

**Informal Details about the Double Bass Concerto by G. A. Capuzzi,  
and its Relationship (or lack thereof) to Domenico Dragonetti**

© by Joëlle Morton, August 23, 2012

**Domenico Dragonetti**

Born April 7, 1763 in Venice, to parents of limited means (his father was perhaps a musician, but also a gondolier)

moved to London in 1794

Died April 16, 1846 in London

“Little research has been done on primary material in Venice relating to Dragonetti’s life there. As a result, statements about these years are often unreliable. It was one such misrepresentation...that prompted Francesco Caffi (1778-1874) to write an account of Dragonetti’s life. This biography, dated September 20, 1846 [5 months after Dragonetti’s death], has served as the source for many later statements. Caffi, a magistrate and musicologist, was a fervent admirer of Dragonetti’s musical talent and had known him personally. These facts make his remarks double-edged: on the one hand, he is speaking from personal experience; on the other, this very advantage is weakened by the sentiment that clouds his memory.” Fiona Palmer, *Domenico Dragonetti in England (1794-1846): The Career of a Double Bass Virtuoso*, p.7-8.

Dragonetti’s biography is almost exclusively known from reminiscences authored by his friends: Vincent Novello (London, 1836), Francesco Caffi (1846) and also some details by Carl Ferdinand Pohl (1867). In many instances it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of their statements; the authors did not know Dragonetti well (if at all) in his younger years, and therefore largely rely on what Dragonetti told them about this period. Especially note that Caffi, who came from Venice and whose accounts of Dragonetti’s younger years form the vast majority of the documentation, was 15 years younger than Dragonetti; so until he was at least 10 years old (Dragonetti would have been 25 at that point), his views and memories could hardly be considered discriminating! The accounts date from decades after the occurrences they describe and very little other documentation exists. So one must remain alert to the possibility of exaggeration or embellishment when reading descriptions of this early period. Caffi himself even acknowledges Dragonetti’s propensity for self-aggrandizement, saying: “...in 1809 he gave me the most effusive and pompous accounts of his glory and fortunes among the English, for education had not placed on his lips that most annoying brake to self-respect—modesty.” (Palmer, p.17)

The “tangled web of unchecked duplication and inaccuracy” (Palmer, p.9) starts with Dragonetti’s date of birth; this inconsistency may have actually come from Dragonetti himself who gave out conflicting information. His official obituary states the year as 1755, but this is irrefutably incorrect; baptismal records indicate he was born April 7, 1763 in the Venetian parish of S. Marina, and baptized two days later.

Palmer observes (p.9) that, "Dragonetti appears, later in life, to have been unsure about his date of birth or to have pretended to be ignorant of it. Perhaps he felt that the startling length of his performing career could be made [to seem] even more remarkable by adding a decade to the total."

Little is verifiable about Dragonetti's early years. Caffi states that "He never had, nor could he have had, any high education; he was almost illiterate, and since his childhood had applied himself solely to the double bass under some instructions given to him by Michele Berini, double bass in the theatres and in the Ducal Chapel of St. Mark's." The details from Dragonetti's early life in Venice are very murky. According to Pohl (in 1867), as a teenager Dragonetti was hired to the theatre orchestras at San Benedetto and St. Marks's. However, these things are almost certainly untrue. San Benedetto burned down in 1774, so Dragonetti would have been only 11 years old if he played there! And employment records from St. Mark's reveal that Dragonetti first auditioned for them in 1784 (at age 21) but didn't gain a single vote from the audition panel at that time. He was, however admitted there 3 years later in September 1787, at age 24, initially taking up the position of 5<sup>th</sup> of 5 bass players, but shortly after that (in December 1787) being promoted, possibly replacing Spinelli as the first player in the ensemble. Caffi states Dragonetti was employed at the prestigious La Fenice in his early years, however this theatre didn't open until 1792 (when Dragonetti was 29), just 2 years before he left for London. All three of Dragonetti's main biographers claim that from a very early age, Dragonetti had an impressive reputation in Venice, and stories abound about his playing in the streets and coffee bars and at people's homes with Venice's most elite musicians. This may also be an exaggeration, especially if he didn't gain entrance to St. Mark's (where all the other renowned musicians were employed) until his mid-20s. But he in fact did seem to rise quickly to a position of some repute after that point.

