



As seen in

ChamberMusic

A Publication of Chamber Music America JULY/AUGUST 2010, VOLUME 27, NUMBER 4

DOMENICO

Dragonetti: *Into the Light*

BY CLAIRE SYKES

Thanks to the efforts of a 21st-century bassist, a trove of compositions by a 19th-century bassist is finding its way back into the chamber music repertoire.

In the *Manuscript Room* of the British Museum, John Feeney pulled open one of the small mahogany file drawers and fingered through the mass of catalog cards, jotting down folio numbers on little slips of paper. He dropped these through a slot in the wall and waited, as he watched others engrossed in their explorations. A few minutes later, someone appeared and wordlessly handed him the first folder. Here they were—the original chamber music scores of Domenico Dragonetti (1763–1846). Years earlier, Feeney had learned about these manuscripts by the

once-celebrated 19th-century Italian double bass virtuoso, but they had not been played since Dragonetti's time. Now he was actually holding the music in his hands.

After 163 years in darkness, all 31 string quintets, six string quartets and nine concertos are being brought to light, thanks to Feeney, principal double bass of the Orchestra of St. Luke's and the American Classical Orchestra. He is also founder and member of the DNA Quintet, formed in 2008, with those from the esteemed Loma Mar Quartet (both based in New York)—Krista Bennion Feeney (violin), Anca Nicolau (violin and viola), Joanna

An engraving of Dragonetti (opposite, center), with cellist Robert Lindley, was the frontispiece for an 1836 volume titled *The Musical World*.

From the manuscript: the start of the 2nd movement of Dragonetti's Quintet No. 18 (opposite, top and bottom)

The DNA Quintet (opposite, bottom): Krista Bennion Feeney, Anca Nicolau, John Feeney, Joanna Hood and Myron Lutzke

Hood (viola) and Myron Lutzke (cello). The group focuses on “the familiar and the forgotten” from the 17th to 21st centuries, with Dragonetti at center stage.

Since 1996, when Feeney rescued these scores from a captivity of neglect, he has been transcribing them for DNA world-premiere performances and recordings, and first-edition publication. Grancino Editions recently published one of the quintets featured on the group’s first CD, *Dragonetti’s New Academy*, which won the 2009 Classical Recording Foundation Award. The release of these works only promises to expand the repertoire, inspire the creation of new quintets and—because Dragonetti wrote for a virtuoso contrabass—deepen the appreciation and broaden the appeal of an instrument whose full potential has for too long been unfulfilled.

Feeney always keeps an eye out for overlooked classical chamber music scored for double bass. In 1986, while poring over music encyclopedias at Stanford University, he saw a brief mention of the Dragonetti manuscripts housed at the British Museum. “But I didn’t pursue it, because I assumed his music wouldn’t be very good.”

Said to have impressed Beethoven with his virtuosity, Dragonetti has had the reputation of someone who was a fantastic double-bass player and an eccentric. But—until now—he was not taken seriously as a composer.

He wasn’t the only one. Says musicologist David Chapman, lecturer in the music department at Rutgers University and who wrote the liner notes for the DNA’s first CD, “Dragonetti has gotten this incredibly bad rap into the 20th century as someone who was a fantastic double bass player and an eccentric character, but not a great composer.”

Then again, maybe he was. While in England in 1996, preparing for a tour with The London Classical Players, Feeney asked about access to Dragonetti’s manuscripts. The ensemble’s director, conductor Roger Norrington got permission for him from the British Museum’s curator. Feeney observes, “Not only does the music display virtuosity, but also it expresses an eclectic mix of styles and moods, freely moving from one evocative scene to another, all stitched together with fantastic skill and creativity.”

Born into poverty in Venice, Dragonetti received his early musical training informally from his father, an amateur guitarist and double bassist. At age 12 came instruction from Venice’s top double bassist, Michele Berini. A year later, he became principal

contrabassist at the city’s *opera buffa*, and by age 18 at the Ducal Chapel of St. Mark’s. There he performed his own solo double bass works, which led to offers from all over Europe. In 1794, Dragonetti moved to London (home from then on), bringing him musical renown in the local theater, festival and concert scenes; and at composer/publisher Vincent Novello’s private soirées, frequented by the likes of Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt and Nicolò Paganini. Dragonetti also performed with Haydn and Beethoven, in Vienna. He was lauded as a superstar, and continued to write and perform into old age.

Rooted in the Classical and embracing the Romantic, he drew upon all the music of his day. “His work is a cosmopolitan mix of styles, with some emphasis on the tonal implications from the Viennese tradition, but more on its operatic, lyrical nature,” says Chapman. Dragonetti brings in such elements as European folk songs and alpine horn calls, Venetian gondolier tunes and Landler dance music, evoking moods from the profound to the zany, often in a fantasia-like, stream-of-consciousness flow.

Adds conductor Will Crutchfield, who has collaborated with DNA members over the past 20 years, via the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, “Dragonetti includes all sorts of modulations, key juxtapositions and other Viennese music tricks. But instead of working these into careful intellectual structures, like Haydn and Beethoven, he lays them out like a collector,” which he was, of scores, books, string instruments, antiques—and even dolls (some say life-sized cloth ones that he seated in the front row of his concerts). “I also hear a pleasure in making the music speak through the particularities of the instrument. He clearly had fun showing people what the contrabass could do, beyond its obvious qualities.”

