

**Luigi Boccherini: Opera Omnia (Christian Speck, general editor)
Volume III: 6 Sonatas for Keyboard and Violin, Op. 5 (Rudolf Rasch,
ed). Preface in Italian, English, and German; Score; Critical
Commentary. Ut Orpheus Edizioni, 2009.**

There have been several incomplete attempts at Boccherini editions since the mid-20th century, and we can only hope that this one actually continues through to the end. It will certainly take a while. This is the third volume from Italian publisher Ut Orpheus, and like its predecessors it is of excellent quality. The first contained all of Boccherini's concert arias, marvelous pieces that hopefully will get some play now that scores and parts are readily available. Volume Two offered his charming early Violin Duets, Op. 3. Ut Orpheus is surely correct in focusing on some of the less familiar pieces before tackling the hundreds of string quartets and quintets, and of course we already have a complete set of the symphonies (albeit not exactly in Urtext editions) courtesy of Doblinger.

Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805) was one of the most prolific, important, and highly respected composers of instrumental music in the Classical period. He was born in Lucca to an artistic family. His father was a double-bass player; his sister became a noted prima ballerina in Vienna and elsewhere, while his brother was a poet and also a dancer who was evidently well connected at the Viennese court. He authored several opera libretti for Salieri (among others), as well as the text of Haydn's first oratorio, *Il Ritorno di Tobia*.

Young Luigi enjoyed considerable acclaim as a cellist. While still in his teens both he and his father played in opera orchestras in Vienna in the late 1750s and early 1760s, and although he was not in town for the premieres of Gluck's *Don Juan* in 1761 or *Orfeo* a bit later, he certainly was well-placed to get to know both the music and the composer. Gluck, for his part, reportedly praised the Italian's early compositions and gave the young composer encouragement. Boccherini also admired and corresponded with Haydn, who had a high regard for him (they may well have known each other personally).

Boccherini's works were widely published and disseminated, even though he spent almost all of his maturity in the relatively isolated backwater of Madrid, Spain. Haydn's ex-pupil Ignaz Pleyel, in particular, printed a large corpus of Boccherini's works at his publishing house in Paris. From 1786 Boccherini was on salary to Friedrich Wilhelm II, the cello-playing King of Prussia (think of Haydn's and Mozart's "Prussian" quartets). His death notice in the August 21, 1805 edition of the Leipzig *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, cited by his biographer Germaine de Rothschild, offers perhaps the best perspective on his contemporary reputation:

Two months ago there died in Madrid, at the age of nearly seventy, Luigi Boccherini, truly one of the most distinguished instrumental composers of his country, Italy. Unlike the majority of his compatriots he advanced in step with the times and

with the development of the art of music in Germany. From the progress of that art, particularly that part of it which was either achieved or inspired by his old friend, Joseph Haydn, he assimilated into his own work all that he could without denying his own personality. Italy ranks him, for quartets and similar music, at least as high as Haydn; Spain, where he spend the greater part of his active life, in many of his works actually prefers him to the German master, who in that country is sometimes thought too learned; France, without wishing to place him on the same level as Haydn, has a high esteem for him, while Germany, with its present preference for all that is more difficult, more artistic, more learned, appears still to know him too little; but where he is known and where, particularly, the melodic part of his work is enjoyed and appreciated, he is both loved and honored.

He continued to compose until the end of his life, and only recently admirable quartets and quintets by him have been published in Paris. The number of his works (almost all of them instrumental music, ranging from the sonata to the quintet) is very large. A special service that he rendered to the instrumental music of Italy, Spain, and even France as well, was that he was the first in those countries to compose quartets in which all of the instruments are used in the obbligato fashion; or at least he was the first to gain general acceptance there for works of this kind. He, and shortly after him Pleyel with his earliest work, created a sensation there with this type of music even earlier than Haydn, of whose music people were still rather afraid at the time.

He was in addition in his earlier years an admirable violoncellist, with an incomparable tone and an expressive melody which gave to his instrument a magical charm. All those who knew him praise him also as a good and honest man, who at all times loyally carried out his duties towards all the world. (Rothschild, Luigi Boccherini, pp. 187-8)

In other words, Boccherini was a card-carrying member of the Classical school with a fine international reputation, whose works typified his era's best and most characteristic qualities, Italian-style. Given the obvious nationalistic bias evident in this article, it would be difficult to imagine him receiving more fulsome praise. Although considered a minor figure today, his music has never entirely vanished from the international repertoire, particularly his symphonies, which rank among the most beautiful works of the period for chamber orchestra, and his numerous string quintets (with two cellos). All of his output displays a remarkably high level of craftsmanship, revealing great care and precision in musical notation. He uses certain expressive terminology regularly, giving his music a personal fingerprint on the printed page as well as in its actual sound: "amoroso," "soave," "dolcissimo," and "smorfioso" ("grimacing"), are just a few of the more colorful adjectives.

