

In Search of Nino Rota and his *Divertimento* for Double Bass of 1973

By Alexandre Ritter

PART I

(Introduction - Purpose of the Study - Historical Background - *Simplified Higher Technique*)

In February of 1994, during my bachelor's degree at the University of Georgia (UGA-USA), I met for the first time the double bass soloist, pedagogue and conductor Maestro Franco Petracchi. Since that time, I had the opportunity to be in contact with him in many instances. In 2001, I decided to bring him to Brazil to participate in a Double Bass symposium as the guest of honor. During his solo recital, he asked me to translate to the public about this story on Nino Rota and his *Divertimento* for double bass, which he was about to play. Petracchi explained to the public and gave unique details on how this piece was conceived and developed. At the end of that recital I thought to myself "all this information is too important—bass players should know these unique and relevant historical facts." Then, in 2006, during my Masters degree at the University of British Columbia (UBC-CANADA), I wrote a term paper for a bibliography class I was taking, choosing as the main subject the Rota story that Petracchi had exposed to the public on that recital in Brazil. Consequently, right after I finished that term paper, my "boiling brain" started wondering and questioning about many details that arose from that research project. In addition, my great love for the piece fiercely drove me to work on the subject restlessly. Therefore, I decided to dive into the subject, and in May of 2010 I finished my DMA degree at the UGA with a Dissertation entitled *FRANCO PETRACCHI AND THE*

DIVERTIMENTO CONCERTANTE PER CONTRABBASSO E ORCHESTRA BY NINO ROTA: A SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION BETWEEN COMPOSER AND PERFORMER. Here you will find Part I of a two-part article presenting some of the main findings of my research project. The reader will also find that my entire dissertation is now presented at the *Online Journal of Bass Research-OJBR*.

Introduction

Between 1967 and 1971, Nino Rota (1911 - 1979) composed the *Divertimento Concertante per Contrabbasso e Orchestra* in honor of the legendary double bass soloist, pedagogue and conductor Franco Petracchi (b. 1937). This *Divertimento* is a four-movement work with the movement titles, I-*Allegro*, II-*Marcia*, III-*Aria* and IV-*Finale*. The entire piece is approximately twenty-four minutes in length, and it holds an important position in the 20th-century solo repertoire for double bass.

The *Divertimento* is a significant example of effective collaboration between composer and performer. From 1950 to 1977 Rota was the director of the Bari Conservatory in Italy. Within that same period, Petracchi also worked at the conservatory as the primary double bass professor. The *Marcia* was the first movement to be composed; Rota began it during the 1967 academic year. Petracchi recalls the circumstances: "First, he [Rota] wrote the *Marcia* thinking of it as a piece by itself for double bass and piano. It was dedicated to the double bass class; in fact the piece had some elements of the instrument's technique (scales, exercises, etc)." Over the next four years (from 1967 to 1971), the composer decided to add three additional movements.

During these same years, Petracchi was

developing the technical concepts and exercises that were essential to his pedagogy for the double bass. Some years later, in 1982, the results of the work were published as a book, entitled *Simplified Higher Technique*. In Part II of this article, it will be shown how Petracchi's pedagogy for bass (which was developed long before the book was published) might have been an important specific influence on the composition of the *Divertimento*.

The next movement composed after the *Marcia* was the *Aria*, which was completed in 1968. In this movement, Rota gives the performer the opportunity to explore the lyrical phrasing possibilities that the instrument offers. The next movement to be composed was the *Finale*, an *Allegro marcato* (1969), in which Rota explores virtuosity for the double bass, showcasing Petracchi's particular technical abilities throughout. Last of all, a first-movement *Allegro* was composed in 1971. According to Petracchi, Rota did not give the development of the first movement to him until two days before the *Divertimento*'s first performance with orchestra. The performer recalls: "In 1971 there was the premiere in Napoli with the Orchestra Scarlatti of the Rai, conducted by P.L. Urbini, and, as it was common, the Maestro gave me the development of the first movement two days before the concert." Thereafter, in 1973, the *Divertimento* was published by Carisch (now owned by Ricordi) as a four-movement work for double bass and orchestra, together with a reduction for piano.

