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The Double Bass Class at the Paris Conservatory, 1826–1832

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AS PERIOD-INSTRUMENT ENSEMBLES EXTEND the boundaries of their repertoire to include later and later music—Beethoven, Berlioz, even Wagner—the need to reassess instrumental practice in the nineteenth century has become more pertinent. Those seeking information on the double bass in this period can consult the recent books by Elgar, Brun, and Planyavsky.¹ These accounts, while in many ways pioneering and informative, are not without their deficiencies,² not the least of which is their extensive reliance on secondary sources, in particular the writings of François-Joseph Fétis (1784–1871) (fig. 1).³ It soon becomes evident that a series of articles published in Fétis's *Revue musicale* between 1827 and 1829,⁴ following the creation of the double bass class at the Paris Conservatory—or as it was then called, the *École royale de musique et de déclamation* (Royal School of Music and Declamation)—has served as the unique source of information on this period, not only for the three authors just mentioned, but also for many of the works in their bibliographies.

1. Raymond Elgar, *Introduction to the Double Bass* (1960, reprint Princeton, N.J.: Stephen W. Fillo, 1987), *More about the Double Bass* (1963, reprint Princeton, N.J.: Stephen W. Fillo, 1987), and *Looking at the Double Bass* (1967, reprint Princeton, N.J.: Stephen W. Fillo, 1986); Paul Brun, *Histoire des contrebasses à cordes* (Paris: La Flûte de Pan, 1982); Alfred Planyavsky, *Geschichte des Kontrabasses*, 2nd edition (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1984).

2. See, for example, the review of Planyavsky's *The Baroque Double Bass Violone*, trans. James Barkett (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998) by Joëlle Fancher Morton ("The Latest Score," *Bass World* 22/3 [1997]: 45–49), and the controversy surrounding Brun's publication of the apocryphal second movement of Franz Joseph Haydn's lost *Concerto per il violone* (Michel Walcott, "Histoire," *La revue de la Contrebasse en France* 16 [April 1998]: 10–15).

3. As noted by Paul Brun, "Bow Battles," *Double Bassist* 6 (1998): 18–22.

4. "Sur la contrebasse et sur son archet," *La Revue musicale* 1 (February–July 1827): 468–472; François-Louis Perne, "Note sur la contrebasse," *La Revue musicale* 2 (August 1827–January 1828): 495–497; George-Joseph Gelinek, "Note sur la contrebasse" and "Note sur l'archet de la contrebasse," *La Revue musicale* 5 (February–July 1829): 169–172.



FIGURE 1. François-Joseph Fétis (1784–1871). Lithograph by C. Motte after Madou, 1831. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The creation of this class was a significant event: the board of directors of the conservatory, which included the most important composers and musical authorities of the day, summoned the very players who participated in the first French performances of the masterworks of the period to pronounce on questions concerning the type of bow to be taught, the number of strings on the instrument, and the manner of tuning them. Their responses, and the reaction of the authorities to them, thus constitute a vital source of information for practitioners. Until now, these opinions were known only through the articles in the *Revue musicale*. Yet had historians contemplated exploring the *Archives Nationales* (French National Archives) in Paris, they would have uncovered what has proven to be revelatory primary source material: the minutes of the meetings of the committee responsible for the creation of the class, the original letters of the double bass players who were consulted, and the correspondence of the director of the conservatory, Luigi Cherubini (1760–1842) (fig. 2), first with his superior during the Bourbon Restoration, the Viscount Sosthènes de Larocheffoucauld, *Directeur Général des Beaux-Arts* of Charles X (fig. 3), then during the July monarchy with the *Commission de surveillance près le Conservatoire de Musique et de l'Académie royale de Musique*. These documents help to establish a more precise chronology of the creation of the class, to name exactly those who were consulted and their views on the matter, and to shed new light on the performance practices of double bass players of the period.

The Creation of the Double Bass Class

At its foundation on November 8, 1793, as the *Institut National de Musique*, the conservatory provided for a double bass class that could admit a maximum of eight students, but lacking applicants and a professor—the artists of the time may have feared compromising themselves by associating with a Republican establishment⁵—the class was eliminated

5. A letter of 19 November 1816 by the double bassist Chenié begs the Duke de la Châtre, *premier gentilhomme de la Chambre du Roi*, to restore his title of *Musicien du Roi*, a gesture which will repair his “horribly compromised reputation” (*ma réputation horriblement compromise*, Archives Nationales, O³ 1600, II, 60). The titles of some of Chenié’s works should leave no doubt as to where his loyalties lay: *Prière pour sa majesté le roi de Rome, Aux mânes de Louis XVI, Vive le Roi*. . . . Regarding the spelling of his name, which often appears as “Chenier,” the double bassist himself signed “Chenié.”



FIGURE 2. Luigi Cherubini (1760–1842). Lithograph by Constans after Dubufé, 182[?]. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.



FIGURE 3. Heim (?), *Le vicomte Sosthène de La Rochefoucauld, chargé du Département des Beaux-Arts sous le règne de Charles X.* Paris, Musée du Louvre, INV. 20139. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

on November 27, 1798⁶ (not during the reorganization of the conservatory in 1816 as the *École royale de musique et de déclamation*, as Brun has hypothesized).⁷ It reappeared on paper in the *Règlements généraux* of June 5, 1822,⁸ but lacking a professor still did not exist in fact. Fétis summarizes the state of the instrument in the years preceding the formal opening of the class:

It seemed to be the refuge for those who lacked the talent necessary to become good violoncellists. It was rare that anyone deigned to study it other than through its use in the orchestra. There was no lack of good musicians gifted with a proper feeling for effect, who played this instrument intelli-

For those unfamiliar with the call numbers of the *Archives Nationales*, the letter O³ refers to the entire archival series (here, the Restoration-era *Maison du Roi*, O² for that of the first Empire; AJ¹³, AJ³⁷, and F²¹ denote respectively the archives of the Paris Opéra, the Conservatory, and the ministry of *Beaux-Arts*), the number 1600 is one of the individual cartons that compose the series, and any numbers thereafter indicate a folder, subfolder, or register within the carton. The documents within are not always foliated. Owing to the sheer volume of documentation held by the establishment, the diverse forms of the documents, and the inconsistency in cataloguing from one series to the next, it is difficult to give references in a systematic manner. Those given here conform to their presentation in the inventory of the series cited.

6. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Le⁴³ 2471, *Rapport fait au conseil des cinq cents par Leclerc, de Maine-et-Loire, sur l'établissement d'écoles spéciales de musique; 7 frimaire an VII—27 novembre 1798*, quoted in Constant Pierre, *Le Conservatoire national de musique et de déclamation. Documents historiques et administratifs recueillis ou reconstitués* (Paris, 1900), 339: "Professors to be eliminated: Buccini, tubae corvae, 1; timpani, 1; double bass, 1." (*Professeurs dont on propose la suppression: Buccini, tubae corvae, 1; timbale, 1; contrebasse, 1.*)

7. Paul Brun, *Histoire des contrebasses à cordes*, 123: "Suspected by royalists as a product of the Republic, the Conservatory was restructured during the Restoration of 1816. The double bass class was undoubtedly eliminated on this occasion. . . ." (*Emanation de la République et en cela suspecté des royalistes, le Conservatoire fut restructuré lors de la Restauration de 1816. On supprima sans doute à cette occasion la classe de contrebasse. . .*) Since the beginning, the name of the Paris Conservatory has been modified to reflect the successive regimes that ruled the country: *Institut National de Musique* during the Convention, *Conservatoire de Musique* from 1795 to 1815, *École royale de musique et de déclamation* beginning with the Bourbon Restoration in 1816, reverting to the more egalitarian *Conservatoire de Musique* under the Orléans, *Conservatoire National* during the Second Republic, *Conservatoire Impériale* during the Second Empire, *Conservatoire National* during the Third Republic. (The Opéra was subjected to similar peripeties.) The current name is *Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris*. The term "conservatory" will be used hereafter to designate the establishment.

8. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 1, 5c: "Art. 3. In the special School of Music, the teaching is divided as follows: . . . Classes for men only.—Proficiency classes: . . . Double bass . . . three times per week." (*Art. 3. Dans l'École spéciale de Musique, l'enseignement est divisé ainsi qu'il suit: . . . Classes pour les Hommes seulement.—Classes de perfectionnement: . . . Contre-basse . . . trois fois par semaine.*)

gently, and this intelligence sufficed in the past to execute the few difficulties that were written in the majority of compositions; but as time goes on, the difficulties are becoming more numerous and complicated, and each day it is becoming more necessary to undertake a serious study of an instrument which, by its nature, articulates but slowly, and upon which it is difficult to play in tune.

These are the considerations that determined Mr. Cherubini to request the Viscount de Larocheoucauld to establish a double bass class, which he obtained without difficulty.⁹

During the meeting of the conservatory's board of directors (*conseil d'administration*) on December 8, 1826, for the induction of Gioachino Rossini,

the Director, having . . . asked the members if they had any proposals or remarks concerning the teaching of music in general, Mr. Boiëldieu recalled how necessary it would be to establish classes for double bass and trumpet at the Royal School, both requested for some time by composers and conductors.

The Director shared his hope that the double bass class would be created and organized for January 1, 1827. . . .

Mr. Rossini offered to write to Mr. Dragonetti, the celebrated double bassist in London, to obtain from him the necessary information for improving the playing of this useful instrument. Accordingly, Mr. Rossini will report the answer he will receive concerning this subject.¹⁰

9. François-Joseph Fétis, "Publications Classiques," *La Revue musicale* 3 (February–July 1828): 549–552, at 549–550: *Il semblait qu'elle devait être le refuge de ceux qui n'avaient pas assez de talent pour devenir de bons violoncellistes. Il était rare qu'on daignât l'étudier autrement que par l'usage qu'on en faisait dans l'orchestre. Nous ne manquions pas de bons musiciens doués d'un sentiment juste des effets, qui jouaient de cet instrument avec intelligence, et cette intelligence suffisait autrefois pour exécuter le peu de difficultés qui étaient écrites dans la plupart des compositions; mais à mesure que l'on avance, les difficultés se compliquent et se multiplient, et chaque jour il devient plus nécessaire de faire une étude sérieuse d'un instrument qui, par sa nature, n'articule que lentement, et sur lequel il est difficile de jouer avec justesse.*

Ce sont ces considérations qui ont déterminé M. Cherubini à solliciter de M. le vicomte de Larocheoucauld l'établissement d'une classe de contrebasse, ce qu'il a obtenu sans peine.

10. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 15–16: *M. Le Directeur, ayant . . . demandé à MM les membres s'ils avaient des propositions ou des observations à faire relative à l'enseignement de la musique en général, M. Boiëldieu rappela combien il serait nécessaire d'établir à l'Ecole Royale une Classe de Contrebasse & une Classe de Trompette, toutes Deux sollicitées depuis longtemps par MM les compositeurs & chefs d'orchestre.*

M. Le Directeur fit connaître l'espérance qu'il avait que la classe de contrebasse soit créée & organisée au 1^{er} janvier 1827. . . .

M. Rossini a offert d'écrire à M. Dragonetti, célèbre contrebasse à Londres, pour avoir de lui les renseignements nécessaires, pour l'amélioration de l'exécution de cet utile instrument. En conséquence, M. Rossini fera connaître la réponse qu'il recevra à ce sujet.

It has been thought that the reputation of Domenico Dragonetti (1763–1846) was so widespread that when Cherubini decided to create the double bass class, he asked Rossini to contact Dragonetti in London on his behalf and bring back the necessary information on the type of teaching to be instituted.¹¹ As the minutes show, Rossini was acting on his own initiative and not as an intermediary for Cherubini in contacting Dragonetti, to whom he wrote on December 27:

Now I have a favor to ask of you.

As a member of the board of directors of the Conservatory, I have spoken of the differences that exist between the bow and the tuning of your double bass and French ones. I have engaged myself in consequence to ask my good friend Dragonetti to send me a bow, and perhaps also a report on the advantages of the double basses tuned in fourths compared with the French tuning in fifths. The costs incurred in rendering me this important favor as quickly as possible, will be reimbursed immediately, and Mr. Cherubini will thank you in writing. If you wish to come to Paris to establish the class here, everything possible will be done for you, and I would be happy to see you again. I hope that you can help me. Sincerely yours,

Your Friend

Gioacchino Rossini¹²

Dragonetti habitually employed a three-string double bass tuned in fourths (*A'–D–G*), whereas in France at this time, the same instrument was commonly equipped with three strings tuned in fifths (*G'–D–A*). The reason for this was not clear, even to players of the day: George-

11. Brun, "Bow Battles," 21.

12. London, British Library, Reference Division, Add. 17838, Correspondence of Sign. Dom. Dragonetti (1802–1845), f° 296:

Ora devo pregarvi d'un favore.

Essendo io membro del consiglio amministrativo del Conservatorio ho parlato della diversità e risultato che avvi fra l'arco del vostro contrabasso e l'accordatura dello stesso dei contrabassi d'archi francesi, mi sono quindi impegnato di pregare il mio buon' amico Dragonetti a mandarmi un arco e a se fosse possibile un rapporto sul vantaggio che esiste nel contrabasso accordato in quarta più tosto che in quinta come i francesi; le spese che farete per rendermi questo interessante favore, e colla maggior possibile sollecitudine, vi saranno immediatamente rimborsate ed il Sig Cherubini vi scriverà una lettera di ringraziamento. Se volete venire voi a Parigi per stabilire questa classe al Conservatorio farebbero tutte i sforzi possibile ed' io sarei beato di rivederci, spero vorrete favorirmi, in tanto agredite i santimanti

Vostro amico

Gioacchino Rossini

This is not the original letter but an undated excerpt that Dragonetti copied from it. Dragonetti's reply (see note 16 below) indicates the date: . . . *lettera vostra del 27. X^{bre}. . . .*

Joseph Gelinek¹³ (1769–?), whose father and uncle were double bassists in the chapel of Louis XV, hypothesized that “it was natural that the violoncellists, finding no employment for their instrument in the orchestras, should take the double-bass, tune it by fifths, in order not to derange the interval system in the bass [i.e., the violoncello] as they had learned it, and suppress the fourth string, which cannot descend to the *ut* [*C'*].”¹⁴ Bow technique was similarly divergent on either side of the Channel: French players used a Tourte-style bow held overhand (figs. 4, 5, 6), while Dragonetti used one with a pronounced convex arc (fig. 7) held underhand in the manner of the modern German bow (fig. 8).¹⁵ Even though the French players were aware of the underhand playing technique in Germany, as we shall see, it is probably due as much to the nationality of its famous exponent as to its origins that Dragonetti’s model would be termed the “Italian” bow in the forthcoming debate.

Dragonetti replied to Rossini that

What you have asked me could be the subject of a long, erudite memorandum but not a brief letter. I shall therefore limit myself to sending you the bow and telling you that the tuning in fourths is by nature more correct. Furthermore I can show you, with evidence, that the French way of tuning the double bass will never be able to perform as well as my instrument does both in playing chords, and in facility, evenness and strength of sound. With regard to the bow, it is enough to compare the difference in lengths and in the way of holding it and directing it on to the strings, with a larger distance between them, to see that “the hand that does not dominate the bow can be nothing but a wretched slave to it.” The bow hand is *the only true mediator* of taste and expression. Regarding the favor that you

13. Fétis, *Biographie universelle des musiciens et bibliographie générale de la musique*, 2nd edition (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, Fils et Co., 1866–67), 3:412, gives Gelinek’s first name as “Guillaume.” The forms of all names for all the double bassists mentioned here are taken from their contracts with the Opéra—and in the case of Höffelmayer and Lamy, from an alphabetic matrix of the personnel of the Opéra (Paris, Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra, PE 7)—held in the Archives Nationales (AJ¹³ 54). Fétis also states erroneously Gelinek’s date and place of birth: he was born in Versailles, not in Paris. France Vernillat (“Gelinek, Guillaume,” *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 4 [Kassel & Basel: Bärenreiter, 1955], col. 1630) perpetuates the same error. Regarding Höffelmayer, an empty folder in the *Archives Nationales* that once contained his birth certificate gives his names as “Marie-Joseph-Antonin-Valentin.”

14. Gelinek, “Remarks on the double-bass,” *The Harmonicon*, December 1829, 297.

15. Readers are also referred to the watercolor portrait attributed to George Richmond (1809–96) which illustrates the entry by Rodney Slatford, “Dragonetti, Domenico (Carlo Maria),” in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 5:607–608.



FIGURE 4. Double bass bow, anonymous, France, late eighteenth century. Boxwood heel and button, length 61.7 cm, weight 112.4 g including repair shoeing. Paris, Collection Musée de la musique, E.980.2.235. Photo: Billing.



FIGURE 5. Double bass bow, anonymous, France [?], nineteenth century. Pernambuco stick, light wood heel, copper button, length 62.3 cm, weight 180 g. Paris, Collection Musée de la musique, E.980.2.240. Photo: Billing.

so generously propose, to come to the Conservatory to take charge of this class, I regret to inform you that *for the moment* my commitments would not permit me to leave England, even for a short period of time.¹⁶

Dragonetti added in a postscript that his friend Obicini had offered to take the model bow to Paris for him.

By the beginning of February 1827, Cherubini must have received, courtesy of Rossini, both the bow and Dragonetti's opinion on the adoption of a tuning in fourths. The board of directors of the conservatory

16. Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Music Library, Moldenhauer Archive, M.A. 56, letter from Dragonetti (London), in Vincent Novello's hand, to Rossini (Paris), dated 14 [January?] 1827: *Quello però, che mi dimandate, è tale, che potrà esser bene soggetto da lunghe ed erudite Memorie, ma non mai da breve lettera. Mi contenterò adunque di mandarvi l'arco, e di dirvi, che oltrechè L'Accordatura per Quarta è di sua natura più corretta, posso di più mostravi per fatto, che L'Accordatura del Contrabasso Francese non potrà mai eseguire quanto eseguisse il mio Strumento sì per accordi, che per facilità, eguaglianza e forza di suono; chè in quanto all'arco basta solo paragonare la diversa lunghezza, ed il diverso modo d'impugnarlo e dirigerlo fra corde posse a maggiori distanze fra loro, per vedere, che "mano, che*

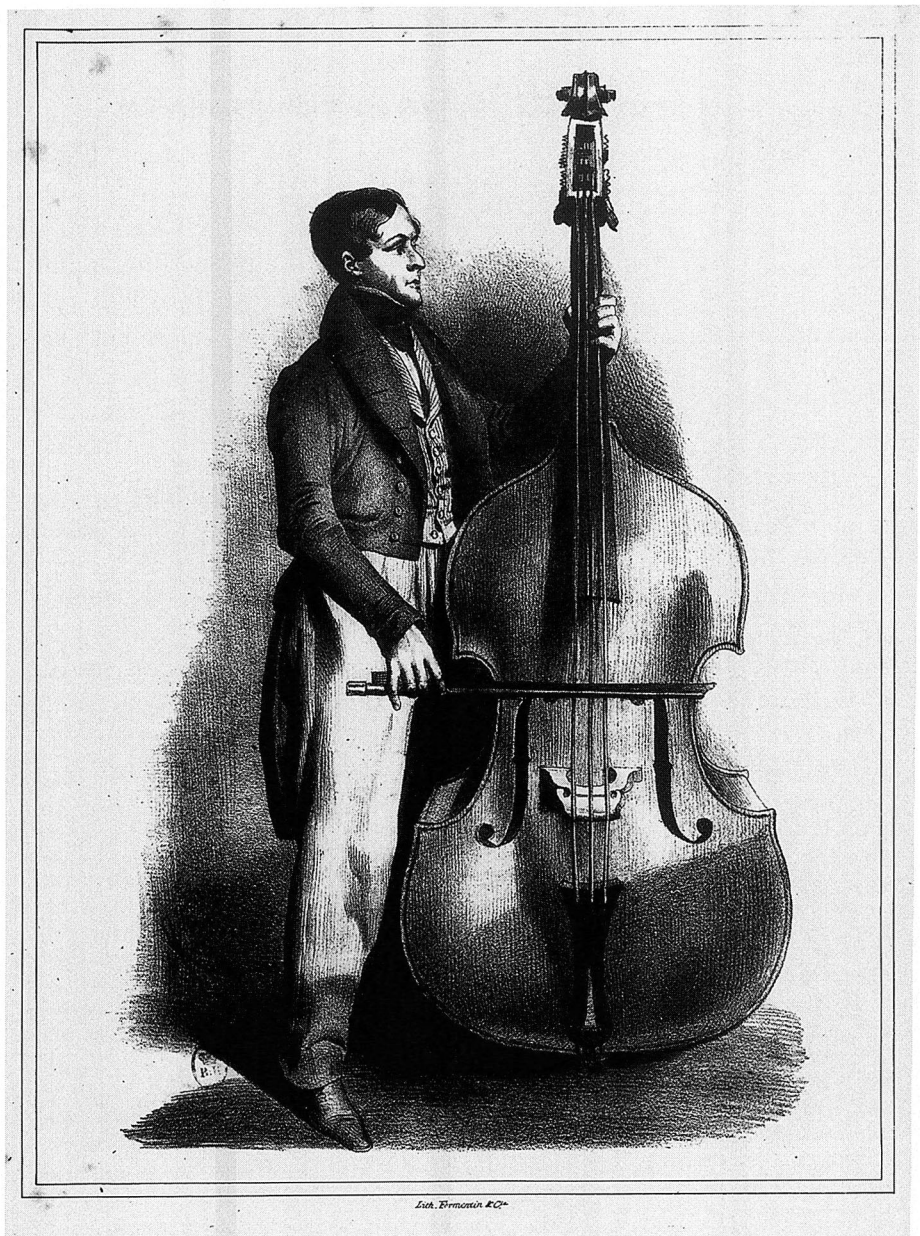


FIGURE 6. Charles-Amand Durier [?]. Lithograph by Formentin after Lafosse, in Charles-Amand Durier, *Méthode complète de contrebasse* (Paris: J. Meissonnier, 1836). Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.



FIGURE 7. Double bass bow, Dragonetti model, anonymous, London, nineteenth century. Pernambuco stick, heel and button, length 65 cm, weight 205 g. Paris, Collection Musée de la musique, E.980.2.238. Photo: Billing.

having agreed “that the artists of the capital who are recognized as the most talented on this instrument, would be invited to give their opinion of the so-called *Dragonetti* bow, and of the means that they would believe necessary to facilitate the playing of the double bass, either by adding a fourth string or by tuning it in fourths etc.,”¹⁷ the *Revue musicale* reported that “Cherubini . . . has assembled a committee to which the foremost double bassists of the Chapel Royal were summoned, Messrs. Sorne, Lamy, Chenié, Gelinek, and several others, in order to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed change in bow.”¹⁸ This meeting appears to have taken place around the month of February, but, judging from the letters requested by Cherubini that are preserved in the file, only included the double bassists Marie-Pierre Chenié (1773–1832), Nicolas-George Sorne (1762–?), the aforementioned

non domina l'arco, non può essere, che meschina schiava dell'arco.” *Eppure la mano dell'arco è il solo mediatore vero del gusto e dell'espressione. Del favore poi, che avete la bontà di propormi, di cercare, cioè, di recarmi fra voi per riformare in Conservatorio questa classe di scuola, mi spiace dover significarvi, che per ora gli impegni miei, e le mie faccende non mi permetterebbero di lasciare, nemmeno per poco, l'Inghilterra.* This letter is also quoted in Fiona Palmer, *Domenico Dragonetti in England (1794–1846)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 69, 79.

17. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 17: *Monsieur Cherubini, rappelle alors que le Conseil s'était déjà occupé de cette affaire importante, & qu'il avait été convenu que les Artistes de la Capitale qui sont reconnus pour avoir le plus de talent sur cet Instrument, seraient invités à vouloir bien donner leur avis sur l'archet dit de Dragonetti, & sur les moyens qu'ils croiraient propres à faciliter l'exécution de la Contrebasse, soit en y ajoutant une 4^e corde, soit en la montant en quarte & & &.*

18. “Sur la contrebasse et sur son archet,” 470: *M. Cherubini . . . a assemblé un comité auquel ont été appelés les principaux contrebassistes de la chapelle du roi, MM. Sorne, Lamy, Chénier [sic], Gélíneck [sic], et plusieurs autres, afin de discuter les avantages et les inconvénients du changement d'archet qu'on proposait.*



FIGURE 8. Domenico Dragonetti (1763–1846), Robert Lindley (1776–1855), and perhaps Charles Lucas (1808–1869). Calotype by D. O. Hill & Robert Adamson [1843]. Edinburgh, The Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

George-Joseph Gelinek, and Marie-Joseph-Antoine-Hyacinte-Valentin Höffelmayer (1760–?), the retired co-principal of the Chapel Royal and a section player in the Opéra.¹⁹ Cherubini asked each one to submit his opinion in writing in order to transmit it to the board of directors during the next meeting on May 15, 1827, “concerning the double-bass class created by the Viscount de Laroche foucauld, but which for various reasons has not yet been opened.”²⁰ Attending this meeting were Cherubini; Jean-Baptiste-Roger Fauchon-D’Henneville, *chef du matériel* of the conservatory; the composition professors (and composers in their own right) Henri-Montan Berton and François-Adrien Boiëldieu; Jean-François Lesueur, *surintendant* with Cherubini of the Chapel Royal, member of the *Institut de France* and a professor of composition; Charles-Henri Plantade, *maître* of the Chapel Royal and a singing professor; the renowned professor of violin Rodolphe Kreutzer; and Rossini, director of the Théâtre-Italien, *compositeur de Sa Majesté et Inspecteur général du chant dans tous les établissements royaux* (composer of the king and general inspector of singing in France).²¹ With the exception of Fauchon-D’Henneville, these were clearly some of the most influential musicians of the time who, based on a lifetime of practical experience, would decide how the double bass should be taught and played.

The Debate on the Bow and Tuning

In their letters, which Cherubini read aloud to the board,²² Chenié, Höffelmayer, and Sorne agree that the instrument should remain tuned in fifths to avoid losing the low Ab' and G' . Gelinek never actually addresses the issue, although he may have pronounced in favor of the tun-

19. This conclusion is supported by Sorne’s reference to “the last conference I had with you and *three* of my colleagues” (see Appendix, letter no. 2; emphasis added). There is no evidence to support the claim that Fétis or François-Louis Perne (1772–1832), *Inspecteur général des classes* of the conservatory from 1816 to 1822 and a double bass player in the Chapel Royal, participated in the discussions, and the omission of Höffelmayer’s name by all historians is yet further evidence that the *Archives Nationales* were never consulted.

20. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 17: *relative à la classe de Contrebasse dont la création a été faite par M. Le Vicomte De Laroche foucauld, mais que différents motifs n’avaient point permis encore d’établir.*

21. Letter of 22 November 1826 from Laroche foucauld to Cherubini, in Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 1, 5f.

22. The full texts of all four letters, with English translations, are given in an appendix to the present article.

ing in fourths and the addition of a fourth string in a previous letter to which he alludes²³ and which was likely published in the *Revue musicale* as “Note sur la contrebasse”; the companion article, “Note sur l’archet de la contrebasse,” is identical to his letter in the file. The minutes state that they also agreed that “a fourth string can only hinder and spoil performance”²⁴ but aside from Chenié, who was on the contrary favorable, none of the musicians mentions it. If one considers Fétis to be the spokesman for their concerns, their objection would be that “by multiplying the strings, the amplitude of the bow movement is multiplied, and consequently the obligation to turn oneself.”²⁵ Chenié’s letter is particularly revealing of his playing techniques:

When these notes [*A*♭’ and *G*’] occur [in fourth tuning] we are obliged to play them on the *D* string, which places us in the range of the violoncello. . . . In Mr. Rossini’s beautiful *Siège de Corinthe*, I momentarily lower my *G*’ string at the end of the first act to obtain an *F*♯’ one octave below that played on the violoncello’s *C* string, and this *F*♯’, which lasts several instants, produces a superb effect.²⁶

Mr. Director, how many beautiful low sounds would be missing from your sublime mass for the dead, and all those that we perform at the Chapel Royal! Supposing that we could add a fourth string I would be charmed to be able to avoid playing the *F*’ on the *D* string. Mr. Spontini [former director of the king’s private music and the Théâtre-Italien] was of my opinion in this regard.

I shall conclude, Mr. Director, by drawing to your attention that the loss of the three low notes in question, which is multiplied incessantly throughout the different keys, would damage the beauty of this instrument, since it would be necessary to perform them all on the *D* string.

For the reasons that I have had the honor to submit to you, and after consideration of the new system, I think that double basses tuned in

23. “In my notes on the double bass I said, concerning the bow. . . . I will repeat it again. . . .” (*Dans mes notes sur la Contrebasse j’ai dit. . . . Je le répéterai encore. . . .*) See Appendix, letter no. 3.

24. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 17: *qu’une 4^e corde ne peut que gêner et nuire à l’exécution.*

25. Fétis, “Publications Classiques,” 550: *en multipliant les cordes on multiplie les mouvements d’angle de l’archet, et conséquemment l’obligation de se tourner.*

26. According to Paul Brun (*Histoire des contrebasses à cordes*, 162), Rossini demanded an entire section of four-string double basses tuned in fourths for the performance of this opera on October 9, 1826, only months before Chenié is writing. Whatever the source of Brun’s claim, Chenié would appear to refute it. Achille Gouffé credits Halévy with the introduction of the four-string double bass at the Opéra for the first performance of *La reine de Chypre* on December 22, 1841: see the title page of his *Traité sur la Contre-Basse à quatre cordes*, part 2 (Paris: S. Richault, [after 1841]).

fourths may be suitable for solos, but for the accompaniment of beautiful religious and dramatic works, and in order to have true orchestral double basses, tuning in fifths is preferable.²⁷

Sorne, the retired principal of the Opéra and assistant principal of the Chapel Royal, reasoning that “it is hardly possible to make the notes above the middle of the chanterelle resonate suitably”—thumb position was not yet in use—also pointed out that “the same loss of one tone occurs at the octave above . . . since in this tuning the chanterelle is only tuned to *G* [whereas] in tuning by fifths it is an *A*, which renders this string much more sonorous and facilitates climbing to the octave above, and which gives the instrument tuned in fifths a range of two octaves and one tone, while in fourths it is only an octave and a minor seventh.”²⁸ Höffelmayer considered that “it will be very difficult to play higher than the *f* on the first string, which is encountered in almost all of our contemporary works, since often one must play up to *f-sharp*, *g*, *g-sharp*, and *a*,”²⁹ while for Chenié “the *A* which becomes *G* gives this string, lowered by a tone, a flaccidity which spoils the quality of the other sounds.”³⁰

Concerning the bow, the writer in the *Revue musicale* exaggerates somewhat when he informs readers that, with the exception of Glinek, “the musicians . . . showed themselves unfavorable to the adoption of the Dragonetti bow.”³¹ Chenié deftly avoids the issue while revealing contemporary opinion of Dragonetti, telling how “this extraordinary man, whom I would have liked to hear in Paris in order to make a final decision, invariably gave me the desire to know where he studied, and from the information I obtained I learned that he had no need of a teacher, and that his talent is a gift of nature.”³² Höffelmayer says simply that “concerning the bow and the manner of using it, habit will do all.”³³ Glinek, pointing out that even before seeing Dragonetti’s bow he had already remarked that “the Germans have not failed to notice the advantages resulting from the length and hold of the bow,” is very enthusiastic and endeavors “to demonstrate physically” the strength necessary to set

27. See Appendix, letter no. 4.

28. See Appendix, letter no. 2.

29. See Appendix, letter no. 1.

30. See Appendix, letter no. 4.

31. “Sur la contrebasse et sur son archet,” 471: *les artistes . . . se sont montrés peu favorables à l'adoption de l'archet de Dragonetti.*

32. See Appendix, letter no. 4.

33. See Appendix, letter no. 1.

the string in vibration that is acquired “by the system of Mr. Dragonetti” but which is not afforded by the usual bow hold:

The natural position of the hand and arm is shewn in *carrying arms* according to military theory, if I may be allowed the comparison—the arm extended, without stiffness, and the little finger against the seam of the trowsers. In this position, without the assistance of the arm, simply by movement of the wrist, the hand may make a fourth of a turn to the left, or half of a fourth to the right—and, by the mode in which Mr. Dragonetti holds his bow, the hand is in its natural position, the fingers even co-operate in supporting the hair on the strings, and the wrist has still its fourth of a turn to supply power, or a half fourth to raise the bow above the strings. Besides this rotatory movement, the wrist has those in front or behind—and all without tiring the arm in directing the bow over the strings.

The same is not the case with the ordinary holding of the bow: for, in that position, the wrist has made its movement to the left, and cannot turn again to support the hair on the strings, and the arm is employed for that pressure of the bow, as also for passing and repassing it.

It will be seen that the arm performs two functions, and that the side-movements of the wrist are so small, that in a sustained *fortissimo*, and if there be a multiplicity of notes, the arm making two contrary movements becomes fatigued, the wrist stiffened, the fingers benumbed, and the result is—a bad performance.³⁴

The only real dissident was Sorne, who stated that

With regard to the manner of holding the bow, that which is presented to us does not seem to me preferable to that presently practiced by all foreign and national bassists, it could suit those who formerly played the bass viol on which there were more strings.³⁵

Finally, from these observations I conclude that the means presented to us as improvements would produce the opposite effect if adopted. I have for proof the example of several musicians who have been obliged to denounce them, and my own experience.³⁶

Sorne’s view was not taken into account in the minutes, which state that “concerning the *Dragonetti bow*, all agree that usage alone can demonstrate its superiority over the old bow.”³⁷

34. Gelinek, “On the bow of the double bass,” *The Harmonicon*, December 1829, 298. This is the English translation of his article “Sur l’archet de la contrebasse,” which is identical to his letter in Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 84, 7c.

35. The double bass would thus be not only the refuge of failed violoncellists but also of former bass viol players whose instrument was outmoded!

36. See Appendix, letter no. 2.

37. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 18: *A l’égard de l’Archet de Dragonetti, tous s’accordent à dire que l’usage seul peut démontrer sa supériorité sur l’ancien archet.*

After this reading, the Director opened the discussion and posed the following questions:

1. Will the double bass continue to be tuned in fifths?

The members of the Board responded affirmatively.

2. Will the new double bass class use *Dragonetti's curved bow*?

This bow that Mr. Rossini ordered from London having been examined carefully and tried during the meeting, the members present[,] with the exception of Mr. Plantade, recognized its superiority over the old bow, and responded that it must be adopted for the new teaching of the double bass.³⁸

Although the minutes do not mention the convocation of persons other than the members of the board, the fact that a test was made implies the presence of the double bassists at the meeting. The notes taken by the secretary during the meeting reveal that Plantade, who would be retired during the restructuring of the conservatory the following year, "on the contrary protested against this innovation and against all those concerning this instrument which must be saved, he said, from the contagion tending to disrupt music in France,"³⁹ a statement which must have pleased neither Cherubini nor Rossini since it is crossed out, absent as well from the fair copy sent to the Viscount de Larocheffoucauld. "This last being the only dissenter, it was decided that the *Dragonetti bow* would be the only one in use at the Royal School and that in consequence the Director will order copies of the London model."⁴⁰

38. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 18:

Après cette lecture M. Le Directeur ouvre la discussion, & pose ensuite les questions suivantes:

1° la contrebasse continuera-t-elle à être accordée par Quinte?

La réponse affirmative a été faite par les membres du Conseil.

2° Se servira-t-on dans la nouvelle classe de Contrebasse de l'Archet courbe de Dragonetti?

Cet Archet que fit venir de Londres M. Rossini ayant été examiné avec soin et l'essai en ayant été fait dans la séance, les membres présents à l'exception de M. Plantade, ont reconnu sa supériorité sur l'ancien Archet, & ont répondu qu'il fallait l'introduire pour le nouvel enseignement de la contrebasse.

39. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 84, 7c: *au contraire protesta contre cette innovation et contre toutes celles qui seraient relatives à cet instrument qu'il faut sauver a-t-il dit de la contagion, qui tend à bouleverser la musique en France.*

40. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 18–19: *Le préopinant étant seul de son avis, il a été décidé que l'Archet Dragonetti serait le seul en usage à l'Ecole Royale, & qu'en conséquence M. Le Directeur en ferait établir sur le modèle venant de Londres.* Could this be the anonymous Dragonetti model double bass bow donated to the Conservatory Museum by the Chambure family in 1979, currently listed as no. E.980.2.238 in the collection of the Musée de la Musique, Paris? In 1960, Raymond Elgar reported that the bow sent by Dragonetti was held "in a private collection in Paris" (*Introduction to the Double Bass*, 19).

The Appointment of the Professor

While it is well known that Marie-Pierre Chenié was the first professor of the double bass class, how he obtained the post has been a subject of speculation. Fétis simply announces that “this class has been entrusted to Mr. Chenier [*sic*].”⁴¹ Brun is more specific, but does not provide the source of his information: “it was only on May 23, 1827, that Chenier [*sic*] was charged by Cherubini, director of the Conservatory, with teaching the three-string double bass.”⁴² The documentation in the *Archives Nationales* reveals, in precise detail, the process involved in becoming a professor at the *École royale*. The minutes of the meeting continue:

The Director then announced to the Board that it should proceed with the nomination of a Double Bass Professor, selected from among the artists of the capital, and asked the view of each one, in order to submit the result of their vote to the approval of the Viscount de Laroche-foucauld.

After agreeing that the ballots should each bear *three candidates*, in order to give a choice to the higher authority, the said ballots were made and collected by the Director.

From which it resulted:

— 1. That Mr. *Chenié* principal double bass of the opera obtained 8 votes which represent the unanimity of those polled.

— 2. That Mr. *Lamy*, also principal double bass of the opera obtained 8 votes which represent the unanimity of those polled.

— 3. That Mr. *Gelinek*, former double bass of the opera only obtained 6 votes.

— 4. That Mr. *Sorne* only obtained 2 votes.

It is thus from among the first three candidates that the Viscount de Laroche-foucauld will be asked to choose.⁴³

41. Fétis, “Publications Classiques,” 550: *Cette classe a été confiée à M. Chénier. . . .*

42. Brun, *Histoire des contrebasses à cordes*, 123: *ce n’est que le 23 mai 1827 que Chenier fut chargé par Cherubini, directeur du Conservatoire, d’enseigner la contrebasse à trois cordes.*

43. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 192, 2e, f° 18–19: *M. Le Directeur annonça ensuite au Conseil qu’il s’agissait de nommer un Professeur de Contrebasse, pris parmi les Artistes de la Capitale, & demanda l’avis de chacun, afin de soumettre le résultat de leur vote à l’approbation de M. le V^{re} De Laroche-foucauld.*

Après être convenu que les Bulletins porteraient chacun Trois Candidats, afin de donner le choix à l’autorité supérieure, les dits Bulletins ont été faits & recueillis par le Directeur.

Desquels il résulte:

—1° *Que M. Chenié 1^{re} contrebasse de l’opéra a réuni 8 Voix qui sont l’unanimité des Suffrages.*

—2° *Que M. Lamy, également 1^{re} contrebasse de l’opéra a réuni 8 Voix qui sont l’unanimité des Suffrages.*

—3° *Que M. Gelinek, ancienne Contrebasse de l’opéra n’a obtenu que 6 Voix.*

—4° *Que M. Sorne, n’a obtenu que 2 Voix.*

C’est donc parmi les 3 1^{ers} que M. le V^{re} De Laroche-foucauld sera prié de faire un choix.

Evidently Sorne's conservatism did not endear him to the members of the board, who were obviously not satisfied with the status quo if they were requesting a class "for improving the performance of this useful instrument."

Cherubini wrote the next day to the Viscount de Larochefoucauld to forward to him the minutes of the meeting, apologizing if the viscount found

belated the proposition that I have the honor to submit to you on this subject; but I must inform you that since the beginning of this exercise I have occupied myself with assembling all desirable information on the means of instituting this instruction and of perfecting double bass performance, of which composers complain with much justification.

You will thus see in the minutes, my Lord, the steps I have taken to achieve this improvement.

At this time the professor must be appointed whose salary already appears in the budget, and it is up to you alone, my Lord, to make this choice among the three candidates who are listed here *by order of appearance on the ballots*, an essential fact which must be drawn to your attention.⁴⁴

This last remark was meant to notify Larochefoucauld that the appearance of Chenié at the top of the list, ahead of François-Noël Prouteau, known as Lamy (1772–1832), and Gelinek, meant he was the one whom all of the board members thought of first when asked to suggest a professor. The esteem in which this musician was held in the Parisian musical world is attested by Fétis, who describes him as "one of our most capable and zealous artists,"⁴⁵ and by Hector Berlioz, who writes in his memoirs: "Oh! that fat, red man, there! He's the principal double bass, it's old Chenié; a vigorous fellow in spite of his age; he alone is worth

44. Archives Nationales, O³ 1811, II, 1072: *bien tardive la proposition que j'ai l'honneur de vous soumettre à ce sujet; mais je dois vous faire savoir que depuis le commencement de cet exercice je me suis occupé de recueillir tous les renseignements désirables sur les moyens d'établir cet enseignement & de perfectionner l'exécution de la Contrebasse dont les compositeurs se plaignent avec beaucoup de raison.*

Vous verrez donc, Monsieur Le Vicomte, par le dit Procès Verbal les soins que j'ai pris pour parvenir à cette amélioration.

Actuellement il s'agit de nommer le professeur dont les appointements figurent déjà au budget, & c'est à vous seul Monsieur Le Vicomte, à faire ce choix, entre les trois candidats qui sont rangés ici par ordre d'inscription sur les bulletins, ce qu'il est très essentiel de vous faire observer.

45. Fétis, "Publications Classiques," 550: *l'un de nos artistes les plus habiles en même temps qu'il est un des plus zélés.*

four ordinary bassists; you can be sure that his part will be performed as the author wrote it: he is not an advocate of simplification.”⁴⁶

Chenié, born in Paris on June 8, 1773, was a student of the abbot d’Haudimont at the composition school he founded at Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, where Chenié had a mass of his own composition performed at the age of sixteen.⁴⁷ He joined the orchestra of the Opéra in 1795, serving as its principal double bass from 1820 until his retirement in 1830; he was principal of the Société des Concerts from its foundation in 1828 until his death (performing in Beethoven’s *Septet* on January 30, 1831), and for several years was organist of the Salpêtrière church. He was, however, only an honorary member (during both the first Empire and the Restoration) of the Chapel Royal,⁴⁸ where his *Prière pour sa majesté le roi de Rome* for duo, choir and orchestra may have been performed: the copy held in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris, was formerly in the collection of the *Menus Plaisirs du Roi*, or royal entertainment.⁴⁹ His extant compositions, conserved in the music department of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, also include two settings of the *Te Deum*, a funeral hymn for Louis XVI, a *Chant à la gloire de Napoléon le grand*, and many romances: *Les Adieux d’Atala*, *L’amour et l’amitié*, *Le Bouquet de Mathurin*, *L’élégante Zélie*, *L’hermite hospitalier*, *L’heureux asile*, *Ma doctrine*. . . . (It is interesting to note that whenever the bass line in his orchestral works

46. Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), 1:108: *Oh! ce gros rouge, là-bas! c’est la première contrebasse, c’est le père Chenié; un vigoureux gaillard malgré son âge; il vaut à lui tout seul quatre contrebasses ordinaires; on peut être sûr que sa partie sera exécutée telle que l’auteur l’a écrite: il n’est pas de l’école des simplificateurs.*

47. Fétis, *Biographie universelle*, 2nd ed., 2:260–261.

48. Scribbled on the letter cited above in note 5 is this response: “Notify Mr. Lesueur that the Duke de la Châtre has consented to admit Mr. Chenié to his service as an honorary member of the King’s Music, that he should inform [Chenié] of this and summon him when he will have need of him.” (*Prévenir M. Lesueur que M. le Duc de la Châtre a bien voulu consentir à ce que le S^r Chenié rejoigne son service en qualité d’honoraire dans la Musique du Roi, qu’il veuille bien lui en donner connaissance et le convoquer quand il en aura besoin*) (Archives Nationales, O³ 1600, II, 60). While Chenié did perform occasionally at court—in the Quadrille for the *mardi gras* of 1812 (with Gelinek on the harp), and in the opera *L’ami de la Maison* at St. Cloud on August 13, 1812 (Archives Nationales, O³ 39, f^o 281, 335)—and in exceptional events such as the ceremony commemorating the deaths of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette in Saint Denis on January 20, 1827 (Archives Nationales, O³ 291), he is never listed as a permanent member in the accounts of the Chapel Royal (Archives Nationales, O² 62, O³ 380).

49. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Vma. 3731. Published by Chenié in 1811, its title as well as its dedication to the Count de Montesquiou-Fezensac, Napoleon’s *Grand Chambellan*, must have been responsible for his “horribly compromised reputation” during the Bourbon Restoration.

ventures below written G, Chenié writes the double bass part an octave up in the same way that Johannes Brahms does for any notes below E.)

Cherubini proposed to Larochefoucauld that if “in light of the parity of the votes for the first two candidates, you would like to know my personal opinion . . . I will admit that I would favor Mr. Chenié who will assist me, I am certain, in lifting this instrument out of the routine in which it languishes.”⁵⁰ Assuming the nomination of Chenié to be a done deed, Cherubini considered it his duty to signal that in view of “how much I am beholden to Mr. Gelinek for the ceaseless care he has taken and the zeal that he has deployed for *the improvement of the double bass*, undertaking research and experiments to achieve this goal, it would be a pleasure for me to see this ingenious artist receive a token of satisfaction to console him for his failure to obtain the post in question.”⁵¹

Larochefoucauld thus announced in his report of May 23, 1827, that “the considerations expounded by the director of the Royal School of Music and Declamation having led the viscount to select the first of these artists, Mr. Chenié, we have the honor to submit to his formal approval the nomination which will take effect beginning next July 1, at which time it has been calculated that the opening of the double bass class can take place.”⁵²

Cherubini chose this date in order to “allow the necessary time to recruit students by an announcement to be made in the newspapers,” and did not omit to point out to the viscount that “at the same time, this arrangement is favorable from an economic point of view,”⁵³ namely that no salary was to be paid in the interim. Several drafts that are mod-

50. Archives Nationales, O³ 1811, II, 1072: *Si en raison de la parité des suffrages des deux premiers candidats, vous désiriez connaître mon avis particulier . . . je vous avouerai que je pencherais pour M. Chenié qui me seconderait, j'en suis certain, pour sortir cet instrument de la routine dans laquelle il languit.*

51. Ibid.: *combien je suis redevable à M. Gelinek des soins qu'il n'a cessé de prendre & du zèle qu'il a déployé pour l'amélioration de la contrebasse, en faisant des recherches & des essais pour parvenir à ce fin, je verrais avec grand plaisir que cet ingénieux Artiste reçut une marque de satisfaction qui put le consoler de ne pas avoir obtenu la place dont il est question.*

52. Ibid.: *Les considérations exposées par M. le Directeur de l'Ecole royale de musique et de déclamation, ayant déterminé Monsieur le Vicomte à fixer son choix sur le premier de ces artistes, M. Chenié, on a l'honneur de soumettre à son approbation formelle cette nomination qui aura son effet à partir du 1^{er} juillet prochain, époque à laquelle on a calculé que l'ouverture de la classe de contrebasse pourra avoir lieu.*

53. Ibid.: *La classe de contrebasse ne pouvant s'ouvrir qu'à partir du 1^{er} Juillet, attendu qu'il faut donner le tems [sic] nécessaire de se procurer des Elèves, par le moyen d'un appel qui sera fait dans les journaux, le professeur qui sera nommé n'entrera en fonction qu'à compter du 1^{er} Juillet prochain. Cette disposition, en même tems, est favorable sous le rapport de l'économie.*

els of illegibility show that Larochefoucauld notified Chenié in writing of his decision. Complying with Cherubini's request, he sent a letter to Gelinek expressing his satisfaction and his regret that he could not name him to the post "owing to the number of votes that your competitors obtained."⁵⁴ Lamy apparently received nothing to console him.

The Public Debate

The creation of the double bass class and the discussions to which it gave rise must have been enthralling for a Parisian musical public hungry for novelty, for in the months following the meeting a series of articles on the subject appeared in the pages of the *Revue musicale*. Owing to the influence of Dragonetti on the debate, Fétis first published a biography of this musician⁵⁵ in order to invoke his name in the landmark article⁵⁶ that would follow it two issues later. Illustrated by drawings (fig. 9), this article, presumably written by Fétis himself (who on the evidence was not party to the discussions but at least kept abreast of proceedings), summarizes the arguments in favor of the adoption of the "Italian" bow—lighter, longer, endowed by virtue of its convex form with a rigidity and point of resistance favorable to an energetic attack—over the "French" bow—shorter, made heavier to reduce the flexibility inherent in its inversed arc form which places the resistance points at the useless ends of the stick, and insufficient to draw the volume necessary to compete with the growing number of ophicleides and trombones that were invading the orchestra pits. Fétis cites Dragonetti and Antonio Dall'Occa (1764-1847) as partisans of the Italian bow, explaining that the only disadvantage to it is that its underhand grip is contrary to the "force of habit and the natural aversion to any innovation"⁵⁷ of the double bassists consulted, Gelinek excepted. With the exception of Sorne, as we have seen above, no written evidence justifies this accusation, although it is possible that Chenié and Höffelmayer modified their spoken views when it became evident that they ran contrary to those of their superiors at the Chapel Royal. Fétis reports the compromise reached whereby the musicians in the Chapel Royal would continue to use the French bow

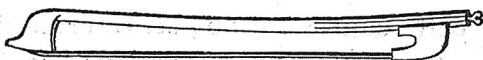
54. Ibid.: *à raison du nombre des voix qu'ont obtenu vos concurrents.*

55. "Biographie," *La Revue musicale* 1 (February-July, 1827): 431-432.

56. "Sur la contrebasse et sur son archet," *La Revue musicale* 1 (February-July, 1827): 468-472.

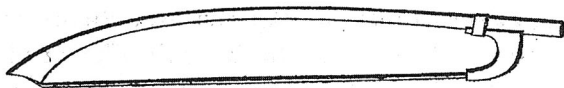
57. Ibid., 470: *la force de l'habitude et l'éloignement naturel pour toute innovation.*

construit de la manière la plus avantageuse pour cet objet. On sait qu'il présente l'aspect d'un arc renversé, tel que la figure suivante :



Cette construction, qui est bonne pour l'archet du violon et pour celui du violoncelle, en ce qu'elle donne au centre de la baguette une flexibilité nécessaire pour tirer des sons purs et doux, est par cela même vicieuse à l'égard de la contre-basse, dont les cordes très rigides ont besoin d'être attaquées avec énergie.

L'archet italien, au contraire, assez semblable à l'ancien archet de violon dont Corelli faisait usage, paraît présenter dans sa construction les conditions les plus désirables. En voici la forme :



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FIGURE 9. Illustrations of French (above) and Italian (below) double bass bows in *La Revue musicale* 1 (February–July 1827): 469. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

while the students at the conservatory would learn the other one exclusively, and predicts that in ten years the Italian bow would supplant the French one.

The other issue addressed in the article is that of tuning, but it is evident that the author has confused two separate questions: whether to tune the three-string bass in fourths like the Italians ($A'-D-G$), and whether to add a fourth string. Fétis believes that the additional string is pitched a fourth *above* the Italian tuning, hence $A'-D-G-c$, whereas it is clear from Chenié's letter that one tuned *below* the A' string is understood. Gelinek would commit the same error in his article in the *Revue*

musicale two years later,⁵⁸ in which he implies but never actually describes another tuning which would save the two low notes. This must be the tuning $G'-C-F-B\flat$ mentioned by Fétis as rejected by the committee due to the fingering problems that would be posed by the top string in keys with sharps. Another suggestion was to raise this top string to c , producing an irregular tuning (“as on the guitar”) $G'-C-F-c$, but “irregularities which would oblige the musicians to divide their attention between the difficulties of reading and the workings of their instruments must be avoided.”⁵⁹ Fétis reports that “the committee postponed its definitive resolution,”⁶⁰ but as we have seen above it was clearly decided to retain the tuning by fifths.

Several months later, François Perne wrote to the *Revue musicale* to applaud this “illuminating and very exact dissertation”⁶¹ on the two bows, but at the same time to defend his colleagues against the attack. According to Perne, the double bassists in question are entirely capable of playing all the written notes with the same strength, clarity, and exactitude as their foreign counterparts, but their decision not to is dictated by their judgement of total orchestral effect acquired through experience, knowledge, and continual observation, and not by technical deficiency. Berlioz confirms that Chenié is not a simplifier. Perne’s article has been interpreted as an apology for a “backward-looking attitude,”⁶² but clearly he intended his comments to apply only to the musicians named by Fétis and did not extend them to the younger majority who in his opinion should be instructed according to the “method of playing this instrument in Italy and Germany.”⁶³ Fétis subsequently modified his stance, dividing French double bassists into two classes,

the one composed of men full of energy and devoted to their art, such, for instance, as Messieurs [Sorner], Chenié, [Gelinek], and [Lamy]; the other, in which are ranged those who do nothing more than exactly fulfil their duty. The former, having to contend against the difficulties of a

58. Gelinek, “Note sur la contrebasse,” 169–171.

59. “Sur la contrebasse et sur son archet,” 472: *Enfin il resterait la ressource d'accorder irrégulièrement comme on le fait pour la guitare . . . mais on doit éviter dans les instruments d'orchestre les irrégularités qui obligeraient les artistes à partager leur attention entre les difficultés de la lecture et celle du mécanisme de leur instrument.*

60. *Ibid.*: *le comité a ajourné sa résolution définitive.*

61. Perne, “Note sur la contrebasse,” 495: *dissertation lumineuse et très exacte.*

62. Brun, *Histoire des contrebasses à cordes*, 110–111: *Un texte de 1828 nous montre avec quelle ingéniosité ils justifiaient leur attitude passéiste.*

63. Perne, 497: *selon la manière dont on joue de cet instrument en Italie et en Allemagne.*

disadvantageous mode of tuning their instrument, and of an ill-constructed bow, can produce the desired effect only through dint of effort and fatigue; the others give themselves less trouble, and are content with executing the leading notes of the passages of the score before them.⁶⁴

The Progress of the New Class

The new class had no problem attracting applicants—tuition was free—and by July 10 all eight of its places were filled by male students ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-five years. It appears that they were required neither to pass an entrance audition,⁶⁵ nor to possess instruments: the conservatory placed at their disposal six double basses and bows formerly in the depot of the *Menus Plaisirs du Roi*,⁶⁶ while Charles-François Gand (1787–1845), the official luthier of the conservatory, was charged with producing copies of the new model of bow.⁶⁷ With the foundation of the Société des Concerts in 1828, certain students could—in addition to their regular studies—be designated by the director to participate without pay in concerts, their refusal or absence at rehearsals resulting in expulsion from the conservatory.⁶⁸

The progress of the new class can be followed in the notes taken during the half-yearly examinations by the members of the Teaching Committee (*comité d'enseignement*),⁶⁹ and in the articles on the annual final *concours* in the *Revue musicale* by Fétis, who as a professor (of counterpoint and fugue) served on the jury. Complaints centered consistently on intonation, rhythm, and volume of sound, and those students who did not exhibit progress at the half-yearly examinations were expelled

64. Fétis, "State of Music in London . . . On the Philharmonic Society," *The Harmonicon*, September 1829, 216.

65. The first instance of an entrance audition is 13 February 1843, where all three candidates were absent due to an administrative error (Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 209).

66. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 81, 9.

67. "Sur la contrebasse et sur son archet," 471. A register of the instruments of the conservatory started in 1833 (Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 81, 10) mentions "two bows for double bass, new model" (*Deux archets pr. contrebasse nouveau modèle*) (no. 122) and a "case for twelve double bass bows (brass fittings with 6 bows)" (*Une boîte pour 12 archets de Contrebasses [garniture en cuivre avec 6 archets]*) (no. 135, dated 1841) by Gand. They were probably all sold off at public auctions on May 21 and June 28, 1898, where one lot of double bass bows figures among the offerings (Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 78, 6).

68. Antoine-Amable-Elie Elwart, *Histoire de la Société des Concerts* (Paris: Castel, 1860), 65. The presence of three students is attested in a register from 1833 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, D 17329 [1]).

69. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 208, 223, 224, 225.

without hesitation by the committee. That these were not the only criteria is evident in the distinction made in the awarding of the first and second prizes at the final *concours*. At the first *concours* on August 4, 1828, in which three candidates had participated, Fétis reported that

Mr. Chenié, who for one year has been teaching this instrument, and who has introduced the use of the Italian bow in his class, has already obtained satisfactory results. It was noticed that his students attack the string with vigor and clarity. One of them, Mr. Guillion the younger, obtained the second prize. The jury decided that there were no grounds for awarding a first prize.⁷⁰

Vigor and clarity: these were the qualities lacking in double bass playing in France. In an article on musical performance that appeared the same year, Fétis considered that

this change [in bow] that is beginning to take hold is not enough. Often the passages sound heavy and labored, which depends not only on the bow; the arm of the player is responsible for much of this. The playing of the double bass requires not only physical strength but an energetic effort which seems to me to be quite rare, judging from the flaccidity with which the majority of double bassists attack the string. I have even seen some in theater orchestras who, when they are tired, sit and stop playing, without concern for the effect that results from their silence. The conductor who tolerates such abuse is inexcusable.⁷¹

Similar complaints about the students are encountered in Cherubini's notes: "labored performance, without edge . . . attacks the strings flaccidly."⁷² One student "has a weak chest, he cannot practice long without tiring,"⁷³ while another who "does not draw enough sound" and

70. Fétis, "Ecole Royal de Musique. Concours annuels," *La Revue musicale* 4 (August 1828–January 1829): 39: *M. Chenié, qui depuis un an enseigne à jouer de cet instrument, et qui a introduit dans sa classe l'usage de l'archet italien, a déjà obtenu des résultats satisfaisants. On a remarqué que ses élèves attaquent la corde avec vigueur et netteté. L'un d'eux, M. Guillion jeune, a obtenu le second prix. Le jury a décidé qu'il n'y avait pas lieu d'en décerner un premier.*

71. Fétis, "Exécution musicale," *La Revue musicale* 3 (February–July 1828): 228: *Mais ce changement, qui commence à s'opérer, ne suffit pas. Souvent les traits ont un air lourd et empâté qui ne dépend pas uniquement de l'archet; le bras de l'exécutant y est pour beaucoup. Il faut, pour jouer de la contrebasse, non seulement de la force physique, mais une volonté énergique qui me semble être bien rare, si j'en juge par la mollesse avec laquelle la plupart des contrebassistes attaquent la corde. J'en vois même dans les orchestres des théâtres qui, lorsqu'ils sont fatigués, s'assoient et cessent de jouer, sans s'inquiéter de l'effet qui résulte de leur silence. Le chef d'orchestre qui tolère de pareils abus, est inexcusable.*

72. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 208, 1: *exécution empâtée, et sans nerfs . . . attaque les cordes mollement.*

73. *Ibid.*: *a la poitrine faible, il ne peut pas travailler longtemps sans se fatiguer.*

whose weak hands and fingers are repeatedly remarked is finally expelled.⁷⁴ However, the blame did not lie entirely with the players, since Perne pointed out that

The double bass is set up, in France, with strings so thick and high above the fingerboard, that this instrument is truly tiring to play in loud passages, and difficult in *piano* and *pianissimo*, especially with the manner in which the [French] bow is generally constructed and held by the performer; for the length of the bow, due to the form of its shaft, ruins its flexibility by the excessive stiffness this form gives to the tension of the hair. The form of the French bow thus harms the vigorous attack of the strings, without rendering performance easier in *mezzo forte* and *piano*.⁷⁵

The Dragonetti bow could help to solve the problem but, as the jurors' notes demonstrate, it did not guarantee results, which still depended on the arm of the player. Otherwise, Charles-Amand Durier (1807–?),⁷⁶ a pupil of Chenié who played in the orchestra of the Opéra-Comique and the Société des Concerts, was of the opinion that “if the majority of double bassists draw a sound of poor quality, it is because

74. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 208, 3: *ne tire pas assez de son*.

75. Perne, 495: *La contrebasse est tellement montée, en France, avec des cordes si fortes et tellement élevées sur la touche, que cet instrument est vraiment fatigant à jouer dans les passages de force, et difficile dans les piano et pianissimo, surtout par la manière dont l'archet est généralement construit et celle dont il est tenu par l'instrumentiste; car la longueur de l'archet, en raison de la forme de sa baguette, nuit à sa flexibilité par le trop de roideur que cette forme donne à la tension du crin. La forme de l'archet français nuit donc à l'attaque vigoureuse des cordes, sans rendre l'exécution plus facile dans les mezzo forte et les piano*.

76. Singled out by Fétis as one of Chenié's better students (*Biographie universelle*, 2nd ed., 2:260–61), admired by Berlioz who, at the festival honoring Beethoven in Bonn in 1845, would have liked to see him come to play in a dream orchestra with Dragonetti from London, Müller from Darmstadt, and Schmidt from Brunswick (Hector Berlioz, “1^{re} lettre au Rédacteur,” *Journal des Débats*, 22 August 1845), Durier obtained a contract with the Opéra-Comique beginning on October 1, 1827, while still a student—and with his mother's permission, for he was considered a minor (Archives Nationales, AJ¹³ 1059, I, IV). Cherubini was not only aware of the engagement, but commented at the first exam that Durier should hold the bow on the job in the manner taught at the conservatory (Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 208, 1: *Seulement il faut qu'il se serve au spectacle où il est de tenir l'archet comme à l'Ecole*). Durier appears to have abandoned his studies and was expelled from the conservatory on March 6, 1828 (Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 150, 1). He became a member of the Société des Concerts on September 14, 1836, resigning on October 23, 1853 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, D 17331 [4]), and was once reprimanded by the administration for coming to a rehearsal on January 6, 1846 “in a state that we decline to specify” (*dans un état que nous ne voulons pas qualifier*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, D 17344). Concerning the Beethoven festival, legend has it that Dragonetti participated in this concert (Elgar, *More About the Double Bass*, 65); Planyavsky goes so far as to blame the journey for hastening his death: *Es hat den Anschein, daß diese Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven Dragonetti auf das*

they do not use the first phalanx [of the left hand] to stop the strings, they use the second with which one can not obtain as equal or strong a pressure, and the note does not speak clearly.”⁷⁷ He also reported that another “bad habit which the majority of double bassists acquires is to play very near the fingerboard and sometimes over it, which deprives the instrument of the bite for which it is esteemed, since the sound becomes weak and lacks energy.”⁷⁸ If this was not simply a bad habit, it may have been deliberate: in 1860, Nicolas-Charles Labro (1810–1882) still deplored “these limp bow strokes that do not set the string in vibration (and a poor one at that) until they reach the middle of the shaft and even further, which generally makes the strings strike the fingerboard,” a style of playing which “supposedly was formerly accepted and considered as a quality.”⁷⁹ Can this be taken as lingering proof of the swelling sound purported to be characteristic of period instruments?

Another letter in the *Archives Nationales* reveals that in the year following the first examination, the conservatory proved already to be an international meeting ground: Cherubini wrote to Larochefoucauld on June 6, 1829, concerning a recent visit to Paris by the Italian double bassist Luigi Anglois (1801–1872), that

He played before me, at the Royal School, in an astonishing manner. Since he is attached to the chapel and theater in Turin, he had to return to that city; but his intention is to return to Paris next year and take up

Totenbett brachte (Planyavsky, 397). The simple testimony of Berlioz, which will suffice to lay this myth definitively to rest, also seems to be the source of it: C. F. Pohl, in his book *Mozart und Haydn in London* (Vienna: Carl Gerold's Sohn, 1867), 2:306–307—from which Elgar and Planyavsky obtained their information—failed to grasp that Berlioz, using the conditional tense, expressed a wish to see assembled these double bassists that he met individually during his travels (cf. his *Mémoires*, 2:111, 159–160), and accepted the statement as fact.

77. Charles-Amand Durier, *Méthode complète de contrebasse* (Paris: J. Meissonnier, 1836), 2: *Si la plupart des contrebassistes tirent une mauvaise qualité de son, c'est qu'ils ne se servent point de la première phalange pour appuyer sur les cordes, ils emploient la seconde avec laquelle on ne peut obtenir une pression aussi égale ni aussi forte et la note ne parle point franchement.*

78. *Ibid.*, 3: *Une mauvaise habitude que la plupart des Contrebassistes contractent, c'est de jouer presque sur la touche et quelquefois même dessus, ce qui ôte à l'instrument tout le mordant qui le fait estimer car le son devient faible et sans énergie.*

79. Charles Labro, *Méthode de contrebasse* (Paris, 1860), 10: *Je veux parler de ces coups d'Archet flasques qui ne mettent la corde en vibration, (et encore dans une mauvaise vibration) que lorsqu'ils sont arrivés au milieu de la baguette et même plus loin, ce qui fait généralement cingler les cordes sur la touche. [*Cette manière de jouer, a été dit on acceptée et regardé anciennement comme une qualité. . . .]*

residence here, if he could find some benefit in it. This would be, my Lord, an excellent acquisition to make for the opera orchestra; for this artist truly possesses an extraordinary talent on the double bass. Should his admission take place it should not however be at the expense of another double bassist of this theater, although he would no doubt demand a higher salary in proportion to his great talent.⁸⁰

Larochefoucauld replied that he would see "if the resources of the budget permit welcoming him."⁸¹ If Larochefoucauld was at all serious about the proposal, his dismissal with the change in government in July 1830 probably prevented him from pursuing it.

At the *concours* on August 3, 1829, in which there were four candidates, Fétis reported that

A noticeable improvement was observed this year in the class which was established two years ago through the efforts of Mr. Cherubini. By adopting for himself and for his students the Italian bow, Mr. Chenié has rendered a veritable service to French orchestras; for the handling of this bow is very favorable to sound production, its modifications, and the articulation of virtuosic passages. It would be desirable for theater managers to furnish the young bassists who enter their orchestras after graduation from the Royal School, with bows of this type, for the work of Mr. Chenié and his students would be in vain if the old bow continued to be the only one in use in theaters. The first prize in double bass was awarded jointly to Messrs. [Guillion] and Hemet. Mr. Marié obtained the second prize.⁸²

80. Archives Nationales, O³ 1815, III: *Il a joué devant moi, à l'Ecole Royale, d'une manière surprenante. Etant attaché à la chapelle & au théâtre de Turin, il a dû retourner en cette ville; mais son intention est de revenir à Paris l'année prochaine & de s'y fixer, s'il y trouverait des avantages. Ce serait, Monsieur le Vicomte, une excellente acquisition à faire pour l'orchestre de l'opéra; car cet artiste possède vraiment un talent extraordinaire sur la contrebasse. Il ne faudrait pas cependant que son admission, si elle avait lieu, occasionnât la suppression d'aucun artiste contrebassier de ce théâtre, quoiqu'il réclamerait, sans doute, des appointements plus élevés & en proportion de son grand talent.*

81. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 11, 3b: *Quant à votre proposition relative à Mr. Anglois, contrebassiste, je verrai également si les ressources du budget permettent de l'accueillir.*

82. Fétis, "Concours de l'école royale de musique," *La Revue musicale* 6 (August 1829–January 1830): 62: *Une amélioration sensible s'est fait remarquer cette année dans la classe qui a été établie depuis deux ans par les soins de M. Cherubini. En adoptant pour lui-même et pour ses élèves l'archet italien, M. Chenié a rendu un véritable service aux orchestres français; car le maniement de cet archet est très favorable à la production du son, à ses modifications et à l'articulation des traits. Il est à désirer que les directeurs de spectacles fournissent aux jeunes contrebassistes qui sortent de l'Ecole royale pour entrer dans les orchestres, des archets de cet espèce, car les travaux de M. Chenié et de ses élèves seraient sans résultats si l'on continuait à ne se servir que de l'ancien archet dans les théâtres. Le premier prix de contrebasse a été décerné en partage à MM. [Guillion] et Hemet. M. Marié a obtenu le second prix.*

Antoine-Bellarmino Guillion (1809–1856) joined the orchestra of the Opera in 1832 and was its principal bass after 1848, performed in the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire as principal from 1849 until his death, and played the ophicleide as well as the double bass at the church of St. Roch.⁸³ Edouard Hémet (1806–?)⁸⁴ played in the Concert Musard.⁸⁵ Apparently it was the responsibility of the theaters to provide double bassists with instruments and bows, which would explain why standardization of the string length was such an issue for players then, as it is now.⁸⁶ A double bassist employed by several theaters could not be guaranteed that each instrument he used would allow him to play consistently.

By the time of the *concours* on August 9, 1830, in which two candidates participated, Fétis affirmed that “Mr. Chenié, who had the courage to adopt boldly the Italian bow, in spite of the obstacles posed by habit and prejudice, is reaping the rewards of his efforts by the good students he is training. Messrs. Marié and Dietsch, who owe the talent they have acquired to his care, shared the first prize.”⁸⁷

Claude-Marie-Mécène Marié (1811–1879) played in the orchestra of the Opéra from 1831 to 1834, then in the orchestra of the Théâtre-Italien, before embarking on a career as an opera singer.⁸⁸ Pierre-Louis-Philippe Dietsch (1808–1865) (fig. 10), who Cherubini predicted “will make an excellent double bassist”⁸⁹ (the only example of unequivocal

83. Pierre, 769.

84. The Hémet listed (with no first name) in the roster of the Société des Concerts (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, D 17331 [4]) has proven to be not Edouard, but his younger brother Jean-Louis-Camille (see below, p. 124): see Jean-Michael Nectoux, “Trois orchestres parisiens en 1830: L’Académie royale de Musique, le Théâtre-Italien et la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire,” in Peter Bloom, ed., *La Musique à Paris dans les années mil huit cent trente*, La Vie Musicale en France au XIXe Siècle, 4 (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1987), 471–507, at 503.

85. Pierre, 773.

86. See for example Durier, 3–4, and Labro, 14.

87. Fétis, “Concours de l’école royale de musique,” *La Revue musicale* 9 (14 August 1830): 19–20: *M. Chenié, qui a eu le courage d’adopter franchement l’archet italien, malgré les obstacles que l’habitude et le préjugé lui opposent, recueille le fruit de sa persévérance par les bons élèves qu’il forme. MM. Marié et Dietsch, qui doivent à ses soins le talent qu’ils ont acquis, ont obtenu le premier prix en partage.*

88. A member of the choir at St. Eustache and of the chorus at the Opéra-Comique, he made his debut in Metz in 1838 as Raoul in *Les Huguenots*, in Paris at the Théâtre de la Renaissance in 1839, and at the Opéra on June 3, 1840 as Eleazar in *La Juive*. He also performed in Toulouse, Belgium, and Italy (Pierre, 805).

89. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 208, 2: *Il sera une contrebasse excellente.*



FIGURE 10. Pierre-Louis-Philippe Dietsch (1808–1865). Photo by Lerotz. Paris, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

praise that he ever bestowed on a double bass student), enjoyed a relatively brilliant if controversial career: after joining the orchestra of the Théâtre-Italien, then that of the Opéra, he abandoned the double bass to become, on Rossini's recommendation, the Opéra's chorus director in 1840, then conductor of this same organization in 1860. His two-act opera *Le Vaisseau fantôme* (with a libretto by Paul Foucher and Henri Révoil based on a popular novel by Frederick Marryat) was performed at the Opéra on November 9, 1842, preceding, although reportedly not surpassing, Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843). But Dietsch will probably be remembered in music history primarily as the incompetent conductor of the infamous Paris première of *Tannhäuser* in 1861. Dietsch's conducting was criticized as weak, uncertain, and inartistic,⁹⁰ and he left the Opéra in 1863 after a disagreement with Verdi during a rehearsal of *Les vêpres siciliennes*. Parallel to his activity as a conductor, Dietsch was an accompanist at the church of St. Roch, *maître de chapelle* at St. Eustache from 1830 to 1849 and at the Madeleine thereafter, and a teacher of harmony and composition at Niedermeyer's School of Religious and Classical Music, where Gabriel Fauré was one of his pupils. His output consists mainly of sacred works. He was made *chevalier* of the Legion of Honor in 1856. It is paradoxical that in the eyes of today's bassists it is those who abandoned the instrument to pursue a conducting career who confer upon the double bass its greatest prestige. Anxious to see their instrument accorded the same distinction as that enjoyed by the violin, piano, and voice, bassists pride themselves on the premiere of Verdi's *Aida* under the baton of Giovanni Bottesini (1821–1889), or the stellar careers of Serge Koussevitzky (1874–1951) and Zubin Mehta. Dietsch appears to be another worthy candidate to add to this list.

The Program of Study

What was the program of these first examinations? While the minutes of the examinations indicate that the candidates were heard "in a piece selected by the professor and a written piece that they were required to perform at first sight,"⁹¹ the required repertoire is unknown before

90. Jeffrey Cooper, "Dietsch, (Pierre-)Louis(-Philippe)," in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 5:470–471.

91. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 249, 2a, f° 451: *Les Concurrents . . . ont été successivement entendus dans un morceau au choix du Professeur & dans un morceau manuscrit qu'ils ont été tenus d'exécuter à 1^{ère} vue.*

1843,⁹² and the oldest sight-reading exercise that has survived is one by an anonymous author for the examination of July 21, 1836, in the hand of Tourte, copyist of the conservatory, with violoncello accompaniment (fig. 11).⁹³ (Until 1898 the double bass exam was accompanied by a violoncello; after this date the sight-reading pieces have piano accompaniment.) This same piece is reproduced in 1836 in the double bass method by Durier, arranged for two double basses and attributed to Durante, alongside two other fugues by Durante including one for violoncello and double bass, a fugue by Hasse, a *Solfège du Conservatoire N° 173* for two double basses by Charles-Simon Catel (1773–1830), four such exercises by Cherubini adapted for violoncello and double bass,⁹⁴ and *Les Folies d'Espagne arrangés par Corelli* for violoncello and double bass. These were likely the pieces performed by the candidates between 1828 and 1836. By today's standards they are not demanding—the range of the double-bass part is from *G'* to *g* and the rhythm is never subdivided beyond half of the tactus (quarter notes in the case of a half-note tactus, for example)—but were ideal vehicles for demonstrating the “vigor and clarity” considered to be lacking in playing generally and which it was the conservatory's mission to cultivate.

What comprised the students' daily studies? The notes taken by Cherubini during the half-yearly examinations provide a clue to Chenié's instruction of novices: in December 1829, two “beginners are still playing scales.”⁹⁵ Other references are tantalizingly vague: on June 28, 1828, a student named Bagna played “a difficult piece.”⁹⁶ Was Chenié aware of the copies of Michel Corette's method⁹⁷ in the school's collection? Even if he knew about it, he must have considered it outmoded, and Fétis reported that an “elementary work for the instruction of the double bass was lacking.”⁹⁸ This was astutely realized both by

92. Pierre, 620, lists a *Concertino* by Labro used as a *morceau de concours* beginning in 1843; this is likely Charles Labro, *Concertino pour la Contre-Basse, composé pour le Concours de l'année 1839, offert à M^r Schaft, Professeur de la classe du Conservatoire* (Paris: Canaux, 1839).

93. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 198, 5.

94. Two are adaptations of exercises nos. 15 and 62 in *Solfèges pour servir à l'étude dans le conservatoire de musique*, part 2 (Paris, An X [i.e., 1802]), 56–57 and 168–171.

95. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 208, 1: *Commençans, ils ne sont qu'aux gammes.*

96. *Ibid.*, *il a joué un morceau difficile.*

97. Michel Corrette, *Méthode pour apprendre à jouer de la contrebasse à 3, à 4 et à 5 cordes* (Paris, 1781).

98. Fétis, “Publications Classiques,” 550: *Un ouvrage élémentaire, destiné à l'enseignement de la contrebasse, manquait à l'art musical.*

Violoncelle

C. Basse

Vivace.

FIGURE 11. Sight-reading exercise for the *concours* of 21 July 1836, copied by Tourte, copyist of the *Ecole royale de musique et déclamation*. Paris, Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 198, 5. Photo: G. Willms.

Jacques-Claude-Adolphe Miné (1796–1854), organist at the Saint-Roch church and Perne’s nephew,⁹⁹ who in 1827 published a method for the three-string double bass tuned in fifths,¹⁰⁰ and by the publisher Schott, who in 1828 released a French translation of the method by Wenceslas Hause (1764–1847),¹⁰¹ professor at the conservatory in Prague. Fétis praised this last work in the *Revue musicale*, but considered that “unfortunately [it] will not at first in France be as useful as it could be due to the notable difference in the set up of the double bass in Germany and the system of tuning used here for the same instrument.”¹⁰² Miné’s method would seem to be the most obvious choice for use at the conservatory, yet it appears that Hause’s more comprehensive one was employed as well, since by 1834 it was “arranged and edited for the French double bass” by Marié, the pupil of Chenié mentioned above.¹⁰³ Such a paradoxical situation implied two possible solutions for the French double bass method that national pride demanded: one applying Hause’s analysis and program of study to the three-string French instrument tuned in fifths, or a domestically-produced method for the four-string double bass which would eliminate the foreign stigma attached to a system elaborated in Germany. Fétis predicted that “if one of our artists has the courage to set up a double bass according to Mr. Hause’s system, I have no doubt that he will be imitated by his colleagues, and especially by the young persons who have no established system.”¹⁰⁴ Charles-Amand Durier would produce a three-string method patterned after Hause’s in

99. Fétis, *Biographie universelle des musiciens*, 2nd ed., 6:148.

100. Adolphe Miné, *Méthode de contre-basse*, Op. 25 (Paris: A. Meissonier, [1827]). *La Revue musicale* 1 (February–July 1827): 531 announces its release, which allows it to be dated. That Miné must have consulted with his double bassist uncle in elaborating this method is evident in the resemblance of certain passages in the text to Perne’s article in *La Revue musicale*.

101. Wenceslas Hause, *Méthode complète de contrebasse* (Paris: Les fils de B. Schott, [1828]).

102. Fétis, “Publications Classiques,” 550: *Malheureusement son ouvrage n’aura pas d’abord en France toute l’utilité dont il est susceptible, à cause des différences notables qu’il y a entre la manière de monter la contrebasse en Allemagne, et le système qu’on suit parmi nous pour l’accord du même instrument.*

103. *Arrangée et chiffrée pour la Contrebasse Française*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Vm⁸ f.8. Since Marié is cited therein as *Artiste de l’Acad^{mie} Roy^{le} de Musique* (the Opéra), this arrangement must date between 1831 and 1834.

104. Fétis, “Publications Classiques,” 550: *si l’un de nos artistes a le courage de se faire monter une contrebasse d’après le système de M. Hause, je ne doute point qu’il ne soit imité par ses confrères, et surtout par les jeunes gens qui n’ont pas de système arrêté.*

1836,¹⁰⁵ while Achille-Henry-Victor Gouffé (1804–1874) would follow Fétis's advice and publish, in 1839, the first French four-string tutor since Corrette's.¹⁰⁶ If the first "battle" was over the bow, the next confrontation in France would be between these two systems of tuning.

The Issue of Tuning Persists

Towards the end of 1827, Perne wrote that "musical performance has taken giant steps during the last half century. Violoncello and double bass parts are almost as difficult to perform as violoncello concertos from the first half of the last century. It is therefore necessary to take

105. Charles-Amand Durier, *Méthode complète de contrebasse* (Paris: J. Meissonnier, 1836).

106. Achille Gouffé, *Traité sur la Contre-Basse à quatre cordes* (Paris: Adolphe Catelin, 1839). This method, the content of which is mostly plagiarized from Hause's, was reprinted several times, but bearing the copyright date of 1839 each time. The dates of the subsequent editions can be deduced from the details on the title page. The second part of the method, published by Richault—who must have acquired the rights after Catelin went bankrupt in 1843—is dedicated to Halévy (see note 26), and therefore must be dated after 1841. The revised and expanded version of the first part, published by Richault and dedicated *à la mémoire du célèbre Dragonetti*, must date from after Dragonetti's death in 1846, but before 1848, since Gouffé's titles include *Membre . . . de la Musique du Roi*. A final version of both parts, which inverts the title pages, was published by Richault in 1862 ("Nouvelles," *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* 29/50 [14 December 1862]: 406). The most recent reprinting was by Costallat, which acquired Richault's catalogue on September 1, 1903. Costallat published in separate collections many of the études and exercises contained in both parts of the method: Gérard Billaudot, which in turn acquired Costallat's catalogue, published a new edition by Jean-Marc Rollez of the *45 Etudes* in 1982. Contrary to what Duane Rosengard has asserted ("Centerfold: F. Plumerel, 1843," *International Society of Bassists* 15/3 [1989]: 32), Gouffé was never a professor at the conservatory, although he was a candidate for the post, along with Durier and Labro, in November 1853 (Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 194, 2, f° 201–202). The source of the error appears to be an inscription on the rib of an 1841 instrument by August Bernardel, senior: *Pour M. Ach. Gouffé, Professeur du Conservatoire Royale [sic], par August Bernardel, père, 1841* (David Walter, "From Dégas to Dockside," *Double Bassist* 5 [Spring 1998]: 27). Bernardel seems to have misinterpreted Gouffé's title *Artiste de l'Académie Royale de Musique*, which in this period denotes the Opéra. Gouffé joined the orchestra of the Opéra on July 1, 1837, succeeding Guillion as its principal from 1856 to 1872 (Paris, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, PE 3, PE 6). He was admitted to the Société des Concerts on November 8, 1842, serving as principal from 1856 to 1864 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, D 17331 [1]). From 1836 to 1873, Gouffé hosted private chamber music concerts at his home once per week during the winter months, culminating in an annual public concert ("Concerts et auditions musicales," *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* [30 March 1873]: 101; Joël-Marie Fauquet, *Les sociétés de musique de chambre à Paris de la Restauration à 1870* [Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1986], 220–221).

steps to produce instrumentalists who can perform the music of our time."¹⁰⁷ The operas of Rossini, for example, caused an uprising of provincial musicians among whom the double bassists were "the most irritated." Obligated "to shake and whip his bow like a second violinist in a dance band, or like a cook whipping eggs for a soufflée," one of them cried, "I was engaged to play the double bass, not to arpeggiate on the violin" and "complained out loud while accompanying the duo of *The Barber [of Seville]*."¹⁰⁸ Confronted with the double bass parts in contemporary music, "having to contend against the difficulties of a disadvantageous mode of tuning their instrument, and of an ill-constructed bow," the majority of French players, according to Fétis, "do nothing more than exactly fulfil their duty . . . and are content with executing the leading notes of the passages of the score before them."¹⁰⁹ Miné affirmed Fétis's contention by attempting to confer upon the practice the legitimacy of a national school: "when, in a fast tempo, there are many notes to play, it is the responsibility of the double bassist to pick out those notes which are appropriate to the harmony, the instrument requiring too much strength to be able to perform all the notes with liveliness; even if it were possible, the result would often be only a confusion of sounds sometimes disagreeable to the ear."¹¹⁰

107. Perne, 495: *L'exécution musicale a marché à pas de géant depuis un demi siècle. Les parties de violoncelle et de contrebasse sont presque aussi difficiles à exécuter que les concertos de basse de la première moitié du siècle dernier. Il faut donc prendre les moyens de former les instrumentistes qui puissent exécuter la musique de nos jours.* Note that by "les concertos de basse" Perne unquestionably means violoncello concertos; the terms "violoncelle" and "basse" were used interchangeably in France at this time, whereas the double bass was without exception called "contre-basse"; cf. Gelinek's remarks quoted above at note 14.

108. X.X.X. [François-Henri-Joseph Blaze, known as Castil-Blaze], "Chronique musicale. Orchestres des Théâtres des départemens," *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, October 11, 1827, 4: *le contre-bassiste est obligé d'agiter et de faire tremousser son archet comme un second violon de bastringue, ou comme une cuisinière qui fait mousser des œufs pour une omelette soufflée. . . . Je me suis engagé pour jouer de la contre-basse et non pour arpéger sur le violon. . . . les contrebassistes sont les plus irrités. J'en ai entendu un qui faisait ses plaintes tout haut en accompagnant le duo du Barbier.*

109. See above, note 64.

110. Miné, 3: . . . *lorsqu'il y a beaucoup de notes à faire dans les mouvemens vifs, c'est à l'intelligence de celui qui tient la Contre-basse à en extraire les notes qui frappent juste dans l'accord, l'instrument exigeant trop de force pour qu'on puisse faire toutes les notes avec vivacité, et quand même on pourrait les faire, il n'en résulterait souvent qu'une confusion de sons quelquefois désagréable à l'oreille.* This was echoed nine years later by Durier (p. 1): "In modern works are encountered double bass parts that present great difficulties often impossible to perform, therefore one must seek to preserve the principal intentions of the author, and content oneself with supporting the violoncello by playing the principal note of the harmony." (*Dans les ouvrages modernes on rencontre des parties de Contrebasse dont l'exécution présente de grandes difficultés souvent impossibles à exécuter, alors on doit*

Fétis wrote from London in 1829 that the double bassists of the Philharmonic Society, contrary to their French counterparts, “articulate with a precision, a minuteness, a delicacy, and a power, to which in Paris we are strangers . . . these artists allow every thing to be heard, mark distinctly every part of their bowing, as well in legato as in detached passages; preserve all the shades of expression; strike the note with unerring precision, and seem to use no greater effort than if they were playing the violin or viola. There can be no doubt but that these advantages are derived from tuning the double bass by fourths, and from the admirable manner of employing the bow introduced into England by the school of Dragonetti.”¹¹¹ While Dragonetti’s bow had been adopted at the conservatory, the tuning in fourths had not, and the retention of the tuning in fifths was proving a handicap, as Fétis demonstrated in the following example:

In the brilliant performance of Beethoven’s C minor symphony, which has done so much credit to the orchestra of the concerts of the Royal School of Music, it has always been necessary to slow slightly the trio of the minuet due to the double bass passage which, in the French system, occasions numerous displacements of the hand which require time to be executed. With the double bass tuned as Mr. Hause indicates, these displacements are infinitely fewer, such that performance is easier, and the same tempo can be maintained in the minuet or scherzo and in the trio.¹¹²

The conductor François-Antoine Habeneck (1781–1849) would eventually cut the double basses from the passage in question in performances by the Société des Concerts, prompting Berlioz’s sarcastic “*leçon à Beethoven . . .*” remark.¹¹³ If precise information concerning the tuning

chercher à conserver les principales intention de l’auteur, et se contenter de seconder seulement le Violoncelle en jouant la principale note de l’accord.)

111. Fétis, “State of music in London . . . On the Philharmonic Society,” 216.

112. Fétis, “Publications Classiques,” 550–551: *Dans l’exécution si brillante de la symphonie en ut mineur de Beethoven, qui a fait tant d’honneur à l’orchestre des concerts de l’Ecole royale de Musique, on a toujours été obligé de ralentir un peu le trio du menuet à cause du trait des contrebasses qui, dans le système français, occasionne de nombreux déplacements de la main qu’il faut avoir le temps d’exécuter. Avec la contrebasse accordée comme l’indique M. Hause, ces déplacements sont infiniment moins multipliés, en sorte que l’exécution est plus facile, et que l’on peut conserver le même mouvement dans le menuet ou scherzo et dans le trio.*

113. “For twenty years the Symphony in C minor has been performed at the Conservatory, and never has Habeneck let the double basses play at the beginning of the scherzo. He finds that they don’t produce a good effect. . . . A lesson for Beethoven. . . .” (*Depuis vingt ans on exécute au Conservatoire la symphonie en ut mineur, et jamais Habeneck n’a voulu, au début du scherzo, laisser jouer les contrebasses. Il trouve qu’elles n’y produisent pas un bon effet. . . . Leçon à Beethoven. . . .*) Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 109.

of the four-string double bass seemed to be lacking at the time that the decision was made to retain the tuning in fifths, the method by Hause left no doubt as to the solution to the problem: four strings tuned E'-A'-D-G.

The Institution of the Four-String Double Bass

For historians seeking information on the institution of the four-string double bass at the conservatory, the method by Nicolas-Charles Labro (1810-1882)—principal of the Opéra-Comique, member of the Société des Concerts, *répétiteur* of the double bass class beginning October 1, 1837,¹¹⁴ and professor at the conservatory from 1853 until his death—has often proved to be their only source. Admitted to the double bass class on November 4, 1831, graduating with a first prize in 1835, Labro experienced the changeover first-hand as a student. According to Labro, “it was not until 1832, after the death of Mr. Chenié, first and last professor of the three-string double bass tuned in fifths, that Mr. Cherubini, Director of the Conservatory, and Mr. Habeneck, Inspector General of Studies, decided that thenceforth in the school, only the four-string double bass tuned in fourths would be taught.”¹¹⁵ This was likely the version of events that the students heard. An examination of the *Archives Nationales* reveals, however, that the process was more complicated than Labro could have known.

On May 6, 1832, Chenié died of dropsy at the age of 59. On May 8, Cherubini wrote to the new *Commission de surveillance près le Conservatoire de Musique et de l'Académie royale de Musique*, responsible for supervising the rechristened *Conservatoire*, to report the death of this “excellent musician and good professor,”¹¹⁶ proposing that Lamy, principal of the Opéra and runner-up to the post in 1827, be appointed as his successor beginning on June 1. Cherubini chose this date so that the salary for the month of May could be donated to Chenié’s widow, who could not benefit from a pension. The Commission replied on May 17 that before putting Lamy’s name forward to the Minister of Commerce and Public

114. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 194, 2, f° 201-202.

115. Labro, 4: *C'est seulement en 1832, après la mort de Monsieur Chénier, premier et dernier professeur de la Contre-Basse à trois cordes accordées par Quintes LA, RE, SOL que Monsieur Cherubini Directeur du Conservatoire de Musique et Monsieur Habeneck inspecteur général des Etudes décidèrent que désormais dans l'école, on n'enseignerait plus que la Contre-Basse à quatre cordes, accordées par Quartes, SOL, RE, LA, MI.*

116. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 3, 5, f° 250: *C'était un excellent musicien & un bon Professeur. . . .*

Works, it wanted Cherubini to summon the Teaching Committee “to deliberate the possibility of introducing the study of the four-string double bass at the Conservatory and whether Mr. Lamy is the artist most capable of introducing this improvement.”¹¹⁷ Meeting on May 23, the committee—including Ferdinando Paër, professor of composition and *directeur compositeur de la musique particulière du Roi*; François-Antoine Habeneck, professor of violin who, as conductor of the Opéra and founder of the Société des Concerts, introduced Beethoven’s music to France; the piano professor Jean-Louis Adam; Pierre Baillot, professor of violin and leader of the Chapel Royal; and Gustave Vogt, professor of oboe and first oboist of the Société des Concerts, the Opéra, and the Chapel Royal—unanimously supported Cherubini’s proposal that “the study of the four-string double bass *tuned in fourths beginning from the low E’* must be adopted at the Conservatory in preference to the other,” that Lamy “is entirely suitable to perform the duties of Professor” and that “a better choice could not be made.”¹¹⁸ Cherubini transmitted the minutes of this meeting to the Commission the following day, informing it that three months before he had already undertaken the institution of the four-string double bass at the Conservatory, “but Mr. Chenié having fallen sick, this project could not be put into operation.”¹¹⁹ Had he lived longer, Chenié would not have merited the distinction of “first and last professor of the three-string double bass tuned in fifths.” On June 4, the Minister announced Lamy’s appointment, and granted an aid of 83 francs to Chenié’s widow.¹²⁰

The loss of their professor could not have been without an effect on the students, for Fétis reported that “there was some indulgence in the

117. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 1, 6b, Rég. 2–B f° 254 N° 96: *Avant d’adresser cette proposition à M. le Ministre du Commerce et des Travaux publics, la Commission désire, Monsieur le Directeur, que vous convoquiez le Comité d’enseignement du Conservatoire, afin qu’il délibère sur la question de savoir s’il n’y a pas lieu d’introduire au Conservatoire l’étude de la Contre-basse à quatre cordes, et si le S’ Lamy est l’artiste le plus capable d’introduire cette amélioration.*

118. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 193, 3c, f° 11: *M. le Président . . . pense que l’étude de la Contrebasse à 4 cordes & montée en quarte en partant du mi grave, doit être adoptée au Conservatoire de préférence à l’autre. Il pense, en outre, que le S’ Lamy est tout à fait propre à remplir les fonctions de Professeur pour l’enseignement de la contrebasse à 4 cordes & qu’un meilleur choix ne peut être fait. Le comité partage unanimement sur ces 2 questions l’avis de M. le Président.*

119. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 3, 5, f° 254, *Je dois vous dire, Mess. que je m’étais déjà occupé, il y a 3 mois, de faire adopter au Conservatoire l’étude de la contrebasse à 4 cordes; mais que M. Chenié étant tombé malade, ce projet n’a pu être mis à l’exécution.*

120. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 10, f° 124.

judgment of the jury towards the double bass examination: in our opinion there were no grounds for awarding a first prize; nevertheless one was accorded to Mr. Chainé. The second was shared by Messrs. Loisel and Hémet.”¹²¹ Alexis-Victor Chainé (1806–1895) went on to the orchestra of the Théâtre-Italien, Jean-Louis-Camille Hémet (1808–1868) joined that of the Théâtre des Variétés, while Denis-Charlemagne Loisel (1814–?), also cited as an organist, played in the orchestra of the Cirque and the Concert Musard.¹²²

Lamy seems to have been singularly unlucky, for not only did he lose out to Chenié in the initial competition for the professorship, when he finally did obtain the job, he was hardly four months into it when cholera claimed him, on September 23. Cherubini announced the news to the Commission on September 26, urging them to appoint rapidly either Gelinek or Louis-François Chapt,¹²³ principal of the Opéra (but violoncellist in the Société des Concerts before assuming Chenié’s post on January 25, 1833¹²⁴), as professor “so that the students are not left long without lessons.”¹²⁵ Probably the last thing anyone expected was that the appointment of a simple double bass professor would provoke an administrative power struggle which some of the most influential musical figures in Europe would be called to mediate. Yet this is effectively what happened.

The Commission replied, on October 4, that before putting forward the name of either musician, it wanted Cherubini to convene the Teaching Committee to submit the following questions for its examination:

1. Is the teaching of the double bass at the Conservatory currently keeping up with the progress in the study and practice of this instrument in other countries?