Boccherini's comparative obscurity today is easily explained. It has little to do with the famous and oft-repeated contemptuous dismissal of him as "the wife of Haydn," or the superficial view that he was a faded hack working in an outmoded "gallant" style. He wrote mostly chamber music, a connoisseur's medium to begin with, and left relatively few of the vocal works that sustained the reputations of even Mozart

(operas) and Haydn (oratorios and masses) throughout the 19th century. Although popular in France, he was denigrated in 19th century Germany (Spohr loathed him, for example), where the toxic nationalism that accompanied the rise of the academic discipline of musicology was hardly conducive to admitting an Italian as an equal into the ranks of the great Austro-German school of instrumental music.

And make no mistake, when it came to the instrumental forms in which the First Viennese School specialized, the symphony and string quartet particularly, Boccherini was not only a great composer, but an historically significant one. His writing of string quartets, for example, predates Haydn's, and as with the supposed orchestral innovations of the Mannheim and Viennese schools in the mid-18th century, the closer one looks the more apparent it becomes that all musical roads ultimately lead to Italy. This doesn't mean that Boccherini didn't have his own characteristic style that distinguishes him from Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. There is less motivic development, and more of that emphasis on vocal melody and pure tone-color that we have come to view as quintessentially Italian traits--but then this was equally true of many of the Viennese colleagues of the "Big Three" composers just mentioned. Boccherini was just better at his job than most of those others.

The Six Sonatas, Op. 5 show Boccherini's formal variety to excellent effect. Nos. 3 and 6 have two movements each, an opening moderato followed by a quicker finale. Although the other four works sport three movements apiece, we find variants of the basic fast-slow-fast pattern, including No. 4's slow-fast-minuet. This isn't in itself unusual; Haydn's lighter chamber works, the piano sonatas and trios, reveal a similarly flexible approach, but what is special is that gracious lyricism, expressively deepened by a piquant use of harmony, that Boccherini made his own. These sonatas also show clear evidence of having been planned as a set, of the composer making sure that they contain plenty of contrasting invention both within the individual works and between them.

Although written for keyboard and violin, the Op. 5 works falls into the category of "accompanied sonata," in the sense that they can be performed as straight clavier music with whatever instrument happens to be on hand; this despite the fact that the violin parts are rewarding, and quite independent. The set was announced for publication in 1768 by the Paris firm of Vernier, thus dating them towards the start of Boccherini's compositional career, and not incidentally to his initial visits to the French capital that welcomed him and proved so receptive to his art generally. As editor Rudolf Rasch explains in his extremely interesting and well-written preface, these pieces actually became the most successful single opus that Boccherini published in his lifetime.

The Vernier edition thus had a wide distribution throughout Europe and did much to secure the composer's international reputation, despite that fact that it remained the closest that Boccherini ever came to writing true music for keyboard solo. This element doubtless explains a good deal about these sonatas' enduring popularity.

They were particularly well adapted to the domestic market, certainly more so than the chamber works for larger string ensembles, many of which require an advanced technique from all of the participants. Or let's put it this way: bad amateur keyboard playing is always more tolerable than bad amateur string playing. At least the wrong notes won't be out of tune, or sound too different from the right ones.

There is some question as to what Boccherini's keyboard instrument of choice actually was. The use of "terraced" dynamics, limited to *pp*, *p*, and *f*, suggests the harpsichord as a practical first option, but the piano cannot be ruled out. The keyboard writing itself, as Rasch notes, is quite effective coming from a composer who was first and foremost a cellist, but one of things that makes these particular works so fascinating is that fact that around 1798 Boccherini undertook a thorough revision specifically for the piano, presumably for performances in Madrid (although the single autograph manuscript of the revised works is now housed in Parma). These new versions are included in the present volume as an appendix, and so we are given all six works twice. There can be no doubt, from the numerous dynamic nuances, crescendos particularly, that the piano is now the sole intended keyboard instrument.

Boccherini's revision is also valuable for what it tells us about the evolution of notation in the Classical period, and in particular for the light it sheds on the controversy surrounding the likely handling of vibrato in string parts. As a professional cellist of the Italian school, Boccherini's writing for his own group of instruments is exceptionally detailed, and he often notates pitch vibrato in both of the two most common symbolic ways then in use, either as a slurred staccato (*portato*) articulation on repeated notes in even rhythm [.....], or with a wavy line [~~~~~]. Here is an example of the latter, from the first movement of Sonata No. 4 in the 1768 original version:

The image shows a musical score for Sonata No. 4, first movement, starting at measure 19. The score is written for violin and piano. The violin part is in the upper two staves, and the piano part is in the lower staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The violin part begins with a rest, followed by a series of notes with a wavy line above them, indicating vibrato. The piano part consists of a continuous series of triplets. The dynamic marking *p* is placed below the first measure of the violin part.

