

LUIGI BOCCHERINI -- AN UNJUSTLY NEGLECTED GREAT COMPOSER FOR THE CELLO

by Dimitry Markevitch (2000)

When I was a young student the only two works by Boccherini ever performed were his celebrated minuet and the B-flat Cello Concerto (in a very freely edited version by Grützmacher, which is, unfortunately still played by some cellists). One of the first to become aware of this sad situation was my teacher Gregor Piatigorsky. He convinced his mother-in-law, the Baroness Germaine de Rothschild, to write a biography of Boccherini, which was published in 1962, and to sponsor a 700 page catalog of his works by a young French musicologist, Yves Gerard. Since then Gerard has become known as Boccherini's Koechel, the first letter of his name being used to number Boccherini's production, which is close to 600 works! Unfortunately, Piatigorsky's goal to render Boccherini's music better known and more popular has not yet, in the last 40 years, really been achieved. In any case the Gerard Catalog, published by Oxford University Press, should be every cellist's bible. Its second updated edition is now being prepared. Let's hope that it will not take too long to come out.

In the 1950's the great Czech conductor Henry Swoboda recorded several of Boccherini's symphonies, which are marvelous. In 1962, Pina Carmirelli, a violinist and Boccherini expert, recorded several lovely quartets.

In 1971, in the *Rivista Musicala Italiana*, the musicologist Massimo Mila said: "Boccherini, a composer, who sounds like Mozart, Haydn or the young Beethoven." But the 250th anniversary of his birth in 1993 was very discreetly celebrated and was not an occasion for a revival of his music. Laudable efforts were made on the part of publishers like G. Zanibon of Padova, Italy, who has produced a great number of scores under the guidance of the veteran cellist and musicologist Aldo Pais. Ricordi has also published nineteen Cello Sonatas in addition to Schott's several Concertos and a few Sonatas.

Since Rothschild's, two biographies have come out in Italian, and several cellists have recorded on CD the Concertos and a few Sonatas. We know now that there are 12 Concertos, but how many Sonatas are there? For a long time, only six were known, those published in 1874 by Ricordi and edited by Alfredo Piatti, though Gerard lists 29 Sonatas in his remarkable catalog. In 1982 Agostina Zecca discovered in the library of the Conservatorio in Milan three more Sonatas, and recently the musicologist Christian Speck found some others at the Abbey of Seitenstetten in Austria. I, myself, thanks to the kindness of the curator of the Abbey, just received photocopies of the manuscripts of eleven Boccherini Sonatas. Of these, eight I already knew from other versions, but three are absolutely new to me. To my knowledge the grand total of cello and basso Sonatas by Boccherini is now 38. They are located mainly at the Conservatorio in Milan. The set of eleven, previously belonging to F. Spiegel, is now in a private collection. The Duke of Hamilton of Scotland possesses several manuscripts and the remainder are in Austria.

Besides those issued by Ricordi, Zanibon has published 15 Sonatas and intends to eventually publish them all. But Zanibon was recently taken over by Ricordi, who was in turn bought by Bertelsmann, a German commercial firm that is not particularly interested in Boccherini. So once more bad luck falls on our composer. I supplied Zanibon with the score of five unpublished Sonatas, which have been ready for publication for several months, but they have not been printed yet. Let's hope that it will not take another two centuries.

All Boccherini Sonatas, by the way, were written for "Violoncello e Basso," which actually means cello with a second cello, not a keyboard. Boccherini performed these sonatas with his father, who played the second cello part. As Boccherini's basses are not figured, writing a piano accompaniment implies inventing some sort of harmony which often, in many editions, is not in style. In my article in *Strings* (Nov./Dec. 1991), I discussed the great possibilities of the cello as an accompanying instrument. Boccherini is an ideal vehicle for trying the wonderful combination of two cellos.

