

A Note On This Publication

A typical part of a double bass student's development is to study the Bottesini Method, presented usually as a series of short exercises in a small book with no accompanying text to explain each exercise. When I first studied the method I was unaware that Bottesini had originally written any text in his Method as I was working from a later edition. I continued to work through the exercises as I progressed until I stumbled upon a copy of Bottesini's original Method in French. In this, I was surprised to find paragraphs written by Bottesini describing the exercises and of his experiences performing on the double bass.

I was a little confused as to why this detail had been lost from later publications and why, when the most famous double bass virtuoso of the time was asked to write a method book, that the later editors would remove content that is integral to his style of playing. Initially I assumed that the Method would have been published only in Italian and French and that it was just bad luck that it was never translated into English. I did wonder whether it would be advantageous to translate Bottesini's Method into English to make it more accessible to a wider audience; however this would have been a significant task and I thought it would be best to save that project until time permitted. It was only later, when I was completing other research in the British Library, that I stumbled upon three versions of the Bottesini Method in Italian, French and, more unusually, in English! This suggests there may have been far fewer copies of the English translation printed, representing a significant loss to the double bass community.

After discovering this, I decided to take it upon myself to bring back these methods for other bassists to see and study so that we can get a greater insight into how the genius Bottesini performed. However, as the Method was produced over a hundred years ago the original printing plates were no longer in existence and so it would be impossible to reprint copies from these. Secondly, from searching the world library catalogue, there seem to be only five copies left of the English translation in libraries across the entire world. In light of this, the British Library and Hal Leonard (Ricordi) have supported my project by allowing me to republish all three original Methods from the originals in the British Library's collection.

Creating the new edition

Thanks to the British Library archival team, the three Methods were photographed in high resolution allowing me to create this facsimile re-print. Each page from the three translations has been edited individually to correct perspective and remove unnecessary colour from the original paper. The image below taken from page 5 in the Method shows how the colour has been removed on the left hand side:

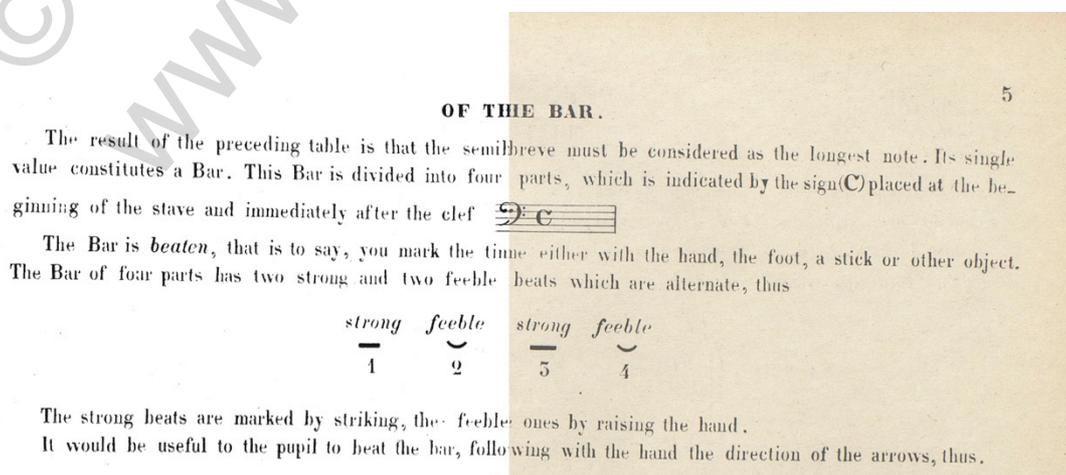
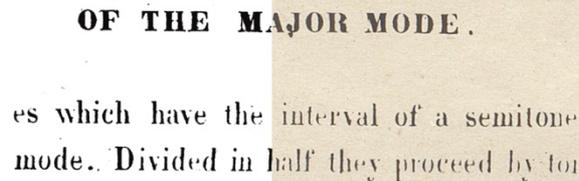


Figure 1 Showing how colour has been removed on the left hand side. (I)

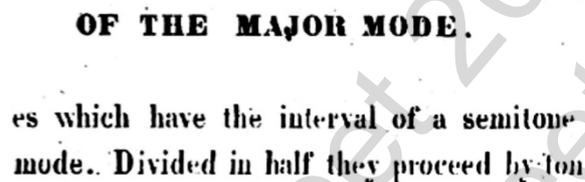
As the printing of the original Method was made by pressing ink onto a page, any malformation of characters has been caused by a lack of ink on the original plate when first pressed onto the paper, rather than the clarity being lost in the editing process. The malformation of letters before and after editing is shown in the next picture:



