

VANHAL DOUBLE BASS CONCERTO

Double bassist Christine Hoock emphasises serenity, clarity and flow, and the importance of preparation when tackling the first movement of this overtly Classical piece



From Vanhal Double Bass Concerto. Urtext edition, piano reduction, paper bound. Including pf parts in C major and D major; db parts for solo, orchestra and Viennese tuning. Cadenzas Tobias Glöckler and Johannes Sperger. Editor Tobias Glöckler; pf reduction Christoph Sobanski; fingering db Tobias Glöckler. Order no. HN 979, ISMN 979-0-2018-0979-3, €22.50. Printed with permission of G. Henle Verlag, Munich © 2015

For me, Vanhal's Concerto will always be a 'youthful' piece. I learnt it while studying in Frankfurt, where I performed it with my university orchestra. It's a sparkling work, with clear melodies, positive energy, a beautiful Adagio, virtuoso passages and opportunities to create individual cadenzas.

We are lucky that Vanhal was inspired to write a double bass concerto. Bassists such as Kämpfer, Pischelberger and Sperger were creating a sort of double-bass-solo boom in Vienna, and it may have been his acquaintance with Dittersdorf, or inspiration from Sperger, that led to Vanhal composing his concerto between 1786 and 1789. The only preserved duplicate of the manuscript is in Sperger's hand and is part of Sperger's archive – now housed at the Landesbibliothek in Schwerin, Germany.

THE 'IDEAL' TUNING

Sperger's manuscript copy contains many additional *8va* indications. The concerto was originally written in D major for a double bass with Viennese tuning (A¹–D–F#–A). In this tuning, every note is conveniently playable; open strings and harmonics aid the natural, swinging, joyful tone of the concerto. Most Classical double bass concertos were written in D but performed in E flat. At that time it was common practice to tune the bass one semitone higher for solo performance, so that while the bass still had the open strings, the orchestra had to accompany in the duller-sounding key of E flat. This gave the bass more power and a more brilliant, relaxed and natural sound that would project over the orchestra.

Nowadays we can play the concerto in any of the following ways: on an original instrument and period strings, in E flat; on a modern instrument in the key of C (sounding D) for solo tuning; in D, sounding D, with orchestra strings; sounding in E, with solo strings; or sounding E flat, with high-tuned orchestra strings or low-tuned solo strings.



THE SOLOIST

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
'If you want someone to listen to you, you must express yourself with extreme clarity. This has to be exaggerated in front of a large audience'

Christine Hoock will be giving masterclasses at the 34th Portogruaro International Festival of Music, Venice, 21–28 August
www.festivalportogruaro.it

There is much room for discussion regarding these different possibilities as well as Sperger's *ottava alta* indications, but that is for another article. I play the concerto in C, because the sounding key of D major has a bright, festive character that fits with the confident, forward-driving themes of the piece. However, one thing is for sure – when you play with modern equipment, with the bass tuned in 4ths, the technical demands are quite different from those involved when using the original tuning.

KEEPING THE FLOW

When playing the Vanhal Concerto you should aim for elegance, natural balance and flow, brightness, simplicity, clear heartbreaking melodies, a cultivated bow response, elaborate articulation and dynamics, and serene phrasing. The *Allegro moderato*, quite a typical flowing opening movement, should not be hurried. I play the first note with emphasis (as indicated by the  marking in the part), with vibrato played *auf den Kopf* ('on the head'). In other words, the vibrato starts as soon as your finger hits the note, which is shaped more by arm weight and momentum than by bow attack; the sonority is open and projecting.

Although you should keep in mind the eight-bar phrase, it's important to express each note with direction, and the rests should form part of the natural breath of the phrase. Never lose the serenity while expressing the wonderful theme. I play each grace note in bar 25 as a rhythmic sighing figure, as a semiquaver () on the beat, leaning on the dissonances and the descending melodic line.

One of the secrets of flowing, Classical phrasing is a consciously played up-beat that leads into and prepares the following strong beat, which should sound effortless. If you struggle with an emphasised note (such as a down-beat), it means that there was no proper preparation leading up to it.

