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# Double Bass in the Twentieth-Century Chamber Instrumental Music

## Development of Double Bass Solo Performance

### Контрабас в камерно-інструментальній музиці ХХ століття

#### До питання формування сольного виконавства на контрабасі

**Abstract.** The rapid evolution of double bass solo and chamber performance during the twentieth century is explored on the examples of chamber instrumental works written specifically for double bass or with its participation. Analysis of these works allows to form an idea of broadening the expressive range of double bass due to emergence of new performing techniques and improving the traditional ones. The diverse spectrum of musical expression of these works allows evaluating authors' philosophical and imagery concepts that are realized in modern double bass as a rightful participant of ensemble and solo music. The main provisions of double bass functioning in the chamber ensemble are outlined. Artistic and stylistic specifics of modern double bass performance are based on the acknowledgment that technical and thinking-based motivated actions that allow achieving the highest creative result in interpreting chamber instrumental music, are inseparable.

*Keywords:* double bass, chamber instrumental music, expressive means, author's concept.

**Introduction.** Double bass performance is currently actively developing because of the increase in numbers and in the quality of works for chamber instrumental ensembles. Festivals and competitions also impact solo double bass performances. Dramatic changes in the double bass performance and the role of the instrument in academic music—from an orchestral and underused in the early twentieth century to a fully established solo and ensemble instrument nowadays—are outlined on the examples of chamber instrumental works for double bass in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The reason for this transformation is the tendency for updating the performance and expressive potential of the instruments and performance techniques of the instruments by introducing new methods of performance and modification of the old ones, which can be traced in the musical discourse of the second half of the twentieth century. This process is linked to the composers' explorations of new potential

of timbre and sound and was manifested in solo and chamber instrumental works. A deep and expressive timbre-sound palette attracts modern composers with the chance to experiment and depict broad artistic and philosophical generalizations. This interdependent process—timbre-sound experiment on the one hand and constant expansion of the performing and expressive capabilities in chamber instrumental culture on the other—have prompted us to scientific analysis.

The proposed understanding of the given problem is determined by the expansion of the timbre-sound palette in composers' explorations of chamber instrumental music with the intention of using-expressive features of the double bass.

The aim of this research paper is to describe specifics of double bass functioning in the practice of composers and performers in chamber instrumental music of the late twentieth century. Accordingly, the research had the following objectives:

- to define the place of the double bass in the modern musical practice through the study of historical preconditions,
- to outline the dynamics of expressive capabilities of the double bass,
- to describe some of the ways and techniques of performing on the double bass in chamber music,
- to analyse chamber instrumental works of European composers written for or with the participation of the double bass to find their artistic and imagery characteristics and performing specifics.

**Methodology.** The following methods were used for this research: the comparative-historical method to study the evolution of ideas and theories, keeping the focus on specific historical conditions while describing the development of modern chamber instrumental music that uses the double bass; the inductive method allowed to build a full picture of emergence and application of enhanced and innovative performers techniques from separate and unconnected facts; the holistic analysis was used for exploring theory and performance of contemporary chamber instrumental works that use the double bass.

**Results and discussion.** The use of the double bass as a solo and chamber musical instrument with a wide range of expressing capabilities is linked to the process that took place in the music of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The experimentation with timbre, the refreshing of the orchestral sound palette, active exploration of new expressive capabilities of instruments emerged during the heyday of Western romantic instruments and contributed to the inclusion of the double bass into ensemble performance.

In the rich heritage of chamber instrumental music of the nineteenth century, the ensembles with double bass are relatively unremarkable: *Septet* by Ludwig van Beethoven, *Octet and Quintet The Trout* by Franz Schubert, *Quartet sonatas* by Gioachino Rossini, the chamber instrumental ensembles by Luis Spohr, and others. Concepts of ensemble works of Romanticism have defined the important functions of orchestral double bass that were actively developed during the twentieth century. Chamber instrumental works of the Modern age were marked by the development of the language of orchestral instruments, the system of instruments, and enhancing of performance skills.

The technology of creativity was influenced by the discoveries of the twentieth century. Chamber instrumental music is a sensitive indicator of the formation of the style and, at the same time an artistic workshop of the composer. The specifics of production of chamber instrumental music is linked to fragmentation, minute-ness (in the sense of being filled with dramatic development), and semantic richness. The specifics of the whole, which is based on mosaic integrity, or on the principle of maximum diversity, or the representation of the shades of one impression, is a trend that often is found in chamber works. According to Leo Raaben, chamber music reflects the musical conscience of its time, it is an indicator, that “responds sensitively to the slightest movement of the soul, to the subtlest of the emotional

states, and also reflects philosophical and ethical categories and enhanced trends of intellectualisation and psychology” (Raaben, 1986, p. 5).