Born in 1743 in Lucca, Italy, Luigi Boccherini began studying the cello at an early age with his father, a double-bass player who had also some knowledge of the cello. At thirteen he was sent to Rome where the well-known cellist G. B. Costanzi (1704-1778) taught him cello and the basics of composition. Barely sixteen he was already solo cellist at the Imperial Theater in Vienna, where he met Gluck, who became his ardent supporter. Germaine de Rothschild, in her biography of Boccherini, says that early in 1764 he gave a concert in Vienna at which, with the assistance of his father, Leopoldo, he performed his compositions for one or two cellos. This concert ranks him among the "Virtuosi of the Music-Akademie."

In 1760 he published his Opus 1, six trios for 2 violins and cello. Back in Lucca he befriended the violinist Filippo Manfredi, with whom he toured in Northern Italy, and, in 1765, they formed the first known string quartet with Pietro Nardini and Giovanni Maria Cambini. Then they made their way to Paris where they played at the famous "Concert Spirituel." Reports said that "the public was conquered." From there they went to Madrid where Boccherini was to live until his death in 1805. In Spain he was first at the service of infant Don Luis, brother of King Charles III. From 1785, while still in Spain, he worked for the King of Prussia, Frederic-Wilhelm II, an amateur cellist who had composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven write works for him. After Frederic-Wilhelm's death Boccherini found protection in the person of Lucien Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon. But the last years of his life were difficult and he died in near poverty.

The abundant output of the greatest Italian composer of instrumental music of his generation includes, besides the works for cello already mentioned, some significant chamber music -- 113 quintets with two cellos, a form invented by him, 91 quartets, of which he was one of the first initiators, trios, and works for various combinations of instruments. His production also includes an opera, 21 symphonies, and a remarkable *Stabat Mater*.

His style is very personal, already beyond baroque style, but not yet completely classical. With *Sturm und Drang* qualities, always beautifully written for the instruments, his cello parts are, naturally, a joy to play. Let me point out some pieces particularly interesting for both their musical content and their technical appeal to the cellists:

- Above all there are, naturally, the first cello parts of the Two Celli Quintets, including the well known one in C Major G.310 with its famous Rondo. The G. 276 in G Major, "The Aviary," contain some lovely spots depicting the life in the country. Both cellos have very interesting and quite difficult parts to play.
- The following Gerard numbers are really worth exploring: G. 265, 266, 279, 283 and 291.
- The E Major Quintet, G. 275, contains the celebrated minuet (the best known Boccherini piece), which has been transcribed for so many different instruments and even used in several film, such as "The Magnificent Ambersons" by Orson Welles and "The Ladykillers" with Alec Guinness. It has become the most typical example of an 18th century minuet.
- There are also the Quartets, Op. 32, G. 201-206. The 4th Quartet with its first movement, *Allegro Bizarro*, is particularly noteworthy.

Spanish influence can be felt in the following works:

- Quintet, Op. 50, No 5, G. 374, second movement *Minuetto a modo di sghidiglia spagnola*
- Op. 40, No 2 has a *Fandango*.
- Op. 30, No 6, G. 324, is called "La Musica Notturna delle Strade di Madrid." In the minuet the celli hold their instruments like guitars and play with their nails.
- The last Quintet, Op. 51, No 2, G 377, is very beautiful. Its last chord has 15 notes!
- The Op. 42, No 1, G. 348, was the Quintet preferred by Boccherini himself.
- The last movement of G. 346, is an amusing *Allegro alla Turca*.
- The six Trios, Op. 14, G 95-100 for Violin, Viola and Cello are fine and the Quartet, Op. 58, No 2, in E flat, G. 243, has a slow movement which announces Schubert.
- Quartet, Op. 44, No 4, G. 223 is called *La Tiranna*. The trio of its minuet is very Spanish in character.

Boccherini utilizes, for his time, a very advanced cello technique. He systematically uses the thumb positions, like in G. 347 with the mention *capo tasto*. It allows him to explore unexpected keys such as E-flat and to do away with open strings.

The String Sextets, Op. 23, G. 454-459, and the Divertimenti, Op. 16, G. 461-466, for Flute, 2 Violins, Viola and 2 Celli contain much beautiful music as well.

I cannot mention everything, but these works should already give you a good idea of what Boccherini has to offer. Continued neglect of such a wealth of great pieces would be a terrible shame. Cellists and music lovers will find it very rewarding to reactivate interest in Boccherini's music.