At letter C, I play the double appoggiatura quite airily, before the beat. I like the following bars here, as they express a light, contrasting colour. However, they are tricky for the left hand. I play them in one position to avoid portamentos: the concentrated left hand, with fingers always very close to the strings, gives the bow a chance to articulate calmly and clearly this passage which 'dances' around the pitch D. By integrating the consecutive two-note slurs into the melodic line you will create a natural swinging, breathing phrase.

THE BOW IS YOUR VOICE

Whatever your native language, you speak with dynamics, expressing words and phrases in a particular way to build the sense of what you are saying. And you have to breathe. If you really want someone to listen to you, you must express yourself



with extreme clarity, and this has to be exaggerated in front of a large audience.

It is the same in the language of music, where your bow is your voice. The fine, noble expressivity of the Classical style demands a particularly elaborate and varied bowing 'palette'. Take care not to let the bow jump too high while articulating fast *détaché* lines (for example, bars 30, 78 and 124). If you slightly angle the bow, it will bounce very close to the string and you will have more control over it, making it more agile so that you can effortlessly create dynamic and musical lines. At the same time, the string stays under control, allowing you to implement your ideas directly, as you remain connected with both the instrument and the bow. This is how you can reach your audience.

The conscious use of bow weight, bow speed and contact point will produce your wide scope of colours. It's best to practise thinking about these elements while playing at a medium tempo with the original dynamics (many dynamic changes occur during the course of a bow). It is difficult to stay flexible when playing over the fingerboard at the frog, so avoid doing this, or your interpretation will suffer too.

PLAYING REPEATED NOTES

Particularly when playing repeated notes, there is a danger of the line becoming static and losing its momentum. This is precisely where you should intensify your declamation. In bars 29 and 30, a melodic upper line moves away from a repeating root note, and in bar 41 an ascending line leads to a repeated D preparing the down-beat of bar 42. In contrast, the following lyrical *dolce* requires space and serenity. It is this kind of juxtaposition that lends a magical balance to this movement. >

EXERCISE 1 Use this exercise to work on your string-crossings and bow changes

Kreutzer 18 Studies for String Bass, no.7

Allegro non troppo

EXERCISE 2 Play this exercise in slow *detaché*, then faster with two or four notes to a bow, and finally in a fast *spiccato*

Findeisen 25 Technical Studies op.15
vol.5, page 8

EXERCISE 3 Practising 3rds is a useful way to prepare for the Vanhal Concerto

Christine Hoock 3rds exercise

USE OPEN STRINGS

I like my sound to be as sustained as possible; I allow the bass to ring and I almost never dampen the strings. It's good to have the open G string as the dominant, especially in the development, after letter E – its free vibration enhances the joyful, natural character of the piece. I also use it in the semiquaver broken triad passages. The introduction of *ottava alta* transpositions can disrupt these sections – for me, the natural, rich, sonorous tone of our instrument should always have priority.

THE CADENZA

Originally, cadenzas were where the soloist displayed not only their technical but also their improvisational skills. Sperger's cadenza (printed here) is pleasant and stylistically homogeneous. You can show more virtuosity and use a broader pitch range in H.K. Gruber's cadenza, which pushes the limits of our instrument. I like to play a combination of Sperger

and Gruber, also introducing something of my own. I have included Sperger's cadenza on page 79.

EXERCISES

In Viennese tuning we use more string-crossings, but when using today's tuning in 4ths we are more limited. It's important to prepare and execute string-crossings and bow changes (**exercise 1**) calmly. Using thumb position (**exercise 2**) gives us much-needed agility in high positions. Practising scales and broken-chord studies daily in the main and related keys of the piece also prepares us for its technical demands (**exercise 3**).

MARKINGS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES

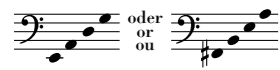
- ☞ Emphasis via arm weight rather than bow attack
- ⊗ Work towards the middle of the bow in phrases preceding this symbol, reach the middle where the symbol is marked, and move away again afterwards
- ◁ Think of the hairpins as opening and closing
- ▷ 'waves' within the main dynamic ●

Konzert

Kontrabass

Komponiert wohl zwischen 1786 und 1789

Stimmung / tuning / accord:



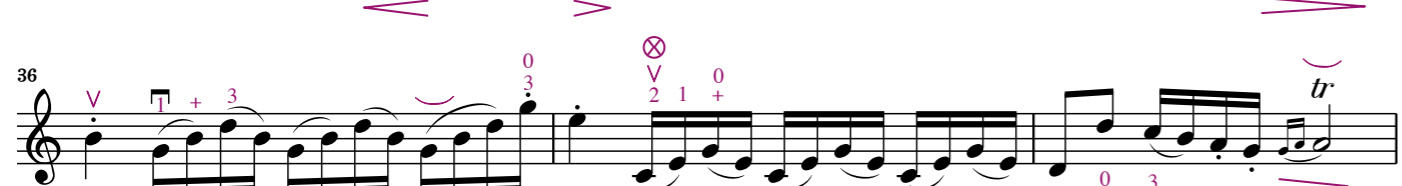
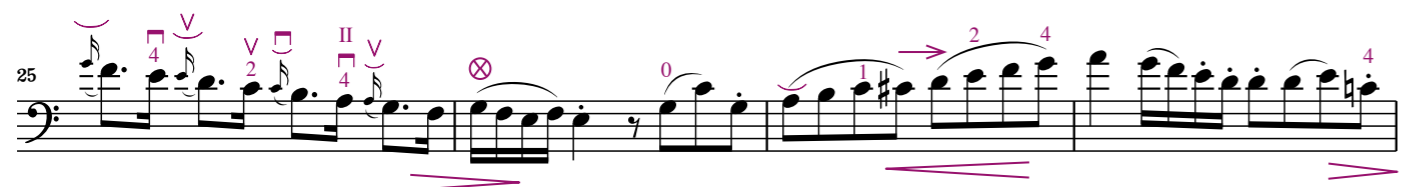
Allegro moderato