The development and elaboration of double bass parts in chamber music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is manifested in a wide range of texture details and higher demands to the performers. The process took the same direction as in symphonic music. Scores of the contemporary chamber instrumental works are “vertically” and “horizontally” complex and compact and have determined the growing requirements for intonation. The notion is valid in the case of the double bass, which sometimes “substituted” cello or other bass instruments. Frequently double bass had performing double notes, accords and intonationally high sounds for the completeness and stability of harmonic vertical. The rhythmic of the twentieth-century chamber instrumental music, with its complexity of meter-rhythmic details and variants, is the characteristic feature of every instrumental part, including the part of double bass. In any version of the chamber ensemble, double bass part is individualised to the limit and demands technical and expressive skills. Almost all famous composers of the twentieth century—Camille Saint-Saens, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, Arnold Schoenberg, Boguslaw Martin, Hans Eisler, Albert Russell, Darius Milhaud, Benjamin Britten and Hans Henze and many others—turned to the double bass as a part of the chamber instrumental concept.

Also, new functions of double bass have to be mentioned that were transferred from orchestral music to chamber instrumental music. For example, in *Pulcinella* by Stravinsky, in the solo episode in *La création du monde* by Milhaud, *Music for strings, celesta and drums* by Bartok, — all three pieces are orchestral by genre — the double bass plays the role of ensemble soloist. The double bass part in *Septet Story of a Soldier* by Stravinsky is the organic mix of “bass” elements, bass voice and elements of characteristically soloist plane, that have artistic and imagery value. The composer uses different technical means—fast alternation of arco and pizzicato, virtuoso passages, complex figures of rhythm—and enriches the performance and expressive characteristics of the instrument.

The original ensemble works in which the double bass has a soloist function appeared in the second half of twentieth century. In the 1960s, German composer Henze wrote *Concerto for double bass and chamber orchestra*, in which the parts of soloist and ensemble were organically linked. This work, massive in the concept and complex in performing, uses almost all the resources of contemporary double bass language.

In the second half of the twentieth-century, new ensembles of unorthodox instrumental composition appeared. For example, *Chamber music # 1, Chamber music # 2 for piano and 12 solo instruments* by Paul Hindemith, *Concerto for strings in D* by Stravinsky, music for *La revue de cuisine* ballet by Martinu, *Sinfonietta # 1* by Britten, *Concert for 13 instruments* by Ligeti, and other ensemble works.

Chamber forms experience through significant changes in the works of the twentieth-century composers. These changes manifested themselves not only in the complication of the musical language but also in the exploration of timbre

and sound innovations (effects). Experiments with timbre combinations in chamber music brought to life the new and daring forms, which at the end of the twentieth century became a norm. As Alexander Radvilovich put it, "... composers introduced the changes in the form of chamber music orchestras, similar to changes that have happened in melody, harmony and form. Besides, searching for cornerstone, for 'topical' element of the work, they took those musical (and not only musical) instruments with which they could experiment to describe new ways of artistic expression. The individuality of timbres, and their unorthodox interpretation formed, on their part, chamber forms that were better adapted for compositional innovations" (Radvilovich, 2007, p. 7).

In this context, *Profindum Praedictum* by Alexander Brott is a perfect example. Its intonationally complex melodic lines of the double bass part demands a virtuoso bow technique from the performer.

*Gioratio* is a work for soloist double bass and chamber ensemble by Paul Angerer, made as a duet of sorts of the soloist and ensemble or its instruments. The double bass part is quite difficult from the technical point of view.

*Concert serenade for viola, double bass and chamber orchestra* (1963) by Medina could serve as another example. In the five parts of this cycle, the two parts of the soloists fit into the sound of the orchestra. Among other features of *Concert serenade*, there is a delicate intonational structure of the melodic lines in a wide tessitura range, complex rhythm, and virtuoso technique.

In the chamber instrumental music of Martinu, and in particular in *Nonet for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, violin, viola, cello and double bass*, the characteristic national features interpreted from the standpoint of contemporary musical innovations could be traced.

Also, worth mentioning are the *Nonets* and *Septets* by Hans Eisler, one of Arnold Schoenberg's disciples. In these works, the double bass parts are marked by individual expressionism of ensemble instruments. Complex in language and expressive content, these works reveal what double bass is capable of in solo parts, thanks to the intense texture on the extreme registers, the use of complex rhythms and subtle nuances, and the sound of double notes.