By 1791 (age 28), Dragonetti's success at St. Mark's appears to have brought him a number of other offers of employment, from London and Moscow, which he initially declined, but used to his benefit, since St. Mark's increased his pay in response to his loyalty. St. Mark's was in some financial trouble, and players regularly asked for permission to spend a few months or years at more profitable places. So Dragonetti's departure in September 1794 was neither unlikely nor unusual. Caffi states he requested and was initially granted a two-year leave of absence to go to London, and that his position at St. Mark's was kept open for him, with the promise of payment of a year's salary on his return. In 1796, his leave was extended a further three years and at the conclusion of that period (in 1799) Dragonetti returned to Venice in order formalize his official resignation. Aside from the trip back in 1799, during the remainder of his career, Dragonetti made only a few other trips to the continent: in 1808-1814 (during which he was arrested, locked up for approx. two years and then and formally expelled from Venice, returning to London after approx. 3 years in Vienna), and brief trips abroad in 1820 and 1832 (other details unknown).

According to Palmer (p.18), "In spite of the prejudices of the sources, several facts [about Dragonetti's early life] emerge quite clearly. First, he was a success in Venice and had mastered the double bass before departing for England... Secondly, there was nothing pioneering about his decision to seek work abroad... What is certain is that his Venetian origin was a card he could play to his advantage on reaching England. His Italian roots were an important factor in the success of his English career and gave his virtuosity an added dimension."

It is common lore that Capuzzi and Dragonetti played together often, in public and in private. That the two men knew each other is beyond dispute, since Capuzzi (8 years older than Dragonetti) held prominent violin positions in Venetian theatres at the same time Dragonetti was establishing himself there. But if one compares dates, itineraries, and details of musical scores, their personal connection is difficult to prove and would seem to be quite exaggerated. Yes, they played chamber music together at least once, since Caffi reminisces "In my adolescence [i.e. c1790-1794 when Dragonetti would have been in his late 20s] I heard him [Dragonetti] play Haydn quartets taking the parts of first and second violin alternately with Capuzzi..." Additionally, the two men would surely have seen each other (and possibly worked together) in London in 1796 when Capuzzi traveled there to produce a ballet. But absolutely no other links between the two men are known, and there is no indication that Capuzzi authored any of his compositions specifically for Dragonetti's use. Accounts of Dragonetti's notoriety performing in the streets around Venice (in itself possibly exaggerated) often pair him with a singer (Brigida Giorgi Banti) and an unnamed violinist; it's certainly possible that this was Capuzzi, but no documentation exists to prove it, and there are scores of other players who would also fit the bill. Most of the published Capuzzi pieces for solo violin with a general "basso" accompaniment are typical of their time; nothing suggests they were intended for a double bass, let alone Dragonetti in particular. Ken Goldsmith (an American Capuzzi scholar) informs me that there are "5 later duets in manuscript that specify contrabasso, although a couple of them say simply bass." I have not been able to see copies of these works, they are not mentioned in RISM and they are not listed in any of the other published listings/descriptions of Capuzzi compositions, so I am skeptical about their existence (though open to being proven wrong). There is also no direct link between Dragonetti and Capuzzi's concerto for double bass. The fact that the two men knew each other is not enough to leap to a claim that the concerto was composed for Dragonetti, especially when the title page specifies another name. There is further no indication that Dragonetti performed this work in London, or made the manuscript copy, or gave the manuscript copy to Vincent Novello.

### **The "Capuzzi Bass Concerto"**

This work is known from only a single surviving manuscript copy, located at the British Library (Add. ms. 17834) in a folio that also contains the Cimador concerto for double bass. These two works are NOT part of the much larger collection of works by Dragonetti at the British Library. As inscribed on the front cover of the

folio for the two works, they were “Presented by V. Novello, 6 Aug. 1849) to the British Museum. There is no indication that these works were ever owned by Dragonetti, or that he gave them to Novello; though the two men were indeed friends, Vincent Novello was a hugely important and successful music publisher in London, and so these works could easily have come to him through any number of different channels.

The Capuzzi concerto does not appear to be in Capuzzi’s own hand, although it is quite similar in style to his handwriting. So it is unclear if this is in fact the “original” performing copy of the concerto made by a copyist on Capuzzi’s behalf, which was fairly common at the time, or if it is a secondary copy made with the intent of soliciting publication, or if it is a copy made by a player (even possibly Dragonetti) for personal use or reference. The Capuzzi manuscript is not dated, and his biographers have not attributed a specific date to the work. However, judging from Capuzzi’s general biography and list of works, he was most active as a composer during in the 1790s and early 1800s when most of his career as a composer centred in Venice. This time period and location strike me as logical as being the point of origin for the concerto, especially since the manuscript is inscribed to a member of a very prominent Venetian family. The title page of the concerto reads: Concerto per il Violone//a uso di Si. li Kavalier Marcantonio Mocenigo//Del Sig. Antonio Capuzzi.”