Purpose of the Study

The unique circumstances of the collaboration between Petracchi and Rota deserved a special study. Therefore, I decided to investigate the collaboration between composer and performer, giving

particular attention to how this collaboration affected the compositional history, the style, and the specific technical challenges that are found in the *Divertimento*. Two aspects of the collaboration warranted particular attention. First, it was useful to investigate how the technical demands of the piece compare with the concepts and exercises found in Petracchi's method for the double bass, *Higher Technique*. Secondly, it was essential to investigate a further collaboration between the composer and performer after the publication of the *Divertimento* in 1973, which resulted in a significantly different second version of the *Divertimento*. To date, this second version has not been published but it remains the preferred version for Petracchi. In sum, the main research questions were these: 1) When, and in what circumstances did Rota write the *Divertimento*? 2) What are Petracchi's musical and technical characteristics that might have influenced Rota's *Divertimento*? 3) What aspects of the book *Higher Technique* might have influenced Rota's *Divertimento*? 4) What are the changes made to the *Divertimento* after the publication in 1973, and in what circumstances were they made?

Historical Background

Much of the material presented here has been taken from the 2008 interview between myself and the performer, which is a valuable source for the genesis of both the *Divertimento* and *Higher Technique*. Like the interview itself, the discussion will proceed according to the chronology by which the four movements of the work were composed, i.e., *Marcia*, *Aria*, *Finale*, and *Allegro* respectively.

According to Petracchi, the *Divertimento* "was born" as a result of his request to Rota to write a single piece for bass and piano in 1967. At that point in time, Petracchi had just been invited to teach at the Bari conservatory, while Rota was its director. The performer recalls: "I [Petracchi] accepted and could not miss the opportunity to ask him to write some music for my instrument." Petracchi explained that Rota had his office underneath his classroom and that Rota could hear the content of Petracchi's lessons. The *Marcia* was composed as an exercise for the double bass class, designed to challenge the student with specific techniques. Petracchi stressed Rota's intention with the *Marcia*:

This *Marcia* contained numerous exercises that I used to give to my students, a kind of training music, realized in living music to "make them [the exercises] more enjoyable," as he [Rota] said. In fact his studio and his sitting room were situated right below my classroom. It certainly was not enjoyable for the Maestro to rest at certain times with that "concert of scales."

The tempo marking assigned to the *Marcia* reflects the collaborative decision made between Petracchi and Rota. In the interview, Petracchi recalled that "he [Rota] made a point of telling me that the time must be *allegramente*, like when children leave school, not when they enter. We estimated that a quarter-note at 132/138 could be optimal."

In 1968, the *Aria* was composed. According to Petracchi, when the prominent Italian critic and musicologist Fedele D'Amico heard the *Aria* performed in Rome, he declared after the concert that this *Aria* was one of the best Italian pieces written in the last

50 years. In his recollection, Petracchi claims that the music for the *Aria* owes its existence to Rota's concurrent project of composing music for the famous film *Doctor Zhivago*:

It's important to clarify that this music (*Aria*) was originally written as the motif of the film *Doctor Zhivago*. Due to disagreements with the production, he withdrew (the beautiful score was then written by Lai with "Lara's Theme") and to our great satisfaction, Rota's theme was "redirected" to the double bass.

In an early conversation about it, Rota revealed to Petracchi that he had already formed a clear idea of where the music of this *Aria* would be used in the soundtrack for *Doctor Zhivago*. According to Petracchi, "For the interpretation, he told me that I should think of a slow march of Russian exiles heading toward Siberia [at RN 4] at night and then, bit by bit, *lentamente* and with *ampiezza*, at the unfolding of dawn (like Respighi's *I Pini di Roma*)."

The *Finale* was the third movement composed and dates from 1969. Initially, Rota had thought of it as a *galop* with respect to its musical style. By the time the *Divertimento* was published in 1973, however, Rota had decided to call it *Finale*. When this *Finale* and the earlier two movements had been scored for double bass and piano, Petracchi asked Rota about another stage of work: "After the finale (*galoppo*), he [Rota] had already thought about a possible orchestration...when I proposed it to him, he told me that he had already planned it."

An additional movement, entitled *Allegro* and intended to be played first was composed in 1971. Petracchi recalls several unique factors that influenced the composition of this movement:

He explained to me that the theme is drawn from the Concerto No. 1 of Paganini modified in the final note, the nightmare of a double bassist who imagines that a concerto has been written for him, but that he is unable to get the final note right, played invariably one tone below the original. A nightmare!

