TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES AND SOLUTIONS IN DOUBLE BASS

CONCERTOS

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

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Historically, double-basses and their wielders are notorious for a lack of soloistic quality. Because of this notoriety, composers have tended to stray away from writing for the double-bass concerto medium. This compositional task has been left to those who truly understand the instrument. The three concertos that I have selected to study are those that I have played (or am currently playing), including a concerto that was on my MM recital. The three concertos also introduce different technical difficulties that were understood by the composers, as they themselves were bassists. Serge Koussevitzky’s concerto is robust and lyrical. Its melodic content is far simpler than the other two. The remaining concertos, one composed by Giovanni Bottesini (no. 2) and the other by Édouard Nanny (named for Domenico Dragonetti, the dedicatee), are written in Italian and French styles, respectively. All three of the works are late Romantic works. The first movement of each work will be examined, as first movements alone are usually requested for professional symphony audition purposes. I will also give a brief historical background for each work.

I have selected these concertos because they each present unique technical challenges. The challenges that rise in these works concern bowings, fingerings, harmonics, and bow strokes. Every bassist has a different approach to the music in each concerto, meaning different musical choices will be made, including decisions about tempo and dynamics. This paper cover information about individual preference, but in the string world, occasionally “whatever (fingering, bowing) works for you,” you being the player, is the attitude about virtuosic repertoire. Due to these biases, I will present these technical challenges, and their solutions, in the same way that I would present them to a young bassist learning these pieces for the first time.
The techniques that I employ in my writing come from many different famous double bass pedagogues, including Franz Simandl, Francesco Petracchi, Harold Robinson, Edgar Meyer, and Eugene Levinson, among others. Often, the specific bowing or fingering that I choose is an amalgamation of some or all of the techniques taught by these double bass teachers. The notation software Noteflight was used to notate musical examples.

**Dragonetti Concerto in G major**

Édouard Nanny’s concerto, written for Domenico Dragonetti, first published in 1925, is a very popular work for young bassists. This is often the first advanced level concerto played by students, usually preceded by the Antonio Capuzzi concerto.¹ Still, it is incorrectly referred to as the Dragonetti, and not the Nanny, bass concerto.

The technical challenges presented in this work are less intense than the ones in the Koussevitzky or the Bottesini, but still require a considerable amount of problem solving for the young bassist. The first difficult passage is actually the very first section in which the soloist enters, measures twelve through nineteen. Often, young bassists will try to play the first and third note as a harmonic. While this is easier, it causes the third of the triad to have a different tone and different character than the other two notes. To avoid this, it will sound best to actually finger the first and third notes as well as the second. Here, the fingering is not so important, because if you actually want to finger all three notes you will have to shift, but the fingering in figure 1.0 is acceptable. The second half of measure thirteen through measure fourteen is often out of tune, because young bassists see the D pedal and abandon any sense of fingering. Using a

¹ This concerto is musically mature, written in the classical style, but the technical challenges are far less demanding.
standard G major scale fingering will be just fine. The stroke here should be on the string but *non legato*. As the bassist is shifting into the lower positions, the stroke can become more off the string. Continuing, as the player shifts back up into thumb position, the stroke should be more on the string. Then, the triplets should be fully on the string, and the player should use about half the bow on each triplet. See figure 1.0.

Figure 1.0. mm 12-19. Dragonetti Bass Concerto.

The next section is measure thirty-one, including the pick up, through thirty-eight. This section is difficult largely because of the triplet passage. In thirty-one the player can stay in thumb position, then in measure thirty two use the scale to come back to first position. The fingering used for the triplets here is slightly different than the standard option, which tends to value staying on the same string over using unnecessary string crossings, however, using this fingering eliminates two shifts completely and the player is only playing one note on a different string. If the player chooses to play the A in the third beat of measure thirty-four on the D string with fourth finger, they eliminate the need to shift back to first position and back up to third position for just one note. This fingering is safer, and sacrifices no musical quality. In measure thirty-five, the bassist stays in thumb position after playing the first G with thumb. The D major scale in measure thirty six uses a standard fingering. See figure 1.1.
Measures seventy-three through eighty are difficult because it is possible that the fingering choice will introduce a risk for faulty shifting. The player needs to avoid any risk of a bad shift, so the fingering is important, as it needs to eliminate as many shifts as possible.