OF THE MAJOR MODE .
es which have the interval of a semitone
mode. Divided in half they proceed by ton

Figure 2 Showing malformation of letters. (1)

Each page has been digitally enhanced individually to counteract any malformed characters in the original print by adjusting levels and contrast in each image to thicken the text. The next image shows how much thicker and clearer the text has become after processing:



OF THE MAJOR MODE .
es which have the interval of a semitone
mode. Divided in half they proceed by ton

Figure 3 Showing how text has been made clearer by editing. (1)

The entire Method and musical examples could be re-typeset to overcome the malformation of any text; however I wanted to retain the charm and character of the original publication. If demand is sufficient re-type setting could be a future project. The purpose of this publication is to preserve the information and make it available again as soon as possible to bass players.

Bottesini's Teaching Method

Reading the Method has given me a fascinating insight into both the man behind the instrument and how he negotiated his way around it. One of the most amusing things to read in the book is how forthcoming Bottesini is with his opinions. He does mention himself in the preface:

*I hasten to forewarn who might accuse me of a certain exclusiveness, more apparent than real, that I have every respect for the opinion of others, whilst I frankly state my own.*¹

This frankness is most apparent in his discussion of the Dragonetti bow of which he says:

*This position, as one can see, is not very elegant. Although at first sight it may appear favourable to a good attack on the strings, it has the great disadvantage of dulling sounds seeing that the hair of the bow in this manner stays too long on the string and impedes its vibration.*²

¹G.Bottesini, *Complete Method for the Contre-basse* (London: Rivière et Hawkes/Hawkes and Co, 1872), Preface page.

²*Ibid.*, 3.

It is clear to see that Bottesini approached music not just from being an instrumentalist but also as a master of harmony, composition and arranging, drawn from his studies at Milan Conservatoire. Bottesini takes his time to talk about the fundamentals of scales and harmony, which have been left out in most recent republications, but these are details that are obviously important to Bottesini to make the pupil a more skilled musician. In Bottesini's own words:

*I believe it will be very useful to the pupil that he should have some slight knowledge of that art (harmony) or at all events that he should understand the meaning of certain words which one ought certainly to be acquainted with.*³

Unlike most other styles of music today, it is usual for 'Classical' musicians to be either players or composers. There are always exceptions to this rule, but rarely does a classical musician get a chance to excel at both skills. However, it is through this special combination that Bottesini managed to achieve so much on the double bass.

In his exercises, Bottesini gives away a few secrets to the way he manages to play certain sections of his own pieces. Throughout the book, each study has been meticulously fingered with great detail as to how he would play certain passages and various string crossings he would use. Something that is very apparent from early on is that Bottesini gets the pupil shifting up and down a string (page 27) (1) by writing exercises that practice shifts up an individual string at a time. This is slightly different to other methods such as Simandl (2), which deals with each position as a block. Simandl keeps exercises mostly within a position, working across strings until the student is ready to move a semitone up to the next position. In contrast I presume that Bottesini did not want the pupil to be afraid of shifting and to develop some useful habits of avoiding unnecessary string crossing that can be achieved by playing up and down a string. Although Bottesini's Method is written for using fingers one-three-four, all the exercises can of course be played with the one-two-four technique instead. Bottesini however does not always strictly use one-three-four in a position; his method opens and closes the left hand with some semitones being played first and then fourth finger rather than always first and then third finger. I think this technique was developed to avoid the fatigue he mentions frequently in the book, especially in the lower positions.

Bottesini's choice of fingering in his exercises often suggest a *bel canto* style of playing, shown as one of the techniques he discusses on page 81 (1) by making the use of *portamento* to connect positions. Bottesini himself calls it the 'carrying' of one note tied to another without removing the hand from the string, insinuating that he did not take the weight out of the string when shifting. He achieves this by shifting to the next position using the same finger he has in the previous position and is shown in the Method by writing more than one note on one particular finger. He goes on to describe how to use this technique by saying:

*This passing must be made with a certain rapidity in order to avoid falling into a dragging or exaggerated sliding, which would be always in bad taste.*⁴

Two other techniques that became apparent in re-discovering this Method are that when Bottesini performed in the area of harmonics he would either pinch the string between the first finger and the thumb or strongly push against the string if there was a note that did not fall on to natural harmonics. He doesn't mention what direction the string should be pushed (I presume it is to the left) but it seems he used this manner to alter the pitch of a natural

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

harmonic, and that he chose to pinch the string when he needed to create a stopped note that didn't fall onto either a natural harmonic or the length of the fingerboard.