Schoenberg's Sextet *Enlightened Night* and Hindemith's *Octet* are not exceptions. The texture of these chamber instrumental works, meticulously crafted, shows the capabilities of the ensemble players, and in particular, the part of the double bass filled with artistic and technical elements.

Let us consider a series of chamber instrumental sonatas for double bass and piano to describe the enriched performing and expressive capabilities of the instrument. Bass instruments do not usually play the solo part but in the twentieth century, because composers explored the chamber music, this group of instruments became widely used.

*Sonata for double bass and piano* by Hindemith, written during a mature period of the composer's life, is a striking example. This work is unique in the repertoire of double bass players, as it is almost the only work written for double bass taking into account a wide range of performing and expressive capabilities

of the instrument. It is a well-known fact that Hindemith owed his competence in the field of instrumentation to his knowledge of playing many orchestral instruments and his experience as a string player and orchestra conductor. The work is a three-part cycle with an expanded coda, full of prickly melodies, rigid harmony, complex linear-polyphonic texture and clear rhythm.

Parts of the sonata cycle are built as a comparison of the contrast images, which are slightly different from other sonatas. The first part of *Allegretto* is an energetic, dramatically focused development filled with clear rhythm and dynamic movement. The second part—*Scherzo, Allegro assai*, fast dotted, flight music. Third—*Molto adagio*, a large-scale part of the chanting-recitative character—is written in the form of variations.

Technically and expressively, the sonata is quite a complex work for the interpreter, because it is built on virtuoso passages of dialogue between piano and double bass that are at the same time expressive and melodic. The small cadence of both instruments at the end of the opus seems to "dilute" the intense emotional and direct development of the coda, which is marked by a pronounced song spirit of *Lied, Allegretto grazioso*.

Another direction in which chamber instrumental music developed is so-called "traditional". We can trace it in *Sonata for double bass and fortepiano* by Robert Fuchs. Johannes Brahms' influence can be seen in this three-part cycle. Fuchs actively uses the natural scale of double bass and quite a wide range of its capabilities—cantilena in all registers, pizzicato, flexible strokes, etc.

In chamber instrumental duets for double bass and other instruments, the double bass is the rightful participant in the dialogue. Frequently, the solid sound of pianoforte is absent so the sound and technique of double bass are extremely exposed.

In Albert Roussel's *Duet for bassoon and double bass*, the composer set difficult tasks for the performers. Achieving these tasks requires not only high professional skills but the freedom for music. For example, the performer is required to virtuously master the instrument in order to richly intone the melody on high flageolets in the part where double bass leads flageolet melody against the background of a staccato-melodic figure of a bassoon.

The duet *Five bagatelles* for viola and double bass by Walzel requires from the performers a real solo virtuosity, an accurate reconstruction of complex rhythm. The work also contains significant intonation problems. In the context of combination of instruments' timbres, Wilder's *Suite for guitar and double bass* is unusual in its original concept.

Trios, quartets, and quintets form a complex and valuable ensemble repertoire. In the *Trio for violin, viola and double bass* by Stefan Boleslav Poradowski, the composer used the so-called double bass-baritone—its scales are a quarter above the natural scale of the double bass. The part can be performed on a regular double bass but in this case the instrument will sound quite high. In general, the work is not hard to perform. However, there are fast virtuoso passages in the part of the double bass, for example, in the third part.

In the *Trio for flute, violin and double bass* by Sideman, double bass was used in its natural scale. The texture of the work is simple, and the tessitura is comfortable. The main difficulty for the ensemble, in our opinion, is in its rhythmic organization in a refined interweaving of three voices.

Among the quintets in modern ensemble music with the participation of the double bass, Milhaud's *Quintet Dreams of Jacob* for oboe, violin, viola, cello and double bass (1949) should be noted.

The repertoire of the double bass is not limited to the given chamber instrumental works. Still, these examples give a specific understanding of the way the double bass is used and its tasks he faces in the ensemble.

*Quintet* (1924) by Prokofiev is worth special mention. The part of the double bass creates a unique character of musical language in this particular work. Prokofiev's *Quintet* is one of the most difficult and most interesting works of chamber instrumental music of the twentieth century. Being a rightful member of the music set, the double bass performs diverse functions in this ensemble. The composer chose not to use other bass instruments in the work and, hence, was forced to use the double bass in different roles: as a bass and relief base for the score, as a colorful soloist and worthy partner of other solo instruments, and as a carrier of original and bright timbre (chords, flageolets, pizzicato). In *Quintet* all these features require brilliant mastery of the instrument, true artistry and superior professionalism from the performer.

