragonetti (1763–1846). Dragonetti was an acclaimed virtuoso, sought after as soloist and chamber player, and was much admired by both Beethoven and Haydn, whose compositions, inspired in large part by his abilities, brought greater prominence to the orchestral role of the double bass. For most of his career, Dragonetti made his home in London, playing at the King's Theater.

The wealthy banker, patron of the arts, and Lord Mayor of London Sir David Solomons commissioned Rossini to write the Duetto. It was first performed at a private musical soiree

in Solomons' home on July 21, 1824 with Sir David's brother Philip Joseph on cello and his good friend Dragonetti on bass.

As composer of arguably the greatest Italian "opera buffo," *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Rossini possessed gifts for lyricism and comedy perfectly suited to pairing these two instruments to great effect. Sadly, the work soon fell into obscurity. There is no record of any public performance over the



CHARMING: Gioachino Rossini is best known for opera, but his chamber music also delights.

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## play it!

next 144 years. The original manuscript remained in the Solomons family until 1968 when it came to the attention of double bassist Rodney Slatford, whose firm, Yorke Editions, published it in 1969. An excerpt appears on pages 38-39.

#### POCKET OPERA

The Duetto is composed in true operatic fashion, albeit on a much smaller scale. Rossini hardly lavished great attention on the piece, as it was composed in its entirety only the day before its premiere! The opening phrases of the first movement serve as a short "overture" leading into a duetto aria. The second movement assigns a beautiful *cantabile* melody to the cello followed by a dramatic *tempesta* section dominated by the double bass. The finale returns to a sharing of melodic material, this time in a bravura style, and charges to the end with an exhilarating "Rossini crescendo."

There are many discrepancies between Rossini's autograph score and the original parts written in Dragonetti's hand. These differences are merely a reflection of the common performance practice of the day, and players today should likewise feel free to take liberties with bowings, phrasing, and ornamentation. I will suggest only a few of the many possible choices available to performers. However, whatever choices you make, always keep in mind that this work is operatic in nature. You should attempt to play as "vocally" as possible.

#### A FEW POINTERS

The excerpt on the following pages is from the first movement of the Duetto. Beginning in the first measure of the excerpt (bar 99), the cello enters with the melody. The closest general dynamic marking is piano but the sound must not be thin. A *dolce* (as with the bass entrance in bar 107) mezzo forte works well. The bowings suggested here are comfortable and allow for a bow speed that will "spin" a warm singing tone.

The cello bowing in bar 102 is designed to arrive on an up bow at the half note. This approach works especially well if the intention is to connect seamlessly into the next phrase—a pleasing, sustained effect that produces a longer line. Articulating all four eighths in one down bow, or hooking two and separating two, are equally good options. It's also fine to divide these eighths into two and two, ending down on the half note and inserting a small breath before continuing the next phrase with a down bow. All this holds true for the corresponding bar in the double bass (110). Coming out of the cello's trill in bar 105 (113 for bass), the 16ths are best slurred into beat three on a

As composer of arguably the greatest Italian 'opera buffo,' 'Il barbiere di Siviglia,' Rossini possessed gifts for lyricism and comedy perfectly suited to pairing cello and bass.

nically lifted up bow followed by a second up bow on the fourth beat.

Throughout this section the accompanying voice must be careful to play smoothly and sensitively while providing enough tone to support the melody. Bass players, with their shorter bows and thicker strings, may find it easier to take two bows to a bar through the accompanying quarters. Even so, maintain a smooth, connected phrase.

In bar 114, the cello should grow dynamically into the printed forte at 115. All of the faster note values through this section should be very well articulated. To the listener, a piece for two bass instruments sounds generally very low and, for this reason, maximum effort must go toward executing everything clearly to avoid a rumbling muddiness. This danger can also be averted by carefully balancing the voices. Both players should be careful to leave dynamic space for whichever is the more interesting voice.

The cello's slurred 16ths beginning on beat four of bar 120 (139 for bass) can easily become uneven, causing the groupings to sound as though they're tripping over one another. To avoid this, play small, almost inaudible accents on the bow changes to help organize the fingers and synchronize right and left hands. The cello's shift to a high E on the downbeat of bar 123 is particularly treacherous! Practice this carefully and, if necessary, make generous use of rubato.