Starting in measure seventy-three, the player should, instead of playing the published slurs, break them each into two bows, this makes the accents easier to articulate and the shifts easier to perform. Measures seventy-four through seventy-seven follow a sort of pattern, where the root of the embellished triad is always played on the D string, with the highest two fingers of the given position. The goal of this fingering is to keep beats two and three completely in the same position, avoiding risk of intonation. The G major embellished triad should be played all on the G string, because it breaks the pattern. The four octave D major arpeggio should be played all on the D string, using harmonics at the end. See figure 1.2.
The final section of this movement includes a virtuosic harmonic passage. Traditionally, players take a slight *meno mosso* here, which allows more time for the harmonics to speak. There really are only a few tricks to playing harmonic passages like this, and they are all to do with the bow. The player must make sure that they are using the right amount of bow and enough bow pressure, otherwise the harmonics will sound weak and unsupported. See figure 1.3.
**Koussevitzky Bass Concerto in E minor**

Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951) is a singular character in the lineage of the Double Bass. He influenced the world of music as a conductor, double-bassist, and composer. Koussevitzky was the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 to 1949. He was one of Leonard Bernstein’s teachers and a long-time collaborator with Bela Bartok and Aaron Copland.²

This concerto opens with a sweeping recitative-like figure in the double bass. Then the first statement of the melody is presented in E minor. Generally speaking, the first sixty measures of this work is technically straightforward. There are a couple of difficult shifts to navigate, but the first section is accessible.

Starting in measure sixty-one, the music begins to get more technically demanding. Choosing a bowing in the triplet section is tricky. Some people choose to do two beats to a bow, others prefer one beat to a bow. Using a bow per beat allows the player to get more sound and makes the shifting easier, so that is what I recommend. In terms of fingering choice, I would recommend following a pattern similar to the third excerpt discussed in the Dragonetti. The goal of the fingering should be to eliminate as many shifts as possible. As well, another goal should be to avoid shifting or string crossing under a slur. So, for measures 61-68, the player should follow a fingering pattern like the one in figure 2.0. As well, for this whole section, the player should stay close to the middle of the bow, using about a third of the length of the bow, and use a little bit more bow in the upper positions.

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The next section, measures 69-77, is difficult not only because of intonation, but because of the bowing technique that must be used. The recommended bowing is a down bow on the first sixteenth and an upbow on the next three. This bowing should be used for measures 69-72. When executing this bowing, the bassist needs to use a fast bow on the first sixteenth and a slower bow on the next three notes. This will make sure that the bassist does not run out of bow on the latter three sixteenth notes. The fingerings in this section are hard, because shifting is largely unavoidable. The first two measures are played with all 2-2-1-2’s. The next two measures follow.
a shifting pattern, with the first two beats of each bar played on the D string, and the latter two beats of each bar played on the G string. The next two measures are straight forward. In measures 75-77 the pleasure should work to assure that their thumb does not move as the non pedal note is ascending. This is one of the most notorious intonation spots in this piece. The thumb will want to slide upward as the player plays the figure.

After this section is another *Alla breve*, and the fingering on the next page will help this section out quite a bit with intonation. As well, it is helpful to break up some of the traditional slurs in this, which makes playing the phrases easier and allows for greater control.

Figure 2.1. mm 83-127. Koussevitzky Bass Concerto.
The coda of the first movement is characterized by the ascending double stops written for the bass. Presumably, every bassist will use the same fingering for these sections, as there is really only one that works. The most present issue with the coda is the use of the bow. It is imperative that the player remain relaxed, because the bow stroke is very specific and very energetic. Often, young bassists will become too tense in this section, and the stroke will be impossible.