The accompaniment for the concerto is extremely light: merely 2 violins (“violino primo obbligato” and “violino secondo obbligato”), viola (“viole”), 2 oboes (“oboe primo” and “oboe secondo”), 2 French horns (“corno primo” and “corno secondo”) and b.c. (“basso obbligato”). The outer 2 movements (*allegro* and *rondo*) are in D major and the middle movement (*cantabile*) is in A major. The solo part (“violone obbligato”) is notated on the same pages along with the continuo bass line (“basso obbligato”), with regular indications for “solo” and “tutti.” Either two or more players could have used the same part; the soloist may also have played along in the tutti sections. The part is notated entirely in bass clef, except for one short passage at the end of the first movement where the solo line goes into tenor clef. We can assume the solo part is to sound an octave lower than notated pitch; if Capuzzi had intended otherwise, he would surely have notated the solo part in a different clef. This being the case, the *ambitus* of the solo line goes from EE (a modern double bass’s lowest open string) to b (above the octave on the modern bass’s top string). This is an unusually low register for a solo piece; many have argued it should be played so that it sounds one octave higher. Though this would certainly work, and be a viable option for players in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I don’t believe that was Capuzzi’s intention. My belief is that the work was conceived for a wealthy amateur player on an instrument type where the passagework lies very conveniently under the hand, so that it makes the player sound good without great effort. And the light orchestral scoring enables the solo line to be heard without the need for it to be played an octave higher. More about this, below.

‘Violone’ is not an unusual term for Italy at that time; in this particular context it definitely refers to a double bass instrument. But the question of exactly what type

of violone Capuzzi had in mind is problematic, as there is no definite indication of how many strings or which of several tuning systems Capuzzi would have expected. 3, 4 or 5 string double bass instruments are all historically viable at this period, with tunings of 4ths or 5ths, or a Viennese *terz-quart Stimmung*. However, there are a number of strong reasons to consider Viennese tuning as a logical possibility. First, the 5-string Viennese violone was extremely popular and well-known at this time period, with a number of solo virtuosi traveling all across Europe and to England to give solo and chamber performances. At the time, this was essentially the only type of double bass that was being written for in a solo and chamber capacity, and its repertoire is very substantial. Secondly, the predominant key of D major and the regular passagework that exploits the interval of thirds are all things innately idiomatic to the Viennese violone. From a player's perspective, the work lies extremely comfortably under the hand in Viennese tuning, and one might argue it requires less work to play well on that set-up, than on an instrument tuned in 4ths or 5ths. (In any case, the piece necessitates a bottom range that goes as low as EE, so 3-string contrabasses are definitely out of the running.) Thirdly, the scoring of Capuzzi's concerto is extremely similar to many of the *notturmi* and *divertimenti*, chamber pieces that were being written in Austrian realms at that time, where this type of violone was prevalent, and which often did not include a separate part for cello, or require an additional 8' bass. And fourth, there are known connections between Capuzzi and the Mocenigo family to Vienna. In Capuzzi's case, an additional parallel is his *Sinfonia Concertante* in D major, of 1782 (scored for 2 violins and horn or viola obbligato, 2 oboes, 2 violas, 2 horns and b.c.), which is another piece distinctly in the *notturmo/divertimento* tradition, and the manuscript is located at Innsbruck. (The remnants of an additional Capuzzi concerto, said to be for violone (although perhaps more precisely for horn) are located in a library in Croatia – reflecting Capuzzi's influence in northern realms.) Although there is no definitive proof, I believe the Capuzzi concerto was written to sound in its lower octave, played on the Viennese violone. To my mind, there are enough logical reasons to support this idea, and almost no other arguments or connections in support of a different type of instrument.

It's important to note that the inscription on the title page designates that this work is not dedicated to, but rather "**for the use of** Marcantonio Mocenigo," and his title "Kavalier" (knight) indicates a noble lineage. He therefore was not a professional musician; it is logical to speculate he played violone as an amateur. At present time, absolutely nothing is known about Marcantonio, however, the Mocenigo family was hugely important and prominent in Venice. As far back at the 14<sup>th</sup> century, members of the Mocenigo family served as *doges* of Venice – positions of extreme honour and authority. (A *doge* was elected for life, serving as chief magistrate, ecclesiastical, civil and military leader for the city.) Alvise Giovanni Mocenigo was *doge* from 1763-1788, and Giovanni Mocenigo was ambassador to Pope Clement XIII also during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. You might liken this family to "Italian royalty." The family had four palaces in Venice, the main one of which is Palazzo Mocenigo, located on the Grand Canal in the San Marco prefecture between the Rialto Bridge and St. Mark's Square. The Mocenigo family was important as patron of the arts and had many connections