Dragonetti invented a convex bow (popular for a while), for stronger tone and sharper articulation. He wrote most of his pieces for the three-string fretless double bass, which stressed projection, versus the resonance of the classical Viennese fretted five-string. “The music shows that he was trying to update the three-string double bass as capable of all the virtuosic, soloistic properties of a violin,” says Chapman. “He was a transitional figure, pulling away from the Viennese tradition, but, more importantly, pushing the double bass toward its next logical step.”

Unfortunately, players in Dragonetti’s time stumbled. “They were clumsy with the three-string style; they couldn’t play his music,” he continues. “By driving a stake through the heart of the Viennese tradition, he did a disservice to double bass players.” It wasn’t all Dragonetti’s fault. Haydn’s invention of the string quartet became an obsession. “And publishers took it upon themselves to change *basso* to *violoncello* in chamber music scores,” says Feeney.

Meanwhile, contrabass players were banished to the back-ground, bumbling along fretless, with fewer strings. Over the decades, they finally gained fluency, but by then music no longer had their fingers flying like Dragonetti’s. Continues Feeney,

“People today have forgotten how fantastic the double bass can sound.”

The DNA Quintet is here to remind them. “We’re working to establish the string quintet as a popular entity, while still playing quartet music,” he says. The group’s diverse repertoire includes everything from the 17th-century Italian Carlo Farina to Bach and Mozart, all the way to George Gershwin, Astor Piazzolla and Paul McCartney—all on historic instruments with gut strings. “There’s a wealth of quintets already out there, such as the 40-some by George Onslow, and those by Antonin Dvořák, Leoš Janáček and Arnold Schoenberg. When you add in Dragonetti’s 31 quintets—most of them for one violin, two violas and two *basso* instruments—that’s a huge transfusion of musical life for double bass players, and for listeners.”

Let’s not forget violists, since many of Dragonetti’s quintets require two of them. Says the group’s own, Joanna Hood, “In these pieces, our voices are elevated to that of a first or second violin. The viola has both bright and dark qualities that you can’t get with a violin, and that opens up the sound world. When there’s only one treble instrument and you add the bass, there’s a larger octave range for the viola to blend in with.” Together, the DNA “is also committed to the historical correctness of Dragonetti’s music, but in terms of its energy and nuances, it’s as if we’re improvising. We feel complete freedom when John has the melody, because he’s taking chances. But we also have to stay on our toes.”

Feeney describes, “As a contrabassist, you have to be able to play passage work in all keys—some very fast, like tongue twisters—so it requires tremendous stamina. And you must phrase, always, and with great taste. You have to imagine this larger-than-life persona and try to fit in his shoes.”

Apparently, Feeney can. “John is a simply outstanding bass player,” says Norrington. “His technical skill is matched by a formidable musical energy and a huge seriousness about the work in hand. It is great that he is doing this intriguing Dragonetti project.”

And he’s been running it pretty much single-handedly. The DNA has been attracting publicity mainly by word of mouth, sheer momentum keeping them going. The quintet first performed Dragonetti’s works in September 2008, at Pacem in Terris. Since then, the group has played several concerts, including those at the Storm King Art Center in New York’s Hudson Valley and Carnegie’s Weill Recital Hall. Most recently, under



John Feeney

the auspices of the American Classical Orchestra, in which Feeney and DNA cellist Myron Lutzke are principal players, the DNA collaborated with conductor/harpsichordist Tom Crawford at the University Club in New York and the Tuxedo Performing Arts Group. The orchestra has since invited Feeney to perform one of Dragonetti’s unpublished concertos during its 2010–2011 season.

While the DNA’s concerts feature a wide variety of composers, each future CD will focus on Dragonetti, plus another composer’s work never recorded before. “We want to show that there’s a wealth of literature that has yet to be uncovered,” says Feeney. Haydn’s recently discovered *Divertimento Hob. II:C5* (for two violins, cello and double bass), which the DNA gave the American premiere of in 2001, will appear on the quintet’s next, live CD, due out later this year.

Meanwhile, from microfilms of all of Dragonetti’s manuscripts that he made

at the British Museum, Feeney has been photocopying the works and then transcribing them with Sibelius music-notation software. He sends these to Jeannot Maha’a, who handles production and marketing at Grancino Editions, in Santa Barbara, California. The company specializes (since 1982) in Baroque and Classical urtext-edition chamber music—and now, Dragonetti’s, too. In March 2010, Grancino published his *Quintet no. 18 in C major* (for solo double bass, violin, two violas and basso). Says Maha’a, “The response from those in the international double bass community has been tremendous.”

One of them is world-renowned double bassist Gary Karr, who writes: “Double bassists are so hungry for music that they can perform in a soloistic way (as opposed to orchestral) with other musicians, that this unveiling of Dragonetti’s chamber music will undoubtedly have an enormous, global impact on the lives of a large percentage of double bassists . . . At last, we double bassists [are] given more to do than supply the foundation and rhythm of the music. I salute John for his efforts, and I look forward with great pleasure and anticipation to the impact they will have on the future of double bass playing.”

Too bad Dragonetti isn’t here to share in Feeney and the DNA’s ambitious enterprise and revel in the results. Though the man may be long dead, he’s no longer in obscurity. His music lives on—through anyone who ever plays or listens to it, thinks or reads about it. And the world is illuminated. ■