

Bass Concerto No. 2 in B minor

Giovanni Bottesini

*Born in Crema, December 22, 1821; died in Parma, July 7, 1889*

Known as the “Paganini of the double bass,” Bottesini dazzled audiences throughout Europe and the Americas with his beautiful tone and phenomenal facility, constantly expanding what was considered possible on the instrument. One contemporary exclaimed: “How he bewildered us by playing all sorts of melodies in flute-like harmonics, as though he had a hundred nightingales caged in his double bass!” Bottesini contributed not only by the example of his playing, but by significantly adding to the repertoire for the instrument both in numbers of works and in their level of virtuosity.

Having begun studying violin, Bottesini switched to bass at age thirteen when his father learned only three weeks before auditions at the Milan Conservatory that there were only two scholarship openings—one in bassoon and one in bass. Giovanni studied bass there with Luigi Rossi, and became so proficient that he graduated with a significant cash prize after only four years. He spent the money on a fine Testore bass—smaller than some and featuring only three strings, his preferred number.

Bottesini earned accolades throughout Europe as a touring bass virtuoso, but also pursued his interest in composing and conducting. In 1846 he accepted the principal bass post at Havana’s Teatro de Tacón, where in 1848 he conducted his opera *Cristoforo Colombo* to great acclaim. He periodically embarked on other tours that included the U.S., Mexico, Brazil, and Europe, interspersed with holding a number of opera posts. One of his great claims to fame was conducting the premiere of Verdi’s *Aida* in 1871 at the Cairo Opera House in celebration of the opening of the Suez Canal. After leaving the Cairo conductorship in 1877, Bottesini continued to travel throughout Europe in conjunction with performances of his works. In his last years he

served as conductor of the Parma Opera House, and, in January 1889, became director of the Parma Conservatory on Verdi's recommendation. Bottesini applied himself diligently but died only six months into the job.

Bottesini composed ten operas, of which *Ero e Leandro* brought him the greatest success. He also wrote orchestral works, chamber music, a requiem, an oratorio, and songs. A number of his works for bass either with orchestra or piano accompaniment catered to the taste of the day for dazzling fantasias on popular opera tunes by other composers. He composed his Bass Concerto No. 2 in 1845, shortly before he left for Havana, but it remained unpublished until 1950.

Edgar Meyer is one of those performers who convinces his audience that every piece he plays is his favorite, but among concertos he accords that status to this Bottesini work. He was captivated by the Concerto early in his career, and, he says, "in my headlong desire to put my mark on the piece, I indulged in some rewriting of the piece." Now a staple of his performances, his rendition includes an amazingly brilliant first-movement cadenza that is "much more extroverted than what I would come up with now. It consists of whatever tricks I knew on the bass at that point."

The slow movement features the bass's singing qualities, showcasing the nineteenth-century composers's typical emulation of Italian opera. Operatic tradition is no less apparent in Bottesini's finale, which dances with idioms of several nationalities. Meyer again provides a finger-busting cadenza that ranges over six octaves. Says Meyer, "Of course, that last octave or so, once you get well past the end of the fingerboard, is really novelty material."

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