In all six parts of the work, Prokofiev creates many episodes for the double bass in a high register (always recorded in the violin key). This phenomenon can be traced in the first variation, in the use of ostinato rhythmic figures, the harmonic supporting sounds in the first part, the use of high flagellates in the third part, as well as the theme of two-voiced development in the finale. The double bass also performs an important harmonic function, which requires the performance of chords and double notes. The solo pizzicato of the double bass plays a significant role in the saturation of the work.

The role of the double bass is especially pronounced in the fifth part and can be traced in the expressive chords of the finale, in typical jumps of Prokofiev's melody, rapid passages of heavy intonation, in a wide range of scales. In general, the *Quintet* by Prokofiev raised the double bass part to the level of the solo concert.

A variety of chamber instrumental works was written for ensembles during the twentieth century, that includes many orchestral instruments, and double bass, in particular, is a characteristic of the evolution of European music. A certain renaissance of ensemble music occurred probably due to the rising interest in performing chamber literature that was shown by orchestral musicians of the world's most prominent ensembles.

**Conclusions.** Chamber instrumental music with the participation of double bass is marked by the expansion of stylistic and performing paraphernalia. This is due to the use of a wide range of modified performing techniques, on the one hand, and experiments with genre prototypes

in the process of creative exploration, on the other. In the studied works this claim is proven by the use of genre prototypes and non-genre innovations that emerged during the composer's experiments, the creation of synthetic forms based on traditional formative structures, and timbre-sound discoveries in double bass technique based on the widespread use of modified performing techniques.

During the twentieth century, there was an increase in the level of performance on the double bass, which can be divided into two stages. The art of playing the double bass in the first half of the twentieth century was marked by a qualitative increase not only in performance (in the nineteenth century the double bass was used as an orchestral instrument with a few exceptions) but also in training and composition. The instrument was actively used in chamber music, which often provides a field for exploration for the composers. Outstanding double bass musicians appeared, whose creative work had a significant impact on the further development of performance and training of this instrument.

In the second half of the twentieth century, original national schools of double bass performance were formed that significantly raised the level of performance and training. In these communities, talented performers, composers, and experts of double bass art have the opportunity to exchange "strategic" ideas for the further development of this instrument.

Currently, the processes in the art of playing the double bass require consideration and categorization. The rising interest to double bass contributes, in particular, to the growing number of chamber and instrumental works and increase in their artistic value. Most of these works resonate with the musical realities of the time and reflect the radical changes that take place in modern music culture, particularly in the fields of timbre-intonation and timbre-sound characteristics of the composer's work.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a tendency to expand the sound capabilities of all types of instruments was on the rise. New sets of sound were obtained through modifying the performance tools and techniques. Regarding the double bass, it should be noted that the inherent resources of the instrument allow reproducing a rich palette of specific timbre and sound effects, without a radical adjustment of the instrument or artificial sound processing. The vast majority of the chamber and instrumental works with the participation of the double bass are often created in close collaboration of the composer and the performer. In many cases, it is the performer who contributes to the introduction of these modified non-traditional timbre and sound techniques into musical practice.

Thus, the development of timbre and expressiveness of double bass in the twentieth-century chamber and instrumental culture was, on the one hand, rooted in the improvement of the instrument (as a whole and of its individual components) and, on the other, happened due to the evolution of professional skills and performing culture, associated with the formation of artistic and aesthetic demands that characterised the musical universe of the twentieth century.

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**Контрабас в камерно-інструментальній музиці XX століття: До питання формування сольного виконавства на контрабасі**

**Анотація.** Бурхливий розвиток сольного та камерно-інструментального виконавства на контрабасі упродовж XX століття простежено на прикладі камерно-інструментальних творів для або за участі цього інструмента. Проаналізовані твори дають змогу скласти уявлення про розширення сфери виражальних можливостей контрабаса за рахунок виникнення нових виконавських та удосконалення традиційних прийомів і засобів. Різностильовий музично-виражальний спектр проаналізованих творів європейської музичної спадщини дозволяє оцінити на практиці широчинь філософсько-образних концепцій авторського задуму, які втілюються на сучасному контрабасі — повноцінному учаснику ансамблевої та сольної творчості. Окреслено основні положення щодо специфіки функціонування контрабаса у камерному ансамблі. Зазначимо, що художньо-стильова особливість сучасного саксофонного виконавства ґрунтується на глибокому усвідомленні нерозривності технічних та мисленнєво-образних умотивованих дій, які дають змогу досягти максимального творчого результату у прочитанні камерно-інструментального твору.

**Ключові слова:** контрабас, камерно-інструментальна творчість, виражальні прийоми, авторський задум.