Beyond the Trout Quintet

Let it never be said that there isn't enough chamber music that includes the double bass BY **KURT MUROKI**

Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra principal bassist Owen Lee maintains that there are so many great chamber works out there for his instrument, that he'd never be able to play them all. More than sixty compositions are written for the "Trout" formation (piano, violin, viola, cello, bass) alone, he points out. And, he goes on, the Classical Period itself is an "embarrassment of riches":

> *.....countless Serenades and Divertimenti by Mozart, to say nothing of his four great String Quintets with bass (Eine Kleine Nachtmusik and the three string divertimenti, K.136, 137, and 138). Haydn wrote at least twenty Divertimenti for two violins and basso. The 20th century is also limitless: there's the Frank Martin Rhapsodie, Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony no.1, the Schulhoff Concertino, Copland's* Appalachian Spring *(the original version for 13 players), György Kurtag's Six Bagatelles, and Vaughan Williams's Piano Quintet. The list goes on and on....*

As a New York City-based bassist who has been lucky enough to play lots of chamber music, I must credit three organizations for bringing lesser-known ensemble works with bass to my attention: these are the Marlboro Music Festival; the Jupiter Symphony Chamber Players, headed by Mei Ying and Michael Volpert, who are devoted to interesting and educational programming and never repeat the same piece twice; and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, with its fantastic combination of energy, enthusiasm, and devotion to excellence.

Frequently performed pieces include, of course, Schubert's "Trout," as well as the Dvořák bass quintet (op. 77), the spectacular Prokofiev Quintet, and the Schubert Octet. Less often heard are gems like the Hindemith Octet, the Lachner Nonet, Lalo's *Deux Aubades,* and Mercandante's *Decimino I,* performed by the Jupiter Symphony Chamber Players. Wonderful new works by Mario Davidovsky, John Zorn, and 101-year-old Elliott Carter are being performed both by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and other prominent New York contemporary music ensembles.

Yet these are only the tip of the iceberg: The St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble's bassist John Feeney—a superb musician and a friend—recently uncovered a multitude of ensemble works by Domenico Dragonetti (1763–1846). (Dragonetti, a bassist himself, is said to have thoroughly impressed Beethoven by performing one of the master's own cello sonatas on his instrument.) Through the intervention of Sir Roger Norrington, Feeney obtained a coveted

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, with Edgar Meyer on double bass

pass to the manuscript room of the British Library and, during a week off between tours, spent days poring over the library's huge collection of Dragonetti manuscripts. He found the music to be "varied, colorful, entirely unique and well crafted." Thanks to Feeney, Grancino Editions will soon publish these works in an urtext version; and he and the Loma Mar Quartet have been performing and recording Dragonetti string quintets (for the full Dragonetti story, turn back to pages 36 to 39 in this issue).

Like Feeney, bassists tend to be resourceful; they not only arrange and commission, but also quite frequently compose for their own instrument. In addition to Dragonetti himself, the bassist/composer list includes Giovanni Bottesini (1821–1889), as well as our contemporaries David Anderson, Peter Askim, Jon Deak, Edgar Meyer, Frank Proto—and many jazz bassists, from Steve Swallow to Ben Allison.

Because a great deal of bass chamber music is either out of print or very difficult to find, the Internet has become an invaluable resource for those on the hunt. One outstanding website—created by Paul Nemeth, a student at the Juilliard School—lists more than 2,000 chamber works for the double bass. Nemeth says that his main point in making the list was to show that the limited presence of a bass in chamber music isn't due to the lack of music, but to ignorance: "People don't know that this repertoire is even out there in the first place." Nemeth's site represents an ongoing search for unknown and lost works and is also an impressive resource for ensembles, promoters, and educational institutions.

Responding to a recent upsurge of interest in bass chamber music, the International Society of Bassists (ISB) and its current president, Robert Nairn, has been a driving force in promoting the double bass and educating musicians and concertgoers in music for the instrument. One far-reaching project that will involve chamber music specifically is the ISB's partnership with the Music Teachers National Association on "The Year of Collaborative Music," during which ensemble music—classical, jazz, and other genres—will be promoted nationwide.

For centuries, composers have recognized the versatility of the double bass. Now, thanks to the Internet, we are able to find more and more ways to bring its supportive and beautiful sound to chamber music audiences.

Resources

International Society of Bassists
www.isbworldoffice.com/

Chamber Music for Double-Bass
www.paulnemeth.com/basschamber.htm

Year of Collaborative Music
www.mtna.org/Programs/YearofCollaborativeMusic

Marlboro Music Festival
www.marlboromusic.org/

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
www.chambermusicsociety.org

Jupiter Symphony Chamber Players
www.jupitersymphony.com

Grancino Editions' Dragonetti Quintets
www.grancinoeditions.com

Bassist Kurt Muroki, *a native of Maui, Hawaii, studied at The Juilliard School under Homer R. Mensch. He performs with numerous ensembles and is on faculty at Stony Brook University, New Jersey City University, and the Bowdoin International Music Festival. He thanks the colleagues who have contributed to this article, especially Jeremy Kurtz, principal bass with the San Diego Symphony.*