The composition of the first movement's development became a particular concern. Petracchi remembered that the orchestral introduction was longer than the entire section with bass. Petracchi recalls his suggestion to Rota:

I pointed out that in the first movement, after the long introduction, the double bassist played a brief *entrata* and then passed to rehearsal number 10 of the cadenza, practically missing the development. He said that I was right. "I'll take care of it. How demanding you are!" In fact, he took care of it, but only two days before the first performance held in Napoli in 1971.

Based on his interactions with the composer during and just after the composition of the *Allegro*, Petracchi has argued against using the *tempi* that appear in the published edition:

I have had the chance to hear several recordings of this *divertimento*, but not one renders the thought of the composer, truly an interpretative loss...on my own score, which I also distribute to my students, there are numerous expres-

sive, dynamic, and metronome markings that are fruit of my time with Rota at the piano.

At the same time that Rota was composing the *Divertimento*, Petracchi was introducing the ideas that he would later publish in *Simplified Higher Technique* into his teaching at the Conservatory. In the article "Left Hand High," Peter Buckoke claimed that he had been exposed to the basic concepts of *Higher Technique* before 1973, even though the book was not published until 1982:

I was lucky to find my way onto Franco Petracchi's summer course in Vicenza, northern Italy. He introduced me to his daily exercises, which were unpublished at the time, but are now available from Yorke Edition. ... I have worked with his exercises continuously over the last 30 years...

Petracchi was quite specific as to his purpose for transforming his pedagogy into a published method; he stressed the fact that he took ideas from the technique of other instruments, such as the piano:

At the time, I suggested to my students exercises to improve their performance to facilitate their study; some I created, and others I took from other instruments. In that period, the 1950s, there was no school of thought regarding technique. I found inspiration in piano technique, the same methodology, a double bass fingered horizontally instead of vertically. My own students encouraged me to publish these "notes" in order to avoid writing them with some occasional notes [in class].

Simplified Higher Technique

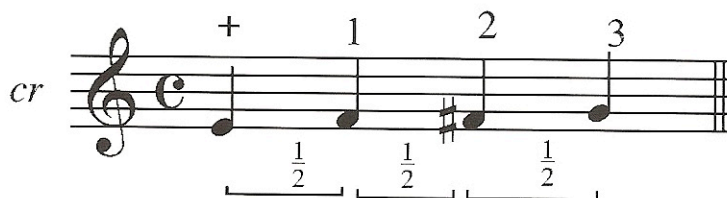
Petracchi's *Simplified Higher Technique* is a method book comprised of twenty chapters, each of which features some combination of one or more exercises, etudes, or excerpts from solo and orchestra repertoire. For the most part, the exercises in the method are Petracchi's original compositions and incorporate his innovative concepts of left hand technique. Petracchi achieves these innovations by using the thumb position technique in unorthodox registers and positions on the fingerboard. He also introduces different pre-set left-hand positions, all of which use the thumb as the base for the positions. Such positions were remarkably innovative at the time due to the unusual fingerboard placements. In most methods published before *Higher Technique*, the thumb is only used above the midpoint of the strings (e.g., beyond the *g*1 – midpoint of the *G* string). Petracchi, however, uses different thumb positions below the midpoint of the fingerboard.

Petracchi also introduced the technique of using the thumb in order to play almost any note on the fingerboard, including such unlikely ones as an *e*1 or a *b*1 on the first string. To supplement the presentation of innovative ideas, he incorporated exercises

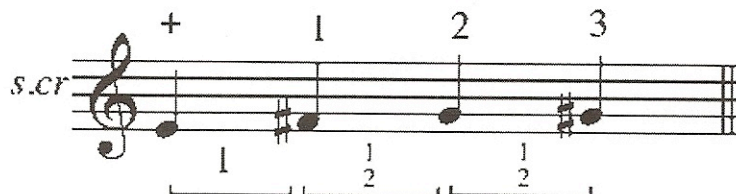
from other methods, borrowing examples from composers such as Billé, Caimmi, Mortari, and Selmi. Furthermore, he applied his technique to important examples from the bass repertoire, from composers such as Henze, Hindemith, Koussevitsky, Mussorgsky, Bottesini, and Fryba.