Bars 127 through to the resolution at 131 (146 to 149 for bass) may be treated as a quasi cadenza. Players may want to add some additional ornamentation in the half-note bars. Too much ornamentation or excessive visual "clowning" in this spot or elsewhere, however, can overwhelm the genuine elegance of the work and ultimately detract from the performance. On the other hand, plenty of bluster is called for at bar 131 leading into the double bass's repetition of the material. □



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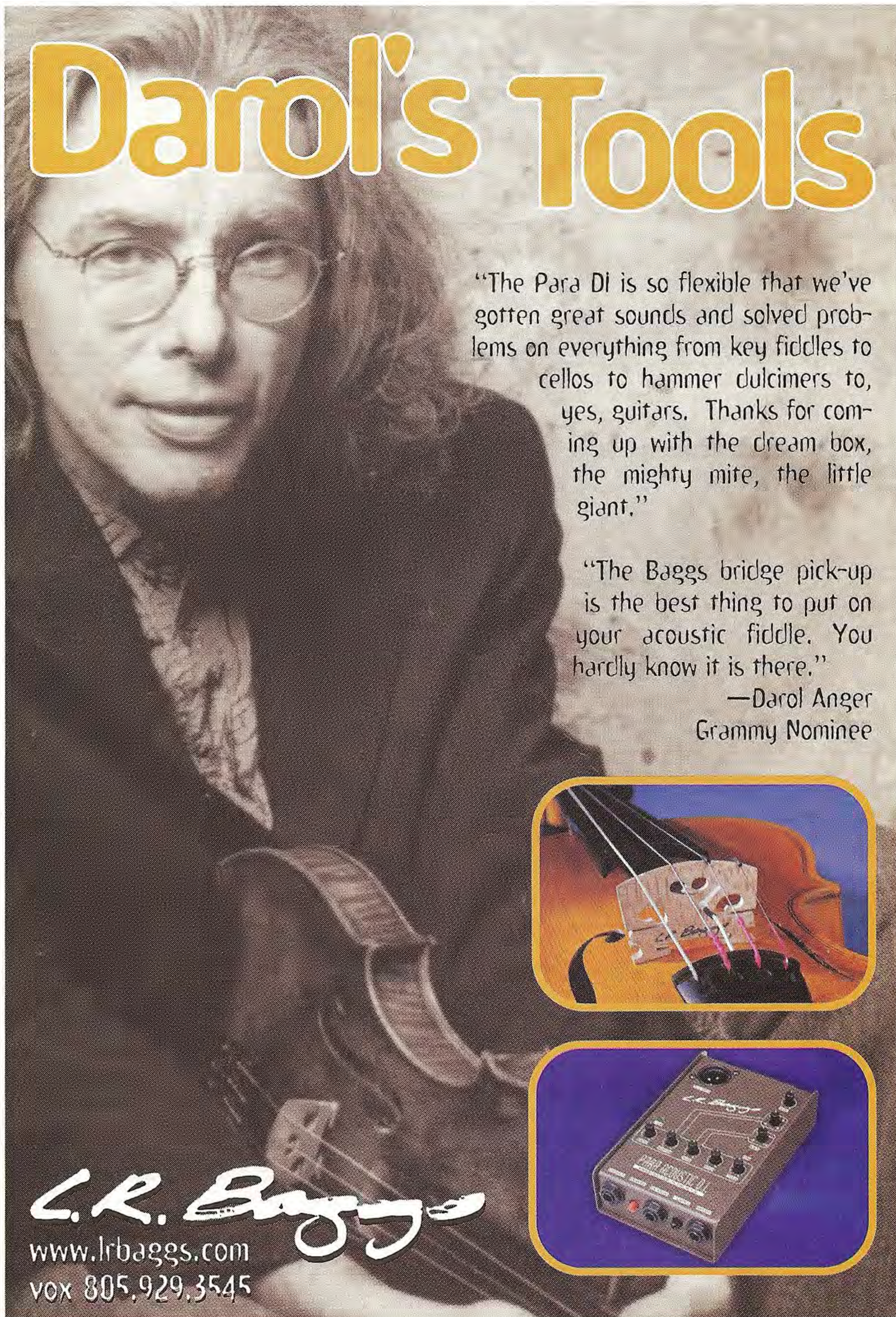
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# Duetto per violoncello e contrabbasso

GIOACHINO ROSSINI

This excerpt is taken from the first movement, marked Allegro. Throughout this section, cellist and double bassist take turns with the melodic line. The material is virtually the same for both voices, but each player should explore the unique characteristics of his or her instrument in contrast to the other and,

working together with this in mind, create two distinct “operatic” characters. I had the opportunity to record Rossini’s Duetto with cellist Steven Doane on the recently released CD *Dialogues with Double Bass* (Bridge, 9163).

—J.M.

99

Cello

Bass

105

*tr*

*dolce*

112

*f*

*f*

118

122

126

Musical score for measures 126-129. The top staff features a melodic line with slurs and a fermata. The bottom staff has a rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and dynamic markings.

130

Musical score for measures 130-135. Includes a trill in the top staff and triplets in the bottom staff. Dynamic markings include *ff* and *f*.

136

Musical score for measures 136-139. Features continuous triplet patterns in both staves.

140

Musical score for measures 140-142. The top staff has a simple rhythmic pattern, while the bottom staff has a complex triplet accompaniment.

143

Musical score for measures 143-146. The top staff has a rhythmic pattern, and the bottom staff has a complex triplet accompaniment. Dynamic marking *p* is present.

147

Musical score for measures 147-150. Includes a trill in the top staff and a fermata in the bottom staff. Dynamic marking *f* is present.