



BASS

The Dragonetti Concerto: Getting Ready to Perform Quickly

by Tom Pieper

My son just completed his last semester in high school orchestra, and capped off his bass playing by performing the first movement of the Dragonetti Concerto. He and two other soloists were chosen to perform as they finished their final year and head off to college. I was a practice partner and coach as Charlie learned the concerto and I learned a lot about teaching and pacing to reach the goal of performance ready in about three months. I have never performed a concerto with an orchestra myself so he has now had an experience that I cannot compare notes with; however I have had the good fortune to prepare many students for auditions with this concerto from the standard repertoire.

One thing is obvious: if you are still in high school or college you have a great opportunity to create performance spaces for *your* bass playing. Charlie was fortunate to have Lorie Hippen as his orchestra teacher, and she was great at motivating him and the orchestra to perform this work. Having a bass featured for a concerto concert is important for the solo bassist, for orchestra members to hear the bass as another solo voice, and for exposure of the bass to the general public who come to see a concert. This past May I was aware of two bass concerto performances and I think that is quite a lot for our community. Way to go!

In one sense what matters most in the selection of the concerto to perform is not so much the demands of the piece—they all are challenging—but the interest, talent, and motivation of the person playing. The Dragonetti Concerto is played by many bassists ranging from 12 year olds to professional players across the world. Nowadays, it is very easy for anyone to watch multiple performances of this piece on YouTube. You will get a very good close-up view of the bassist and see the standards that are expected of you for your performance. One caution is remembering that when you see a bass concerto live the sound of the bass might not be as prominent as on these recordings; you may have to listen more carefully to connect with the sound of a bass than with other solo instruments. The sound of the bass on a recording is enhanced by the placement of microphones and therefore much more present than what you hear on the podium or in the hall. Bass concertos require more skill from all the musicians on stage to maintain a balance between the orchestra and the soloist.

The Dragonetti Concerto is well constructed with its range and orchestration to help with balance. The tutti sections are easy to predict, the scoring is sparse when the bass is playing in the lower range, and there are sections of space for the bass to come through to the audience. The piece has a flashy theme that works well for audience, orchestra and performer. The use of harmonics places the melody in a more comfortable range for the audience to hear and is impressive to see. This piece is also a good etude for the performer's technical development as well as being fun to play.

Since many players are continually drawn to this piece here are some tips on how to learn and perfect this concerto when given a short deadline.

Step 1: Getting started with the opening theme and repetitions.

Starting at measure 12, the bass enters with the main theme. Instead of playing the harmonics for this opening section on the G and the D try beginning with the 3rd or 2nd finger on all three pitches, G-B-D so that you can play with a little vibrato on each note and then in measure 13 shift from 3rd or 2nd finger on D to 3rd finger on C to set up all the shifting in measures 13 and 14.

In measure 16 you will want to find a fingering that is comfortable and allows you to negotiate all the shifting on the G string:

Practice this section slowly at 60/minute with the 8th note getting the beat at first and move the speed up. One good way, after you are comfortable with the notes, is to play twice under tempo and then at the tempo you want to end up at. By doing this you will start to get an idea of how fast you need to go—your goal—and also make good progress with your slow practice.

Step 2: Harmonic section and that B natural

This section is perhaps the most well-known part of movement one and is especially fun to see as a member of the orchestra and

audience. Harmonics on the bass, due to the resonating chamber of the instrument, sound really good. The main problems in this section are keeping the bow closer to the bridge, keeping the bow straight, and the one B natural that cannot be played as a harmonic. By varying the practice of section one and this section you make a good start at learning this movement because this section works the upper reaches of the bass and the first section works the lower and deeper section.

This section is marked *meno mosso* so let the slower tempo work for you as you practice this section. I have students learn this section by the chords that you are arpeggiating. (D, G)

Step 3: Other important themes

The next entrance to work on is the lyrical section starting at measure 23. Although many play the passage shifting down the G string this one works well across the strings; try using the third finger for the C# on the A string and the F# on the D string to keep the intonation exact:



In measure 32 you can then work down the G string to help with the tone and crescendo. The next *A Tempo* begins at measure 42. In measure 44 try to play the high D as a harmonic followed by the A harmonic on the D string:



Play the next A on the G string and make sure you let the first A ring to cover your shift. In measure 46 play across the strings and after the thumb plays C# on the D string and the F# on the G string shift to the G with the thumb and continue up until the high D on the A string and then crossing over to the A string and then the harmonic section:



At measure 73, the arpeggios, begin by practicing these separate and as even quarter notes. Knowing harmonically what you are playing will make this section much easier to learn. The chords establish the key of e minor and move around the circle of fourths and cadence on the D dominant chord. The bass plays written (solo tuning one whole step higher) e minor, a minor, B dominant, e minor, A major, D major, G major, and D dominant. After you master the pitches and can hear this progression add the printed bowing and build up the speed.

The final problem begins with the section after measure 92 where we jump to C major. In measure 95 try to group D-C-B 3 1 T than 323:



simply acknowledge your audience and peers and let the conductor know when you are ready. Since my son was prepared he performed with energy, good tone and intonation, solid technique, and was able to bring the piece to life. Great to see this concerto performed as an audience member, fellow bassist, and proud Dad.

Tom Pieper teaches at East Middle School and Central Middle

School for Wayzata School District 284. He teaches bass and electric bass in his private studio and at MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis. Tom performs with his group SpiritJazz featuring his wife Karen on piano, Salem's Discover Band at Salem Lutheran Church, with the Illicit Sextet, and at other venues throughout the Twin Cities. If you are a bassist, teacher or student, and have questions or ideas for articles please contact: thomas.pieper@wayzata.k12.mn.us 📧