Tutti 8

A 10

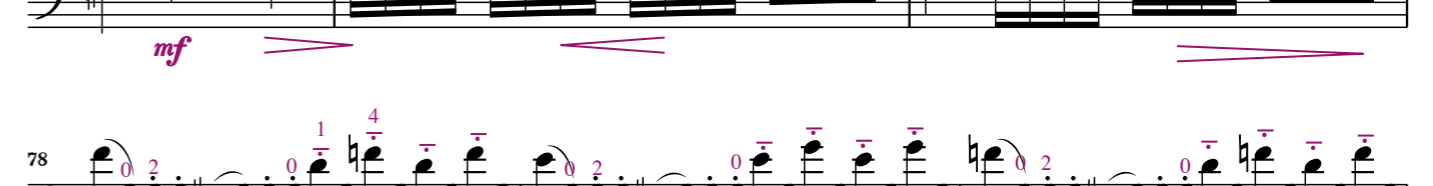
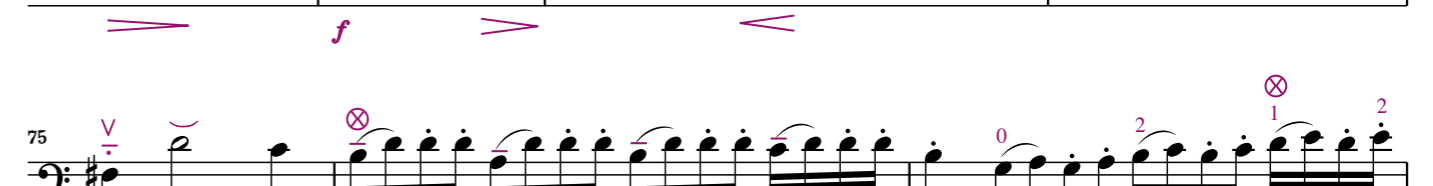
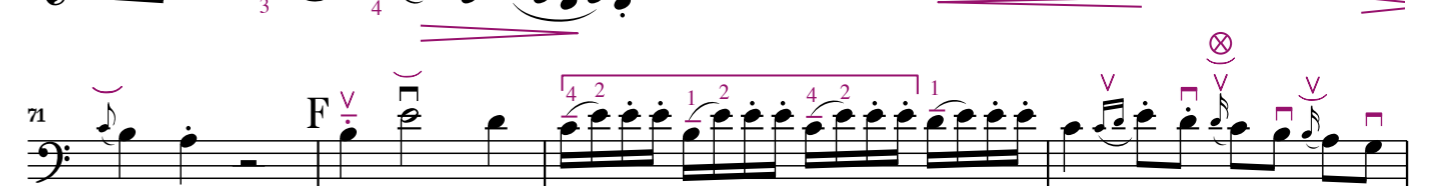
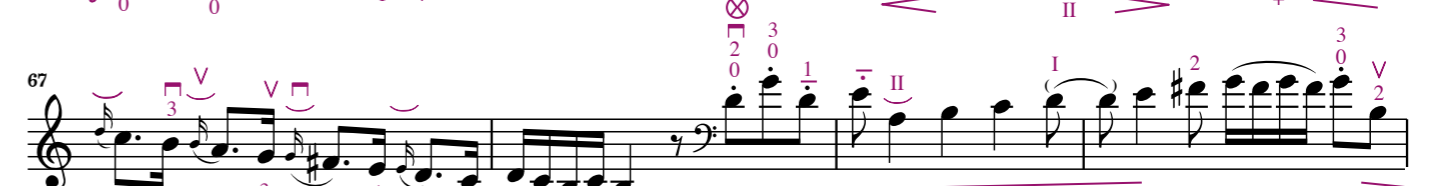
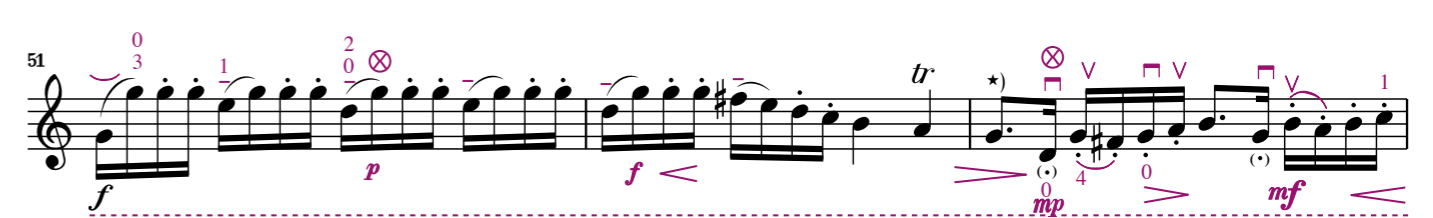
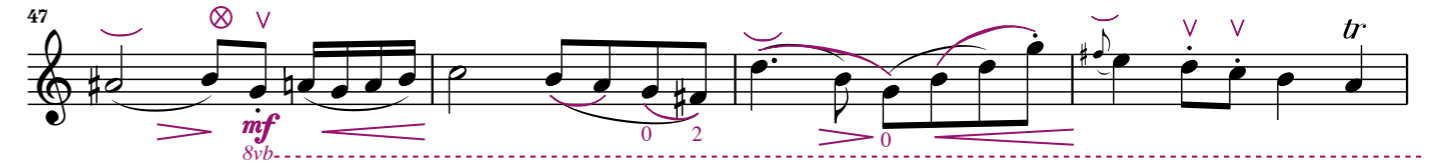
VI. I

Weinmann II h



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*) Editor's suggestion. Original version in harmonics only possible with 8^{va}.
**) *dolce* and *f* m. 51 probably added by Spenger.



*) Our edition follows copyist's correction at mm. 53 f. of source; see also *Comments*; original version probably:



4 Kontrabass

88 VI. I Solo *f*

93 *p*

99 *f* *mp* *f* *mf*

104 *mf* *f* *mf*

109 *f* *p*

112 *f* *mp*

116 *mf* *f*

120 *p*

124 *mf* *f* Tutti

I play the Spenger cadenza here (opposite)

*) In source at mm. 124 f. dotted version (cf. mm. 53 f.) indicated by unknown hand (Spenger's?), see also *Comments*.
 **) Editor's suggestion for cadenza; all performance rights reserved! (See p. 12 for cadenza by Spenger.)

Anhang · Appendix · Appendice

Kontrabass

Kadenz zum 1. Satz

Johannes Spenger

129 *f* *mf* *p*

f *mf*

p *mf*

pp 6 6 *mp* 6 6

f 6 *mf* 6 6

fz *p* *fz* *p* *fz* *fz* dolce *p*

mf *f* Tutti