to the most important musicians of the time. A 16-year old Antonio Salieri was brought to Venice by Giovanni Mocenigo in 1766, and lodged with the family for a year. Leopold Mozart and his 15-year old son Wolfgang visited the home of *doge* Alvise Mocenigo in 1771. So the Mocenigo family appears to have been a very musically inclined, and with numerous connections to the north in Europe, most especially with the Hapsburg court in Vienna. It is not illogical to imagine that family members themselves played musical instruments as a hobby. After all, recall that at exactly this time period to the north Frederick II of Prussia (1712-86) was playing flute and commissioning a good number of works to be written for his own personal use... The inscription on the title page of Capuzzi's concerto would incline me to believe that the work was composed for Marcantonio Mocenigo to play informally in his own home, with the rest of the ensemble filled out by family, friends and hired help.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Capuzzi concerto came to be known by many players through a variety of editions. To this day, none of the modern editions represent the original composition truthfully; most have either transposed the work into a new (and higher, more virtuosic) key or provided the solo part at an octave higher than originally written. Even more problematic, all of the modern editions impose all manner of dynamics and articulations that are not indicated in the manuscript. My hope is that before long someone will take the time and trouble to prepare an urtext edition so that this piece may be enjoyed in its original conception. Anyone have a well-to-do patron who would like to fund the venture and perhaps also then take the solo line?!

### **Giuseppe Antonio Capuzzi**

born August 1, 1755, Breno, Brescia

died March 28, 1818, Bergamo

Italian violinist and composer

studied counterpoint in Brescia with Pietro Pellegrini and then in Venice with F. G. Beroni, and violin with Antonio Nazari (a pupil of Tartini)

1780-1785 was first violinist [in Venice] at the Teatro S. Samuele, as well as leader of the orchestra at Teatro S. Benedetto, where he produced his first ballet with choreography by Domenico Ricciardi. In 1792 he became the first concertmaster at La Fenice. In 1796 he went to London, where he produced a ballet "La villegioise enlevee" to great acclaim.

in 1797 Capuzzi was back in Venice, where he along with the choreographers Carlo Taglioni and S. Viganò produced several ballets.

In 1805 he settled in Bergamo, where he served until his death in 1818 as first violinist S Maria Maggiore and professor of violin at the Istituto Musicale, leader of orchestra at Teatro Riccardi

## **Capuzzi's Works:**

Regem cui omnia vivent (date unknown): for double choir and strings

La tempesta (1813): cantata for soprano and strings

Operas: at least 6 (composed 1792 Padua, 1793 Venice, 1794 Venice, 1794 no location known, 1801 Venice, 1804 Venice)

Ballets: at least 11 (composed 1783 Venice, 1784 Rome, 1784 Florence, 1794 Mailand, 1786 Naples, 1786 Venice, 1787 Vicenza, 1787 Ravenna, 1787 Venice, 1788 no location known, 1796 London, 1797 Venice, 1797 Venice, 1799 Venice, 1800 Venice, 1802 Mailand, 1803 Mailand, 1807 no location known)

La rosa di Danzica in D major: orchestra

Overture in D major: orchestra

Sinfonia concertante in D major for 2 vln, hn or vla obbl, c1782)

Concerto for flute in C major

Concerto for flute in D major

at least 9 Concerti for violin (one 1817, others no dates known)

Variations for Violin and Orchestra

Concerto for Cello

Concerto for violone in D major, "a uso di Signore li Kavalier Marcantonio Mocenigo"

Sonata for vln with vln accomp (Vienna ?1803-04)

6 divertimenti for vln and b.c. (2 books of them, Venice, c1790)

Sonata for Violin

2 sets of Theme and Variations for Violin and b.c.

Rondo for cembalo and violin

Trio for 2 celli and b.c.

18 string quartets (op. 1: London, 1780, op. 2: Vienna 1780, op. 6: Vienna 1787)

6 string quintets (op. 3: Venice, after 1780)

## **Additionally:**

Location: The Split City Museum, Croatia ( <http://www.mgst.net/> )

Call number: VII/109

Cited in: Katalog muzikalija u Muzeju grada Splita (Catalogue of music manuscripts and prints in the City Museum of Split), Zagreb Jugoslavenska Akad. Znanosti i Umjetnosti, Zavod za Muzikološka Istraživanja, Series Academia scientiarum et artium slavorum meridionalium, 1989. p.44-45

Main title: No 9: Concerto / a Contrabasso Solo Obbligato / Del Sig.r NN

Margin title: Concerto a Corno obbligato del Sig. Capuzzi

Ms. 18.ex, 32 X 23 cm

Parts: vln 1 (5 p.), b (7p)

Movement keys: B flat major and E flat major