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Giovanni Petronius Bottesini: Music for Double-Bass and String Quintet

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Many folks frown these days when a musician flaunts the title virtuoso. Modesty prevails. Just identify a performer as a virtuoso and he will blanche. Best to just call him a musician, as though the plainer term was antithetical and more honorable than the fancier. Giovanni Bottesini proudly billed himself as the virtuoso of the double bass. His career was sustained by the romantic obsession with virtuosity. A virtuoso was set apart from other musicians not only by his astounding technical prowess. That was merely the first condition. The second was closer to the bone. A virtuoso incorporated his instrument as part of his sense of who he was. Paganini's name cannot be invoked without the violin immediately springing to mind, even though Paganini played the viola and guitar with the same amazing facility. Liszt epitomizes the piano. Still it was not enough that a virtuoso's name become synonymous with the instrument; the instrument must become his means of expression. The virtuoso must write great music in collaboration with his instrument. Among the many musicians who could be classified as virtuosos in the 19th Century only Paganini, Liszt, and Chopin wrote music that has endured beyond their own abilities to animate it. Yes, there is a hefty list of occasional and user-friendly works written by a host of virtuosos who are long dead. Most of them require a supreme instrumentalist to breath a moment or two of life back into them.

These pieces written by Bottesini to show off his skills and the potential of the double bass are sometimes sweet, sometimes saucy, always skillful works of no great staying power. Bassist Michinori Bunya does a credible job of playing them. He brings elan, a sense of timing worthy of the Flying Wolendas, and the same kind of madcap unpredictability that Jonathan Winters used to bring with him onto the set of the Tonight Show. The playing and the music are full of surprises. At your local classical music radio station this is the kind of music that the program director or computer operator salt into that part of the day they insist on calling "drive time" or "the drive home" when they need pieces that require no thought that might pull your attention from the road or the promotional announcements.

I imagine Bottesini himself played with a good deal more elegance and poise than Bunya. The arrangements by Bottesini for the accompanying string quintet are never less than accomplished. So in the end something is missing--the animating presence of the virtuoso himself. It's just such liveliness that makes the work of the contemporary double-bass virtuoso Edgar Meyers bearable.

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