Bottesini shows in two exercises on page 116 (*I*) that the student should push against the string to alter the C natural harmonic on the D string to become a C sharp to fit a D major scale. In the next exercise he instructs the pupil to pinch the string to achieve an A sharp on the first string, again not falling on a natural harmonic or on the length of the fingerboard. Bottesini's fingerings on harmonic passages also show he favoured moving towards the bridge to play higher harmonics rather than creating them with 'false harmonics' lower down the instrument. I think this explains many of the amusing illustrations in newspapers of Bottesini clambering over his bass.

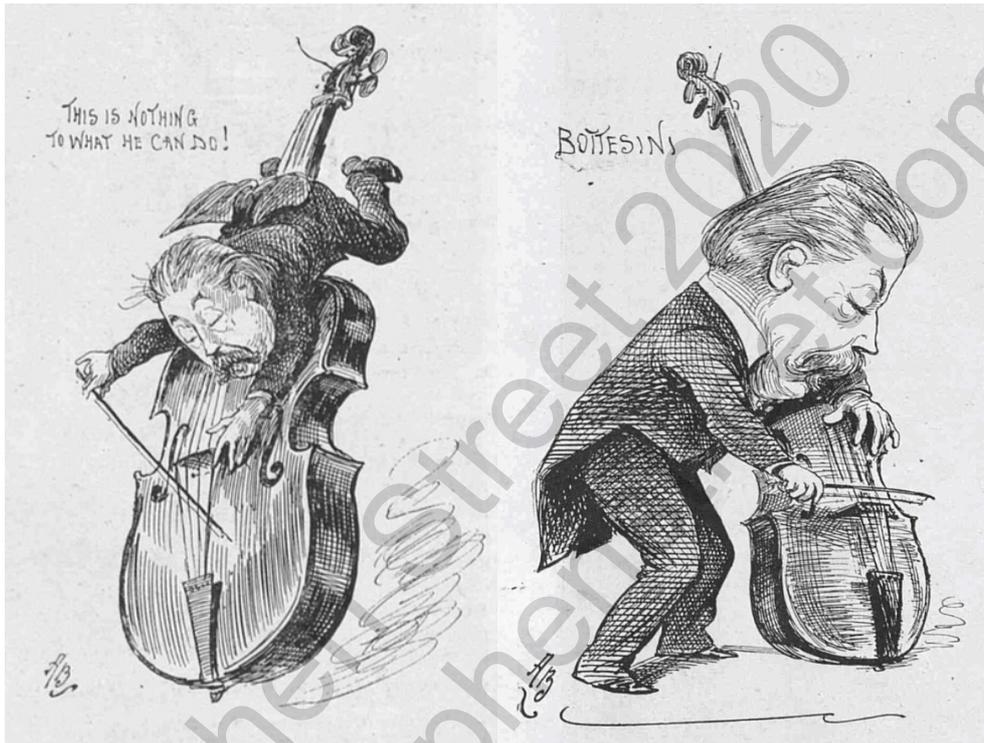


Figure 4 *The Illustrated Sporting And Dramatic News*, October 23rd 1886, page 159. (8)

Bottesini also gives us an insight into the equipment he used and preferred. His choice of an 'over hand' bow made like a cello bow, preferring black hair (page 20) (*I*) and having a preference for three over four strings⁵. In the Method and from contemporary interviews, Bottesini is very disparaging of the Dragonetti or German bow type. He also mentions that double bass bows varied much more in length than the rest of the string family. Measurements of between 21 ½ (55 cm) and 27 ½ inches (70 cm) in length are given in the book.⁶ In an interview with the *Sheffield Independent* from Monday 21st November 1887 in an article named 'Bottesini on the double bass', he informs the journalist that he tried many different lengths of bow until he found his preference, thus giving some rationale to the measurements in this method (*I*) (3) (4). It is also interesting to hear Bottesini's reasoning for a three string bass over four; however he suggests that the pupil should first learn on a three string bass and if it is really called for, to move on to a four string instrument once he has mastered the three (*I*)⁷. The Method mentions that the third and fourth strings of four string basses were often

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

metal covered; however Bottesini writes that he prefers a 'plain string' though exactly what the plain string was made out of is not identified (1) (5) (6) (7)⁸.

I'm sure that you will agree with me that there is much that has been lost in removing Bottesini's original writing from the original publication. I am also sure that the longer time spent with the Method, the more there will be uncovered about how he played. I hope that you enjoy the opportunity to learn more about Bottesini, as much as I have through studying this edition.

Stephen Street

Bibliography

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⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.