

# Giovanni Bottesini – Strad Article

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*Although written for the Strad Magazine it was unfortunately never published. The article is factually accurate at the time of writing however please excuse spelling or grammatical errors that would be have been corrected for the final publication.*

When you hear the name Giovanni Bottesini what do you think? For most today, nothing. Within today's 'popular' classical music scene he is mostly unknown, however few realise his importance to the 19<sup>th</sup> century music scene across Europe and the western world. The newspaper 'The Evening Star' of 1887 quotes him as a household name, a far cry from today where at least two thirds of his music lay dormant on a shelf collecting dust. Discovering Bottesini's music has been quite an adventure, uncovering more and more about this fantastic character, his music and what has been lost to the public domain. The catalyst for this research started simply with a difference in printed editions, however has become a project that will keep me occupied for most of my life.

Giovanni Bottesini was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1821 in Crema, into a musical family. Bottesini's father was a respected clarinetist and composer and introduced Bottesini to the church choir as a boy. His next more serious engagement was playing the kettledrums in the church orchestra; this then progressed to violin under Cogliati a priest and a highly respected music leading the church orchestra and he also started to study piano. His father wanted him to study at the Milan Conservatorio but could not afford to pay for his sons studying. Bottesini had to apply for a scholarship, but the only scholarships available were for Bassoon and Double Bass. In his own words Bottesini said – "I did not like wind instruments so I chose the latter".

During his time at the Milan Conservatorio he had many notable achievements (studying under Luigi Rossi, Vaccaj and others), winning 300 liras in a competition, which was later, used to purchase his now famous Testore bass for about £36 in today's money. Whilst he studied it has been rumoured in a letter to his parents that the exercises set by his teacher were 'too hard', the last thing you would ever expect to hear from the greatest virtuoso of the instrument.

Bottesini developed a fascinating character thanks to his travels all over the world and by being exposed to so many different cultures. Bottesini travelling in his lifetime would often far outstretch most of us today. Over the course of his career he worked in Italy, France, UK, Cuba, America, New Zealand and Australia to name a few and spoke Italian, French and English.

Because much of Bottesini's life has been documented in newspapers and his own personal letters, he is a fantastic source of what life was like within the romantic period. Bottesini died a wealthy man as he spent his gains freely and gave generously. His character was held in high esteem by those who knew him, it was often said that he was kind, modest, always welcoming people he met with an open handshake and gave to the less fortunate often. He was amiable and humourful often giving a "quick smile that crossing his features when he had accomplished a particularly difficult passage" – (The Freeman's Journal Monday November 15<sup>th</sup> 1886) and readily granted

interviews with newspapers, happily answering all their questions. In the musical standard of 1889, at the time of his death it is mentioned that he never failed to find anecdotes which he told frequently, and “he had an exasperating way of “speaking his mind” to those in authority over him.”

He was a significant figure of that period knowing, meeting or working with the greats of that era. One of my most favourite discoveries in old newspapers is Bottesini’s attempted meeting with Wagner. In an interview for a newspaper Bottesini is asked, “ Did you ever come across Wagner”?

“I know very little of him”, “once when he was in Naples, I went to pay my respects to Wagner. I presented my self to Wagner, and when I enquired for the maestro, she (his wife) asked if I would wish to see the ‘God’.

‘Wished to see the God?? Did she speak like that of Wagner”?

“Yes”. “I replied ‘no’, it was repugnant to. (The Sheffield and Rotherham independent Monday November 21 1887)

The quote is a fascinating discovery of Wagner’s behaviour, and Bottesini’s character and beliefs. He was also a companion of many other significant people at the time like St saens, Ambrose Thomas, Gounod, Spohr and most notably Berlioz and Verdi.

For me it is sad to see that the public do not have easy access to Bottesini’s experiences as all literature is out of print or has not been translated to English for the wider community. Bottesini performed in Berlioz’s orchestra both in Paris (whilst traveling on one of his many tours with his trio) and in London the Era Newspaper published on the 28<sup>th</sup> of march 1852 records a few days earlier on the 25 March 1852 Bottesini played as a soloist whilst Berlioz Conducted, this again happened almost a year later, again with Berlioz conducting a two part concert of his own music in the first half and Berlioz conducting a selection of works including Bottesini’s Concertino. Bottesini’s closest colleague was that of Verdi, having a profound influence on each other, documented in the many letters sent between each other over the course of their lives and by Verdi appointing Bottesini principle of the Conservatorio in Parma. It is difficult to quantify Bottesini’s influences on all of his colleagues above but there is no doubt in saying that he changed completely people’s perceptions of the double bass and how to write for it.