**Bottesini Bass Concerto no. 2**

Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889) was a bass virtuoso in the late nineteenth century. It is a commonly expressed sentiment that he was accepted as the “Paganini of the Double Bass.” His pieces are known for their acrobatic technical displays and dramatic quality, much like the dramatic quality of an opera. He was a longtime friend of Giuseppe Verdi, and was also himself an opera composer. Bottesini composed thirteen operas and was also a successful opera conductor.³

This bass concerto is the most difficult bass concerto that young bassists learn. It acts as a sort of right of passage for the student bassist. As well, the first movement of this work is the concerto movement that many bassists use for their symphony orchestra audition. It contains many technical challenges, and the bassist must use great fingering choices and effective bowings in order to execute the music as written. Additionally, this concerto provides many more moments for individual expression.

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The first moment in this piece that transcends the standard intuition of a double bassist occurs in measure thirty five. Here there is an E above the staff in treble clef. If one is aware of the traditional anatomy of the modern double bass, they know that this note is past the end of the fingerboard. There are a few options for how to execute playing this note. One option is to use false harmonics. This option is fine, and perhaps the safest option, but the tone color that false harmonics produce is not appropriate for this moment in the piece. The second option is to use the harmonics on the D string for the E and the D in this measure. This is extremely difficult to execute because the player is shifting from the G harmonic on the G string to the E harmonic on the D string, and in that area of the bass, the slightest inaccuracy in finger placement causes the wrong note to come out. The third option is to use a method where you place your finger on the inside of the string and pull outward to stop the string at the right pitch. This method may seem intimidating at first, but with practice, it becomes the easiest and best sounding approach to this moment. See figure 3.0.

Figure 3.0. m 35. Bottesini Bass Concerto no. 2.

The next passage to be discussed is measures 40-45. These bars are characterized by a florid bass line that goes up the D string and then down the G string. The reason for going up the D string is both to do with tone color and with logistics. If the bassist uses the D string to travel
to thumb position, they will arrive at their destination earlier. This will allow the dominant
cords at the pinnacle of each phrase to be played with minimal shifting. This passage is a useful
illustration for a helpful rule: If a player has a fast scalar passage immediately followed by a fast
non-scalar passage, then the player should use the scalar passage to get somewhere that will
allow them to play the non-scalar passage with as little shifting as possible. See figure 3.1.

Measures 50-56 further illustrate the rule of using scales as logistical vehicles for the
hand. Using the pick-ups into measure fifty, the player travels up the D string to third position.
This allows the player to be in a location that makes the A octave shift much easier. After the
shift, the player is in a thumb position that allows for the same preparation for the D octave shift.
After this, the player will use the Bb scale to get back to first position, in preparation for the low
Bb.

Figure 3.1. mm 40-54. Bottesini Bass Concerto no. 2.
In measures 80-90, which is the most athletic section of the piece, the fingering I like to use is largely to do with color, but also makes the phrases more seamless. Starting in measure 80, I recommend doing the third and fourth beats up the D string. This will allow the bassist to maintain the darkness of the A and D string color, while also keeping the long slur fluid. In the next measure, the bassist should play the third and fourth beats up the G string, which gives to music a brighter tone and provides a bow stroke that is not interrupted by string crossings.

Measures 82-85 should be done solely in thumb position. Usually, players should avoid playing in thumb position on the A string, but here it works because of the way in which the player must be agile in bars 84-85. To play this section solely on the G string is so much more work, and may sound slightly better, but not enough to merit the difficulty of that choice. The next five measures of the piece are difficult because there is no real fingering pattern. Each measure needs a unique fingering because the intervals fall in different places of the arpeggio. For example, in measure eighty-six, the pattern (starting on the second eighth note of the measure) is as follows: minor third, fourth, major third, minor third, fourth, major third. The next measure is different: fourth, major third, minor third, fourth, major third, minor third. Then, again, the following measures are different. This lack of pattern makes these measures particularly tricky.
The pieces I have chosen to review, study, and offer solutions for, are commonly performed by young bassists, as well as bassists trying to win an audition for a major symphony orchestra. I hope that my work in offering solutions concerning bowings, fingers, and other techniques, has given young bassists the tools they need to learn these pieces more quickly and effectively.
Bibliography


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