

Two Notes on ROSSINI's Sonata a Quattro, No. 3 (of Six)

Note #1 by Keith Horner for the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields

“Six dreadful sonatas composed by me at the country estate of my friend Agostino Triossi, when I was at a most infantile age, not even having taken a lesson in accompaniment, the whole composed and copied out in three days.” That’s what’s an older Rossini wrote when he came across the score of a manuscript he’d written in the summer of 1804 when he was just 12. These delightful *sonate a quattro* are the earliest of his works to have survived and they have been in the repertoire ever since he wrote them. They were first published in an arrangement for string quartet. A version for wind quartet followed in 1828/9. Then, in 1954, the original manuscript was discovered in the Library of Congress in Washington and it showed that Rossini originally created the sonatas around his host’s instrument, the double bass. Triossi played the bass part, his cousins played first violin and cello, while Rossini himself took the second violin part. Rossini recalled that everyone played ‘like dogs.’

Like its companions, today’s G major Sonata includes surprisingly little that is derivative. It sounds – well – like Rossini and not like a composer who was not yet a teenager and had his head too much in the scores of Mozart and Haydn. Emulating the easy-going spirit of the 18th century divertimento rather than that of the more earnest string quartet, the young Rossini writes graceful, elegantly flowing lines in the opening movement, allowing his two violins to compete for attention, while cello and double bass add resonance to the overall sonority. The slow movement gently unfolds around musical ideas introduced in its opening measures. A quick half tone shift upwards from the E-flat slow movement leads into a jocular finale. Here, the two violins again spar with one another, allowing the cello a token tune, with even a moment in the limelight for the double bass.

Note #2 by Howard Smith for Hyperion Records:

Rossini’s six string sonatas were written in Ravenna during the summer of 1804. The composer was *just twelve years old* and staying at the home of amateur double bass enthusiast Agostini Triossi – hence the prominent role that instrument assumes.

The existence of these early sonatas was well documented, although their whereabouts remained a mystery. Most scholars assumed they had long since been destroyed. But in 1954 Rossini’s original version turned up at the Library of Congress, Washington. . . .

Today’s musicologists are quick to point out deficiencies and weaknesses in these youthful works. While doing so they evidently lose sight of two remarkable facts: Rossini was not yet a teenager when they were written. Even more, he had scarcely begun to concentrate on his musical studies. . . .

Each of Rossini’s six spirited sonatas is in a major key and follows a conventional three-movement ‘quick–slow–quick’ pattern. Their opening movements take up half or more of each sonata’s total duration. . . .

Together these six works demonstrate the astonishing speed with which Rossini was developing. At this tender age he clearly chose to depart from prevailing musical expectations. He shrewdly separates the roles of cello and bass, allowing both instruments their share of the limelight. Equally, neither of the two violin lines is subservient and each treble 'voice' has been permitted its own ascendancy as the works unfold. Already there is evidence of the bel canto design that Rossini advanced and developed beyond its earlier formalism. He relies heavily on the device of cavatina and cabaletta; the former required singers to sustain a line with beauty of tone, nuance and colour, while the cabaletta called for a high degree of virtuosity.

As sparkling, melodic, instantly appealing concert entertainment the effect of Rossini's six string sonatas is never in question – all six works call for an ensemble of striking finesse, beauty, accuracy and outright virtuosity. Later in life their composer reportedly bragged: 'Give me a grocery list and I'll set it to music.' With this, his first musical shopping spree, the outcome proved miraculous; a confectionary bon-bon in glittering wrapping.