One of the main reasons for writing this article and my Bottesini research is to re-popularise and draw attention to the majority of his catalogue of works that have been forgotten. In his day Bottesini was as famous (if not wanted to be more famous) for being an opera conductor and composer. Very few are aware that Bottesini was a significant opera composer with the majority of his catalogue being vocal pieces. He composed a total of 13 operatic works (known to date) and around 70 individual vocal pieces, two of his operatic works premiered in the UK. One of Bottesini’s most significant works in stature is that of ‘The Garden Of Olivet’, a Sacred Oratorio. Bottesini’s Oratorio premiered in Norwich 1887 and ‘Ali Baba’ at the lyceum theatre, written in 6 weeks and premiered in London in 1871, now currently home to the lion king musical. Bottesini’s first opera ‘Colón en Cuba’ (Cristoforo Columbo) was written in Spanish for his tenure at the Opera house in Havana. Unfortunately along side Cristoforo columbo all his other operas have fallen out of publication. Bottesini’s operatic style has been compared to that of a ‘young Verdi’ so it is difficult to understand why his operas have been left unpublished for many decades or have not been officially printed; any lovers or Verdi’s operas would relish the sound of

Bottesini's operas. Newspapers from the time quote the devotional oratorio Garden of Olivet by Signor Bottesini as 'in many respects a remarkable work'.

The second significant and sacred work that Bottesini produced was that of a 65-minute requiem, written after the loss of his brother Luigi Bottesini and first heard in 1880. The piece shares Mozart's model of a solemn C min and features a beautiful aria called 'Quid sum miser'. The scoring is often operatic in nature, with the work resembling features of Verdi's requiem and his contemporary Mendelssohn. Other orchestral works include 5 sinfonias, marches and overtures.

Besides his operas Bottesini's catalogue extends to over 250 pieces, only his solo double bass works are played today, making up around a 3<sup>rd</sup> of his pieces. A significant part of this catalogue was chamber music, consisting of many string quartets, 4 string quintets and I even made an unusual discovery of a double bass quintet documented in the newspaper 'The Era' on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1867 in London, being performed two days earlier. The article tells us that the quintet was 'performed and written by the composer' and Bottesini was accompanied by Messrs F Pratten, Reynolds, A Howell and Ould, many of them belonging to the opera house bass section. It would be thrilling to know the situation around this concert and how it sounded and if the manuscript still exists today. Bottesini wrote an exquisite piece for string ensemble called 'andante sostenuto for strings'. A beautiful 6-minute piece full of rich colour and profound emotion. He didn't just write solo pieces for the bass, writing 5 pieces for solo cello and piano, a duet for flute and clarinet '*andante and variations*' and even a piece for solo flute '*Arieccchino*'.

A fascinating part of this project is seeing all the events and travels Bottesini made. It has been an eye opener seen how extensively he performed and how concerts were the centre of social events of that era. He was listed with Rubenstein 'the most important soloists of our time' and 'the Paganini of the double bass' in all of the major UK newspapers. Bottesini performed in every corner of the UK from village halls to the Albert Hall and it has been fascinating to see the various ensembles he has performed with, as soloist and as a chamber musician. It has been enlightening to discover the repertoire that Bottesini performed that was not of his own writing and how often he switched role as a conductor, composer and chamber musician. I have found three new duets since the beginning of this research that he composed for 'cornet a – pistons and double bass', 'flute and double bass', and finally a duet labelled '*la fete des bohemes*' for violin and double bass. A popular choice of Bottesini's repertoire in concert listings as a chamber musician is often performing the first movement of Mendelssohn's trio no.1 in d minor where Bottesini plays the cello part; Beethoven Septet in E flat, George Onslow quintet no.30 and finally the Hummel septet op74 and op.87. He also was commonly found to play Beethoven's Adelaide as a solo contrabasso work, other interesting solo repertoire pieces were a romance by Spontini, Ave Maria by Gounod and Per Questa Bella mano by Mozart.

From the newspaper articles we can see that he was in demand as a Conductor. One of his most noticeable roles as a conductor was premiering Verdi's opera in Cairo 1871 when he was director of the Italian opera, again re-enforcing the significant bond between the two, trusting him with a brand new unperformed work. It has to be mentioned that his first engagement as an opera musical director was when he was a

mere 26 years old (1847), writing his opera ‘Colón en Cuba (Cristoforo Columbo)’ whilst he was employed by the Italian opera company in Havana, Cuba. Bottesini was also engaged at the Théâtre Italien in Paris as director between the years of 1855–1857. Bottesini was known as a passionate conductor conducting his work with energy, although apparently sometimes had a little ‘noisy method of beating time’. Bottesini was also a frequent guest conductor at the Covent Garden opera house in London, conducting the promenade concerts along side Johann Strauss.