Petracchi's innovations are based on the establishment and manipulation of three different left hand positions: chromatic (*cr*), semichromatic (*s.cr*), and diatonic (*diat*). All three different left hand positions make use of the thumb as the base for the hand position.

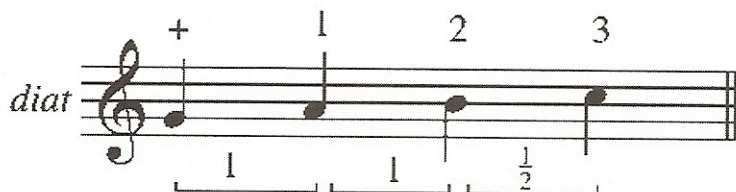
The chromatic position (*cr*) is built on three consecutive semitones using the thumb for the first note, finger 1 (index finger) for the second note, finger 2 for the third note (middle finger), and finger 3 (ring finger) for the fourth note (*example 1*). The semichromatic position (*s.cr*) is built on the span of a whole tone and two consecutive semitones. The whole tone is produced by the use of the thumb and finger 1, while the other two consecutive semitones are produced with fingers 2 and 3 (*example 2*). The diatonic position (*diat*) is built on a whole tone between the thumb and the finger 1, another whole tone between the finger 1 and the



Example 1. Example of Petracchi's **chromatic** fingering system (chapter 1, p.1). Courtesy of Yorke Edition/Rodney Slatford, <http://www.yorkedition.co.uk/nav.htm>



Example 2. Example of Petracchi's **semi-chromatic** fingering system (chapter 1, p.1). Courtesy of Yorke Edition/Rodney Slatford, <http://www.yorkedition.co.uk/nav.htm>



Example 3. Example of Petracchi's **diatonic** fingering system (chapter 1, p.1). Courtesy of Yorke Edition/Rodney Slatford, <http://www.yorkedition.co.uk/nav.htm>

finger 2, and a semitone between fingers 2 and 3 (*example 3*).

On the basis of the three basic positions presented in his method, Petracchi devised more extended positions, always using the thumb as the base for the left-hand positions. Such variations on the three basic positions are of great use in the realization of various works in the double bass repertoire, especially for the execution of fast passages (*example 4*).



Example 4. Example of Petracchi's fingering extensions (chapter 1, p.1). Courtesy of Yorke Edition/Rodney Slatford, <http://www.yorkedition.co.uk/nav.htm>

do something
beautiful

nicklloydbasses.com
cincinnati

For a more in depth investigation on Petracchi's *Simplified Higher Technique* its structure and style, I suggest the reader to turn to my dissertation at the *OJBR*.

End of PART I

PART II (Investigation of the Influences on the *Divertimento* – Conclusion) will be presented in the next issue of *Bass World*.

Brazilian born bassist Alexandre Ritter has been on the faculty of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul-UFRGS, Porto Alegre/Brazil since 2000. Alexandre received both a Doctor of Musical Arts and Bachelor Degrees from the University of Georgia, studying with Milton Walter Masciadri, and pursued Master's studies at the University of British Columbia with Kenneth Friedman.

2012 JAMEY AEBERSOLD

JULY 1st THRU JULY 6th

OR JULY 8th THRU JULY 13th

SUMMER JAZZ WORKSHOPS

CHOOSE FROM

TWO GREAT WEEKS OF JAZZ!

SUPER TRAINING OPPORTUNITY FEATURING:

COMBO • MASTER CLASS • JAMS

FEATURING BASSISTS:

RUFUS REID • JOHN GOLDSBY • LYNN SEATON
DAVID FRIESEN • J.B. DYAS • CHRIS FITZGERALD
RICH ARMANDI • TYRONE WHEELER • BOB SINICROPE

FOR REGISTRATION INFORMATION

1-800-456-1388 ext. 5 • jason@jazzbooks.com

www.summerjazzworkshops.com

AND BY POPULAR DEMAND

2-DAY BASS COURSE

JUNE 30th & JULY 1st OR JULY 7th & 8th

WWW.SUMMERJAZZWORKSHOPS.COM

PRESENTED AT THE

UNIVERSITY of LOUISVILLE
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

WE WELCOME ALL ABILITIES AND ALL AGES

A WEEK WITH US COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE!