

Essay

By John Feeney

The Neue Mozart-Ausgabe, upon scrutiny of all available resources, has determined that while Mozart scored the Quartet in G- KV 285a and the Quartet in A- KV 298 for a Violoncello, both the Quartet in D KV 285 and the Quartet in C KV Anh.171 were scored for Basso.

When Mozart (or his contemporaries) felt the need to differentiate specifically between the eight-foot and sixteen-foot string basses, they used the terms "Violoncello", "Violon", "Violone," or "Contrabasso". Because Mozart writes the term "Basso" in the scores for these works, the great affinity for double bass instruments during this period, particularly in the regions of Salzburg and Vienna, as Leopold Mozart attests to in his 1769 edition of *Violinschule*, makes the use of a contrabass instrument an interesting ossai instrumentation.

Performance practices of the time, clearly revealed through evidence from contemporary documents and the music itself, point to the Double Bass as the sole and preferred Basso instrument in a wide variety of musical configurations.

Musical historian David Chapman writes in the Oct. 2010 issue of *Ad Parnassum* a Journal of 18th Century Music:

"The affinity for the sixteen-foot register in both small and large instrumental settings belongs to a widespread tradition throughout Europe during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Instrumental ensembles from all areas of the continent consistently employed double-bass instruments in equal if not greater numbers than violoncellos during this period.... For example, the Milan opera orchestra in 1770 lists two violoncellists but six double bassists 53; forces at Salzburg during Mozart's time there display a similar distribution of string-bass forces.

Employment manifests of the Salzburg court from 1769 to 1780..... clearly show a strong bias towards double-bass instruments. The ratio of *Violonisten* to *Violoncellisten* at this time is two, three, or sometimes even four to one. And from the end of 1774 through 1775, the records show no violoncellists at all 54."

Zaslaw, Neal. 'Mozart's Orchestras: Applying Historical Knowledge to Modern Performances', in: *Early Music*, xx/2 (1992), pp. 197-205.

54. Bär, Carl. *Op. cit.* (see note 1), pp. 147-148. See especially the chart on p. 148 and the facsimile of the original court records on the facing page.

Music historian Carl Bär in his 'Zum Begriff des *Basso* in Mozart's Serenaden' (*Mozart-Jahrbruch* 1960/61) documents the vibrant tradition in Salzburg of employing the Double Bass (without cello) in the vast majority of serenade works by Mozart and

(continued from page 1)

Andrew Kearns reveals, in his 1996 article in *Journal of Musicological Research* XVI/3, other musical forms relative to the Serenade that commonly utilized a Double Bass - the Divertimento, Cassation, Nachtmusik, Notturmo, Serenata and Partita.

The Gran Partita K.361 and C Major Flute Quartet are closely connected, in fact, the second movement of the flute quartet is mostly a transcription of the sixth movement of K.361. Mozart scores *Contrabasso* as the lone string instrument in the Gran Partita. The bass part in the sixth movement of K361 has exactly the same soloistic material as in mvt. II, Variation III of the C Major Flute Quartet- only one tone away- in B flat rather than C.

The presence of this material is a reminder of the highly developed technical capabilities required of contemporary bassists and lends strong support to the use of double bass in these works.

The 16 foot adds a unique depth, spaciousness and clarity to these often performed and recorded works and we hope that the listener will find this unique approach enjoyable, if not revelatory.