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"The Contemporary Contrabass." By Bertram Turetzky

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Bertram Turetzky. *The Contemporary Contrabass*. New and revised edition. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989. xiv, 178p.

The curious breed of the virtuoso double bass player is hardly a new phenomenon: even before the eighteenth century most musical capitals of the world could lay claim to their own respected soloists, though few commanded a reputation sufficiently great for them to be remembered today. The Dragonettis and Bottesinis, exceptional though they were, had access only to a limited repertoire and their instruments too had their problems—thick strings with often unreliable windings, coupled with comparatively primitive bows and little standardization of sizes or dimensions. Today, things have changed immeasurably. Whereas a century ago the virtuoso was expected to play mainly his own music, recital programs of our time call for rather greater variety. New technology has brought about a revolution in the instrument itself that in turn has given players and composers far greater scope. Bass literature today is rich in its variety and range of styles. Far more is expected of the modern player than would have been conceivable even as recently as the 1950s.

To understand more about all this, it is necessary to explain some of the technology in a little more detail because it isn't fashion alone that has opened the door to a new arena of sound. Metal strings, which were already available to violinists and cellists, were still being experimented with and only gained universal acceptance in the double bass world in the 1960s. Their advantages, apart from durability, are that they stay in tune better, speak more clearly and can be made to produce a wider variety of colors and more subtle nuances than were available from gut. For metal strings to work at their optimum, the instrument must be in prime condition and adjustments made when "setting up" so that tensions and angles are correct and the distances from strings to fingerboard very carefully measured. If these conditions are observed, metal strings can produce a wide range of harmonics that can, with practice, be reliably obtained; double stops speak better and as a result, more refined bowing techniques are called for. But greatest of all, the metal string has brought about an enormous improvement in the ever-present problem of faulty intonation on the double bass: one can simply hear the purer tone more easily and correct it accordingly.

Enormous advances in the world of recording technology have also affected double bass playing. Microphones are now so sophisticated that

even minute discrepancies from the soloist are all too easily reproduced with alarming faithfulness and conductors in the orchestral world demand accuracy and clarity from all bass sections. Gone are the days when ownership of a double bass was sufficient to guarantee a post in an orchestra—this was so after the war—today there is enormous competition for positions. In the 1960s there were possibly three or four available recordings of double bass soloists—today there are hundreds! Inevitably standards have risen and horizons have been broadened and yet somehow we are still seeing only the infancy of development.

It is to the exploration of this new world of sound, with its exciting palette of textures and timbres that one of America's leading players, Bertram Turetzky, has devoted his life. He once said that he was unwilling to conceive of the contrabass (a word he prefers to double bass) as a clumsy, poor relative of the cello. His work began with the re-evaluation of pizzicato technique, not for velocity but for seeking new vistas of color. He then virtually re-invented bow technique, adding to its capabilities enormously. Since his pioneering days in the '50s literally hundreds of new works have been written for him and he has been a major influence on the thinking of younger generations of both players and performers. Who better to draw the fruits of this work together in a book that I found, as a former recitalist myself, a stimulating, compelling and fascinating read!

It would be simple to make lists of notation used by this or that composer, to sprinkle the text with a few examples and to leave it at that. But this book is more than a catalog of notation. Turetzky, in his passionate love-affair with the instrument, has been down all the avenues himself. His personal recollections bring life to the text, which is, incidentally, beautifully laid out and far more easily approached than when it first appeared in 1974.

Looking at it from the non-bass player's point of view, and from the European angle too, it is surprising how few of the very many composers cited really are mainstream writers. Crumb, Françaix, Kagel, Cage, and Henze certainly are, but many such as Leonard Payton, Peter Phillips, and Cecil Adkins don't even all appear in *Grove's* and have yet to make an international reputation. But it is they who have all joined the ranks of composers who have discovered the bass "from the inside" rather than merely following a book of instructions and coming up with bass parts that are less than rewarding to play.

And surely it is this that is the key to it all. There is little merit in an artist struggling with new concepts of technique and mastering what was once considered the impossible, when the music is neither satisfying to play nor, for that matter, very interesting to listen to. A professional and highly respected colleague of mine (not a bassist) spent hours and hours deciphering an illegible manuscript and learning, virtually by rote, highly intricate rhythmic patterns in a lengthy work whose complex time signature changed every bar. He was told at the first rehearsal that accuracy was of secondary importance, only to discover that the composer who had made this comment could hear very little of what he had actually written down. What is the point? My friend walked out.

It will be obvious to the reader that most of what has been discussed so far has only limited application in the orchestral world at the moment: whilst the orchestral player is expected to play better than used to be the case, composers writing for the orchestra have yet to explore the possibilities that modern double bass playing offers them. Even in chamber music, few players beyond the specialist ensembles will encounter many of the more advanced techniques that Mr Turetzky illustrates in *The Contemporary Contrabass*. The gap between the bass as a soloist and the orchestral instrument seems to yawn wider still. But the sounds are there if one has the physical coordination and stamina to master them. There are all too few contemporary contrabass artists of the calibre of Joëlle Leandre, Jon Deak, Fernando Grillo, Barry Guy, and Mr T in the world as yet. "Come on everyone," is what the book is really saying, "The challenge awaits you!"

A glimpse at what is possible will serve to show what I mean. Take, for example, the apparently simple matter of the pizzicato. Which finger or thumb is to be used? Which part of the string is to be sounded? Does the passage employ tremolo pizzicato? So far, so good! But there are four simultaneous pitches required—both hands have to produce bi-tones. Why not? Added to this, there is a vocal line which is written quite independently from the pizzicato rhythms. This incorporates humming, whistling, speaking, shouting, and a multitude of clicks, pops, and "squelches," for which the player uses his mouth. But it need not end here. Some works call for an independent part for the feet. Consider also the bass as a drum (the topic of a number of separate discussion papers produced over the years by Mr Turetzky); it can be rapped, tapped, squeaked, or gently bowed on almost any part of its anatomy, but *never* assaulted with a mallet (perhaps even some players might wish to do so!). This is a specialist's world, but there can be no other instrument that enjoys so many possibilities and that has such a wide vocabulary,

particularly when set in the context of other art forms such as mime or dance. "Any place on the contrabass to which the player can get the bow will produce some sort of sound, as well as a particular theatrical or visual display." An extreme example might be *For Love of the Double Bass* by James Sellars (1985), in which the player is required to put a dress on the instrument and then to dance several brief dance episodes (waltz, foxtrot, etc.). They end up in bed on top of the piano.

The techniques are all here—mutes, scordaturas, finger charts, glissandi, slaps and mixes, circular bowings, col legno, and so on. Of harmonics Warren Benfield once said, "I play them where they are most convenient after figuring what the hell the guy wanted." Here it is easy enough to see how best to notate what is required so the player can be left in no doubt. I miss the demonstration disc that was with the first edition. Bert has now made many recordings, so it is possible enough to find an illustrated example of most of the techniques he discusses in the text. But accessibility to specialist records is not always an easy matter, as anyone living outside the USA who tries to track down a small American label at a sensible price will know only too well. But with or without the disc, the 1989 edition has so many improvements on its predecessor that it justly deserves its claim to being "new and revised"; there are many more pages of musical examples and many paragraphs have been clarified and updated.

Mr Turetzky has chipped away at the foundations of traditional bass playing for years—in the words of Barney Childs in one of the thirteen classical studies he wrote for ASTA, "Welcome to Contrabassland, folks!" Turetzky's book is an essential for the adventurous composer and the serious player.

Rodney Slatford