

Living a 'Reverie'

Singing the praises of Giovanni Bottesini's
bel canto treasure for bassists

BY JEREMY MCCOY

AUDIENCES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CAPTIVATED by the high-flying feats of instrumental virtuosi. By the middle of the 19th century, the starring role of the virtuoso had come into full bloom and was manifested by the popularity of "salon pieces." These vehicles for the virtuoso performer were short, flashy works sometimes adopting the bel-canto style of Romantic Italian opera (a style that stressed ease, purity, precision, and evenness of tone). Even the double bass, one of

the most unlikely of solo voices, enjoyed a renaissance during this age of instrumental masters. "Reverie" (excerpted on pages 36 and 37) is one of several salon pieces left to us by Giovanni Bottesini, the extraordinary virtuoso who revolutionized the technical and musical possibilities of the double bass.

THE PAGANINI OF THE DOUBLE BASS

Bottesini was born in Crema, in what is now Italy, in 1821. His father, a clarinetist and composer, encouraged Giovanni's interest in music, providing him with instruction on violin and timpani in addition to the training he received as a boy chorister. At age 13, Bottesini applied to the Milan Conservatory but discovered there were only two placements available, one for bassoon and the other for double bass. Having never played either instrument, he made a very quick study of the double bass and within a few months was able to perform well enough to gain admission. At his audition, Bottesini is

reported to have said: "I know sir that I have played out of tune but, when I learn where to place my fingers, this shall no longer happen."

During his four years at the conservatory, Bottesini acquired a phenomenal mastery of the bass and composed a number of very challenging works for his newly adopted instrument. An important legacy of Bottesini's method is the use of a French-style bow. Before this time, the German-style bow favored by another renowned double bassist, Domenico Dragonetti, was employed almost exclusively. After graduating from the conservatory, Bottesini and his three-string Carlo Giuseppe Testore bass embarked upon an itinerant career as opera-orchestra bassist and soloist. His travels took him throughout Europe and across the Atlantic to Havana, Cuba, and to the American cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York.

Bottesini also became a conductor of international repute and held posts as conductor of Italian opera at theaters in Paris, Palermo, Barcelona, and London. A highlight of his conducting career was his selection by lifelong friend and colleague, Giuseppe Verdi, to conduct the Cairo premiere of "Aida" on December 27, 1871. Even when acting as maestro, Bottesini would occasionally take to the stage during intermissions and perform his own compositions based upon themes from the opera being presented. His fantasies on "La Sonnambula," "I Puritani," and "Lucia di Lammermoor" remain staples of the repertoire.

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After age 50, Bottesini devoted more of his time to composition. Over his lifetime he turned out at least nine operas, 11 string quartets, and various other sacred and chamber works. Today, it is his oeuvre for double bass—two concerti (a lost third may soon surface), duo concertanti in various combinations, gran duetti, and numerous works for solo double bass with piano—that is regularly performed and that comprises a lion's share of our repertoire.

Despite his triumphs, Bottesini found himself in and out of debt. He died in Parma, virtually penniless, on July 7, 1889.



BOTTOM LINE: Bottesini and his three-string bass.

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PERFORMANCE POINTERS

Possibly the most profitable exercise in preparing "Reverie" would be to listen to a healthy dose of Bellini and Donizetti. This piece is so closely modeled on solo arias by those composers that a convincing performance must adopt the operatic bel canto style. It is most important to lavish attention on generating a beautiful, even tone quality through all registers.

Secondly, phrases should be shaped with the breathing of a singer in mind. Undoubtedly, there are places where we string players are able to create a seamless line longer than a singer might effectively produce (an example is the end of m. 22 through m. 26). Nevertheless, planning the internal shape, the slight hills and valleys of a long phrase, as if taking a breath were an absolute necessity, will make an unbroken line of bowed sound all the more impressive.

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Finally, liberties with the tempo (rubato) should be used freely and with imagination to highlight the sentimental or dramatic moment and to allow for ornaments to be played at a speed characteristic of singing.

Starting at the beginning (m. 5), I suggest setting your metronome at approximately $\text{♩} = 50$. Through this opening minor section, make sure that there is a noticeable difference between triplet and dotted rhythms; the former have a lilting character as opposed to the somewhat emphatic character of the latter. Giving attention to this sort of rhythmic detail is analogous to the attention a singer gives to diction and will impart a speech-like clarity to the instrumental line. Try thinking of this first section as three four-bar phrases, each divided into a statement and response. Terrace the dynamics upward through each of the three long phrases before tapering to a more relaxed dynamic to begin the next section in the parallel major.

The next ten bars will automatically take on a more optimistic, open quality due to the major key. Excitement should build quickly through the ascending repetitions of a two-bar statement (mm. 17–20). In this section (and elsewhere), where the emotional

content is building, slight elisions of pitch known as portamento can be used to great effect. An example of this is on the third beat of m. 21 where I have indicated a "dragged" fingering over the dotted figure. This is imitative of a singer and also lends greater weight to the suspension on the downbeat of the following measure. Two descending statements follow, temporarily releasing tension but, rather than coming to rest, connect seamlessly through an ornamented figure on the last beat of m. 23 and drive upward to new heights.

The "breath" marking after the high A in m. 26 indicates a complete break in the music. Take at least enough time for the sound to clear and then gently transition through the triplet pickups into the next section. (Note: "Reverie" is performed with solo tuning and will sound one whole tone higher than printed. To avoid confusion, I have referred to pitches as printed.)

In m. 27 we arrive at a major version of the opening melodic material. Once again there is an ascending repetition of the motive propelling the phrase to a climax. It works well to find the high B using the harmonic on the G-string and then immediately press the string to the side, stopping the note not against the fingerboard but with sideways pressure alone. This is a technique that Bottesini himself frequently used in the middle-to-upper range of thumb position. I find that it is often easier to generate a good vibrato on very high notes using this stopping method.

Now that you're making such a stunning sound on the high B, hold it out and enjoy—pretend you're a tenor!

For the glissando down to D, quickly transition into the normal stopping method (against the fingerboard) since this slide ends at least a full octave below the "side-stopping" range. The glissando should not be labored but flow naturally into a recovery of the tempo.

The final eight bars are a coda that allows some additional flourishes and brings the energy level down for a calm finish. From a musical standpoint, the trickiest thing to negotiate here is organizing the coloratura 16th notes so that they are smooth and well controlled. I suggest placing small emphases on the notes for which I've marked editorial accents (mm. 36 and 38). Note that the bowings follow a different arrangement from these rhythmically emphasized groupings. The composite effect will create a smooth, well-phrased line. The last three bars are best played with harmonics as opposed to stopped notes.

The "dreamier" sound quality of harmonics brings this reverie to a perfect close. □

24 *a tempo*

cresc. I *f* *p* *rit.*

27 *a tempo*

p

30

cresc. *gliss.*

33

V freely

37

p

40 *rall. e dim.*

rall. e dim.

* Instructions for turns in mm. 23 and 33.

Measure 23

rit.

Measure 33

(Change to up bow before the turn.)