Of course even in 1768, despite the fact that some performers and academics maintain that vibrato was used infrequently by virtue of its being classed as an "ornament," the only thing ornamental about the above violin passage is the use of symbolic notation (that is, the wavy line). The vibrato itself is intrinsic to the motive's musical identity, appearing consistently at most every occurrence. It also doesn't preclude other methods for indicating expressive timbre, such as the *con espressione* marking over the violin part at the start of the Third Sonata. However as

the Classical period progressed, composers began using verbal directions more frequently, pointing to an increasing standardization of notational habits as well as the need to characterize larger tracts of music in longer, more emotionally diverse movements.

Thus, in the 1798 version of this same passage, all the wavy lines have been removed, but of course this doesn't mean that Boccherini wanted no vibrato. On the contrary: instead, he writes *dolcissimo* every time this figure appears, extending the expressive timbre to the entire phrase (note also the corresponding *dolce* in the piano part):

The image shows a musical score for a passage from Boccherini's 1798 version. It consists of two staves: a violin staff on top and a piano staff on the bottom. The violin staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/8 time signature. It starts with a measure marked 'p' (piano) containing a triplet of eighth notes. The next measure has a wavy line above it, followed by another triplet. The third measure has a wavy line above it and is marked 'dolcissimo'. The piano staff begins with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs), a key signature of one sharp, and a 3/8 time signature. It starts with a measure marked 'p' containing a triplet of eighth notes. The next measure has a wavy line above it and is marked 'dolce'. The third measure has a wavy line above it and is marked 'dolcissimo'. The score continues with several more measures, each featuring a wavy line above the notes, indicating vibrato throughout the phrase.

This example tells us not just that the wavy line was in fact a clear indication to use pitch vibrato (and not, as some today contend, merely a stand-in for portato or some other form of bow articulation having no additional timbral significance), but it also suggests what *kind* of vibrato Boccherini wants--the relatively slow, "sweet" variety that authorities such as Leopold Mozart describe in their violin treatises as suitable for quiet passages. This stands in contrast to the quicker, more intensely agitated coloration reserved for loud, passionate, or *espressivo* phrases.

Indeed, it becomes increasingly clear on surveying the scores of this period, Boccherini's in particular, that composers not only felt perfectly comfortable indicating the use of pitch vibrato, they were sophisticated enough to specify which among the various kinds they felt most appropriately enhanced the emotions of a given passage. So to speak of the technique as an all-or-nothing proposition, of one vibrato type only that is either continuously present or entirely absent, is quite incorrect. Like other musical qualities capable of many gradations--such as articulation and dynamics--vibrato inhabits a broad expressive continuum that composers very quickly learned how to exploit to their advantage.

We can thus see in these examples the move away from the use of vibrato primarily as an improvised ornament applied to single tones, in favor of its presence being specified frequently as a variable but nonetheless integral musical component. The truth is that this process began well back into the Baroque period, particularly in orchestral music. There, the need to get multiple players to do the same thing at the same time led composers to specify certain expressive accents more plainly than we often find in music for soloists, where many details could be left to the discretion of the performer. This view flies in the face of the notion that orchestral players

particularly avoided vibrato in the 18th century because of its status as an ornament, but it tracks exactly not only contemporary treatises and eyewitness testimony, but also the evidence of the scores.

Today's school of "historically informed performance practice" (to its everlasting shame and the music's disadvantage) almost completely ignores the facts just described, largely because they don't make an interpretation sound different enough from our traditional conception to validate an artist's claims to unique authority in the repertoire. Nevertheless vibrato, in tandem with other forms of accent and articulation, played a critical role in the evolution of the Classical style to which Boccherini contributed so much. It gave him and his fellow composers a way to individualize the simple rhythmic components of larger melodies, as well as to create independent motives that serve as material for later development according to the dynamic process that eventually came to be known as "sonata form." The use of vibrato in passages such as these fulfills Gluck's stated desire to find a way to "give musical characters life, without changing their shapes."

Italian music, both as the original source of our notational vocabulary and by virtue of its traditional emphasis on tactile sensation and the affective qualities of melody, has an important role to play in resolving many of the controversies concerning performance practice in the Classical and Romantic periods. Its centrality to our understanding of Classical vocal music (opera in particular) is obvious, and has always been acknowledged. However, when it comes to purely instrumental composition the efforts of the Italian school have been neglected, at least until very recently. One of the primary reasons for this state of affairs has been the lack of authoritative critical editions, a situation exacerbated by the widespread disdain in musicological circles for Italian music from the Classical period onwards.

Composers such as Boccherini, who wrote primarily instrumental works and whose use of expressive terminology and notation was exceptionally precise, thus have a great deal to tell us. Of course, the fact that he also wrote wonderful music remains far and away the most important justification for the time and effort spent on a complete edition. The opportunity finally to see the breadth and depth of his achievement as a whole should go a long way toward regaining the recognition that he deserves. So while scholars may find in Boccherini the opportunity to resolve some thorny musicological issues, thanks to this beautifully produced new Critical Edition from Ut Orpheus of the complete works, both they and music lovers in general can look forward to having a very enjoyable time in the process.

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