Within all the newspaper articles I have studied, there is a never-ending supply of compliments or admirations for him. Here are just a few showing the admiration for him at the time:

*‘No one even disputes the palm of Bottesini’*

*‘Bottesini touched his commanding instrument with masterly skill, combining depth, vigour and emphasis with the upmost delicacy and refinement’*

*‘Bottesini played the famous carnival of Venice in a manner which Paganini himself never surpassed: his performance was indeed a prodigy of rapid execution and beautiful tone with the same kind of grotesque and playful grace which Paganini used to throw at it. Being encored with loud acclamations, he returned and instead of repeating it, sang on his magic strings his favourite air from sonnambula in a style from which the finest vocalists might take a lesson’*

*‘He really is the greatest prodigy that has appeared since the days of Paganini’*

*‘His playing is not merely wonderful it is in the highest degree beautiful and expressive, even his compositions are full of melody and sentiment and passion. An artist in the highest sense of the word.’*

*‘Signor Bottesini, one of the greatest artists the world has ever seen, made his appearance on Wednesday night at the Covent Garden Promenade Concert, and met with an enthusiastic reception. No doubt many of the audience remembered the furore awakened some twenty years back by the performance of the great contrabassist, who was the ‘lion’ of an entire season of the promenade concerts at Covent Garden.”1865’*

*He was interrupted more than once during his performance, and recalled five times after his first solo. – Pall mall gazette 1884*

*Nothing could be more flattering than the manner in which signor Bottesini was received by the audience, who listened to his performance with anxious attention, applauding vociferously at the end of each phrase and variation – Lloyds weekly London news paper nov 16 1851*

The reviews above paint a very different picture of how audiences used to interact with performances. Today it is ‘socially unacceptable’ to even make the smallest of

noises yet alone applaud between movements or variations. Classical music concert goers were of many different backgrounds and the behaviour was probably more like that of a jazz concert of today, where audience members are allowed to show their appreciation and admiration.

So what is next for Giovanni Bottesini? I hope a revival of his music. Through various different mediums I plan to republish his life and make it possible for everyone to enjoy his music and protect his memory as a '*artist in the highest regard*' and not just a virtuoso bassist. This whole project has been a quest to discover new insights into Bottesini's life and to correct as much inaccurate information as possible that currently exists. One of the difficult things about this research has been sifting through multiple inaccurate resources and discovering new ones which are reliable. A brief example of this is the first performance dates of Bottesini's grand duo that was actually performed 20 years earlier than listed in a highly regarded academic dictionary. However thanks to digitisation and the Internet we now have a much wider reach to find out information and are able to research internationally with great detail.

The next biggest challenge is that of his manuscripts. As talked about in this article, the majority of his works are not in publication. Those that are, are most likely have been edited and do not contain exactly what Bottesini wrote, with some editions completely changing Bottesini's phrases. Until now musicians have not had a Urtext edition or the original manuscripts as an easy resource to reference and so I have created the Bottesini Urtext. The aim is to give musicians the most reliable source of his compositions to allow the performer to develop their own interpretation. Stage by stage I plan to re-publish his works, as I travel Europe to digitise his manuscripts starting with his double bass works as these are the most in demand and contain the most inaccurate editions. Every single edition of his double bass works published today has been changed from the original. As no two editions are the same, performers cannot make a easy decision on how to interpret the work as they do not have access to what Bottesini originally wrote. With Bottesini's music being such core repertoire for any double bassist, it is time that a reliable resource is made of his pieces. Along side his solo pieces, I am creating play along accompaniments of piano parts, giving bassists the chance to play and practice at rehearsal tempi, a useful learning resource for those who cannot easily reach accompanist. As the project continues to grow I will be moving to his bigger works, like his chamber music, operas and orchestral works, but as a self funded project, it is a significant undertaking for one person to collect scores, collate articles, turn them in to a digital format, type face, print, publish and distribute his entire works. The next largest challenge is translating the few books that have been written on him into English. All of these books contain useful detailed information on his life but have been lost to the general public as they are no longer printed or translated to English. All of these resources will gradually be available from my website [www.stephenstreet.com](http://www.stephenstreet.com).

I hope you enjoy this article as much as Bottesini enjoyed his coffee, and that perhaps you might not spill as much on this paper as he did over his manuscripts, however I trust that you will agree that his life was a fascinating journey and it is a loss to people today that they do not get to enjoy his catalogue of works, nor his experiences travelling the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has been a unique experience looking

through the spectacles of a genius musician almost 200 years ago and I look forward with optimism that his art will be enjoyed by many more people. I hope this article sows a seed of enthusiasm towards his life and that others will join me in making it possible for his music to be played again.

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