2. Are there artists in France capable of introducing at the Conservatory the improvements to which the double bass is susceptible? And if one

121. “Concours du conservatoire de musique,” *Revue musicale* 12 (February 1832–January 1833): 221: *Il y a eu quelque indulgence dans le jugement du jury à l’égard du concours de contrebasse: selon nous, il n’y avait pas lieu de décerner de premier prix; néanmoins il en a été accordé un à M. Chainé. Le second a été partagé entre MM. Loisel et Hémet.*

122. Pierre, 717, 773, 800.

123. Born in Bourg (Ain) on September 30, 1780, died in Chartres on December 2, 1856; his last name was in fact Chapt (Pierre, 439).

124. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, D 17331 (4).

125. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 3, 5, f° 280: *Sa place étant vacante, il est par conséquent nécessaire qu’il soit remplacé à compter du 1^{er} Octobre prochain, afin que les Elèves de la classe dont il était Professeur ne restent pas longtemps sans leçons.*

can expect this improvement from Messrs. Chaft and Gelinek, which one of the two is the more skilled?

3. Would it not be useful to fill provisionally Mr. Lamy's place by a temporary or adjunct professor, and to send to England, to take lessons with the famous Dragonetti, one of the best graduates of the Conservatory, who would be chosen by the Teaching Committee after audition?

Once you have enclosed with your letter of nomination, the minutes of the deliberation of these questions by the Teaching Committee, the Commission will hasten, Mr. Director, to request a decision by the Minister for Commerce and Public Works.¹²⁶

Irritated by the delay and the breach of his authority—under the Bourbons he had dealt directly with the Minister—Cherubini shot back the following day that the Teaching Committee, convened at the behest of the Commission just four months earlier, had decided that the four-string instrument was to be adopted in preference to the other one, and that Dragonetti,

to whom you propose sending a student of the Conservatory to take lessons from this famous artist, plays the three-string double bass. It would thus be necessary, on the assumption that this project could take place, which seems to me impossible, to forego the continuation of the change for the double bass newly adopted by the Teaching Committee. Moreover, if Mr. Dragonetti consented to teach, which is improbable considering his advanced age,¹²⁷ would he not expect a high salary for ministering to a student of the Conservatory whose education in a way would have to be started over, because of the difference between Mr. Dragonetti's method and that taught in Paris? There would be, furthermore, the costs of travel and lodging to pay for the student, which would be considerable, and I do not think that there are funds allocated for this purpose. On the other hand, sirs, I am well persuaded that the Teaching Committee would share completely my opinion of the capacity of Messrs. *Chaft* and *Gelinek*, the two

126. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 1, 6b, Rég: 2.B. f° 283 N° 186:

1° *L'enseignement de la Contrebasse au Conservatoire est-il actuellement en rapport avec les progrès apportés à l'étude et à la pratique de cet instrument dans d'autres pays?*

2° *Existe-t-il en France des artistes capables d'introduire au Conservatoire les perfectionnements dont l'enseignement de la Contrebasse est susceptible? Et si l'on peut attendre cette amélioration de MM. Chaft et Gelinek, lequel des deux est le plus habile?*

3° *Ne serait-il pas utile de faire remplir provisoirement la place de M. Lamy par un Professeur temporaire ou par un professeur-adjoint, et d'envoyer en Angleterre, pour prendre des leçons du célèbre Dragonetti, un des meilleurs Elèves Lauréats du Conservatoire, lequel serait choisi par le Comité d'Enseignement, après Concours?*

Lorsque vous aurez joint à votre lettre de proposition le procès-verbal de la délibération du Comité d'Enseignement sur ces questions, la Commission s'empressera, Monsieur le Directeur, de solliciter une décision de M. le Ministre du Commerce et des travaux publics.

127. Dragonetti was 69 years old.

most capable double bassists in the capital, and that it would express, like me, the wish that one of them be summoned to replace Mr. Lamy. Since its organization, the double bass class has always been one of the most flourishing of the Conservatory, and the first-prize winners who graduate from it each year give proof of the progress in this area of teaching.

I shall add, concerning the dispatching of a student of the Conservatory to London, that the French artists would see in this decision by the authorities an act of humiliation for them, while on the contrary they [i.e., the authorities] should have only benevolent intentions towards them.

I thus dare to hope that the Commission will take into consideration the observations that I have just had the honor to expound, and will solicit from the minister the prompt nomination of one of the candidates to the duties of double bass Professor.¹²⁸

If Cherubini's defense of the interests of the French players seems exaggerated coming from a foreigner, it might be that, recalling Plantade's attack five years earlier, he was sensitive to the accusations of cronyism that could be prompted by such a collaboration with another Italian. This is already evident in the letter he wrote to Laroche foucauld cited above concerning Anglois. The Commission responded on October 7 that

the double bass class at the Conservatory is important enough for the Commission to persist in desiring a new deliberation by the Teaching

128. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 3, 5, f° 284–285: *M. Dragonetti, Mess. près duquel vous proposez d'envoyer un Elève du Conservatoire pour prendre des leçons de ce célèbre artiste joue de la contrebasse à 3 cordes. Il faudrait donc, dans l'hypothèse où l'exécution de ce projet peut s'effectuer, ce qui me semble impossible, renoncer à la continuation du changement nouvellement adopté pour la contrebasse par le comité d'Enseignement. D'ailleurs, M. Dragonetti, s'il consentait à professer, ce qui est peu probable, vu son âge avancé, n'élèverait-il pas de fortes prétentions pour les soins qu'il donnerait à un élève du Conservatoire dont l'éducation serait en quelque sorte toute à recommencer, à cause de la différence qui existe entre la méthode de Mr. Dragonetti & celle enseignée à Paris? Il y aurait, en outre, à payer les frais de voyage & de séjour à Londres de l'Elève, qui seraient considérables, & je ne pense pas qu'il y ait des fonds d'affectés pour cet objet.—D'un autre côté, Mess. je suis bien persuadé que le comité d'Enseignement partagerait entièrement mon avis sur la capacité de M.M. Chast & Gelineck, les deux plus habiles contrebassistes de la Capitale: & qu'il émettrait, comme moi, le désir que l'un d'eux soit appelé à remplacer M. Lamy. La classe de Contrebasse, depuis son organisation, a toujours été l'une des plus florissantes du Conservatoire & les 1^{ers} Prix qui en sortent chaque année prouvent en faveur des progrès dans cette partie de l'enseignement.*

J'ajouterai, en ce qui concerne l'envoi à Londres d'un Elève du Conservatoire que les artistes français verraient dans cette détermination de l'autorité un acte d'humiliation pour eux, et elle ne peut avoir à leur égard que de bienveillantes intentions.

Jose donc espérer que la Commission voudra bien prendre en considération les observations que je viens d'avoir l'honneur de lui exposer & qu'elle sollicitera de la part du ministre la prompt nomination de l'un des candidats aux fonctions de Professeur de contrebasse.

Committee of the questions that it had the honor of addressing to you. It has not forgotten that around six months ago, the Committee already gave its opinion on the utility of the introduction of the four-string double bass at the Conservatory. By a new deliberation we shall know whether the trial of this presumed amelioration has been started in a satisfactory manner.

It thinks, moreover, that the Committee can summon Messrs. Chaft and Gelinek, interrogate them about their method, and, after hearing them, propose a choice that will be all the more certain since it will not have been made without a preliminary comparison of the capacity of each candidate.

Concerning the question about dispatching a graduate student to the famous Dragonetti, the Commission is of the view that it is worth the trouble of being discussed, despite your objections. This artist plays the three-string bass? Without doubt, his entire merit does not consist solely in the use of only three strings. The education of a graduate student, who also does not play the four-string double bass, would not have to be started over, but perfected, and, on his return, the effects of the four-string instrument could be compared and the better one selected definitively. But Dragonetti is old and perhaps would not decide to teach? Age is not an issue in this; and before sending him a student, it would not be difficult to inquire if he gives or would like to give lessons. Regarding the costs of travel and lodging in London, if the measure is judged useful, our duty is to propose it, without concern for the expenditure. Finally the Commission does not think that the French artists would see with displeasure an improvement in their art for the reason that it would come from a foreigner. With this spirit of nationality, we would come to ban the scores of Rossini and many other great artists.¹²⁹

Otherwise, Mr. Director, the Commission is not so attached to this idea that it is not ready to abandon it as soon as the deliberation by the Teaching Committee will support your observations which certainly have their importance. At the least it will not have neglected anything that could enlighten both itself and the Minister. It desires especially that the Committee reach a decision between Messrs. Chaft and Gelinek, after examination. The necessity of a prompt nomination must not result in running the risk of choosing the less skilled one. A tutor can perform the opening of the class; and even if it had to begin only a few days later, this would still be better than losing it through one of these errors against which public opinion protests.¹³⁰

129. Such as Cherubini himself, as it would be insinuated by the Commission.

130. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 1, 6b, Rég: 2-B f° 285 N° 189: *La classe de contrebasse au Conservatoire est assez importante pour que la Commission persiste à désirer une nouvelle délibération du Comité d'Enseignement sur les questions qu'elle a eu l'honneur de vous adresser. Elle n'a pas oublié qu'il y a environ six mois, le Comité a déjà émis son avis sur l'utilité de l'introduction de la contrebasse à quatre cordes au Conservatoire. Par la nouvelle délibération on saura si l'essai de cette amélioration présumée a été commencé d'une manière satisfaisante.*

Implied at the end of this letter is that the exhortations by Fétis in the pages of the *Revue musicale* were reaching the ears of the Commission, which seemed unusually well-informed about the double bass considering that its members were not musicians: the Duke of Choiseul, a *Pair de France*; the *Conseiller-d'Etat* and *Député* Count Auguste-Hilarion Kératry;¹³¹ Edmond Blanc, *Maître des requêtes* and *Secrétaire-général* of Commerce and Public Works; Armand Bertin, *Machiniste en chef* of the *Théâtre Royal Italien, Anglais et Allemand*; and Fauchon-D'Henneville, *Chef du matériel* of the conservatory. What seems more likely is that Fétis, fearing for the future of the Dragonetti bow, infiltrated the Commission, dictating through a sympathetic Fauchon-D'Henneville the refutation of Cherubini's argument. There is already an ominous tone to his article on the *concours* of 1832:

Elle pense, en outre, que le Comité peut appeler MM. Chast et Gelineck, les interroger sur leur méthode, et, après les avoir entendus, proposer un choix, qui sera d'autant plus sûr, qu'on ne l'aura pas fait sans une comparaison préalable de la capacité de chaque candidat.

Quant à la question relative à l'envoi d'un Elève Lauréat auprès du célèbre Dragonetti, la Commission est d'avis qu'elle vaut la peine d'être discutée, malgré vos objections. Cet artiste joue de la contrebasse à 3 cordes? Ce n'est sans doute pas dans l'emploi de 3 cordes seulement que consiste tout son mérite. L'éducation d'un Elève-Lauréat, qui ne joue pas non plus de la contrebasse à 4 cordes, ne serait point à recommencer, mais à perfectionner, et, à son retour, on pourrait comparer les effets de l'instrument à 4 cordes, et choisir définitivement le meilleur. Mais Dragonetti est vieux et ne déciderait peut-être pas à professer? L'âge n'y fait rien; et avant de lui envoyer un Elève, il ne serait pas difficile de s'informer s'il donne ou voudrait donner des leçons. Quant aux frais de voyage et de séjour à Londres, si la mesure est jugée utile, notre devoir est de la proposer, sans prendre souci de la dépense. Enfin la Commission ne pense pas que les artistes français puissent voir avec déplaisir une amélioration dans leur art par la raison qu'elle viendrait d'un étranger. Avec cet esprit de nationalité, on en viendrait à proscrire les partitions de Rossini et de beaucoup d'autres grands artistes.

Au reste, Monsieur le Directeur, la Commission ne tient pas tellement à cette idée, qu'elle ne soit prête à l'abandonner dès que la délibération du Comité d'Enseignement viendra à l'appui de vos observations qui ont certainement leur importance. Elle n'aura du moins rien négligé pour s'éclairer et éclairer le Ministre. Elle désire surtout que le Comité se prononce entre MM. Chast et Gelineck, après examen. La nécessité d'une prompt nomination ne doit pas faire que l'on s'expose à choisir le moins habile. Un répétiteur peut faire l'ouverture de la classe; et dût-elle ne commencer que quelques jours plus tard, cela vaudrait encore mieux que de la perdre par une de ces erreurs contre lesquelles proteste l'opinion publique.

131. Kératry was savagely caricatured by the artist Honoré Daumier (1808–1879): see the catalogue of the exhibition *Daumier* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada; Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 1999), 126–128. Victor Hugo reported in 1847 that Alexandre Dumas had named one of his three pet monkeys “Kératry” (Victor Hugo, ed. Hubert Juin, *Choses vues, 1830–1848* [Paris: Gallimard, 1972], 448).

There is much to be done to bring the double bass to a satisfactory state among us. We have already spoken several times about the faults of the tuning of the French double bass, and those in the handling of the bow that the French double-bassists stubbornly insist on retaining. It appears that it has finally been decided to abandon the tuning in fifths to adopt one in fourths by means of four strings substituted for the existing three. This will be something; but this will not be all. The instrument has shortcomings which must be corrected, in order to put it more in relation with the physical strength of its players. The necessity of the improvement of which we want to speak is understood by several artists; all we have left is our wishes for its prompt realization.¹³²

The arguments against a conspiracy are not helped by the gap in the Commission's records for precisely this month,¹³³ although the disappearance of documents could be attributed to a number of causes.

On October 20 the Teaching Committee—composed of Cherubini, Habeneck, Paër, Lesueur, Baillot, Vogt, the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer, and Adolphe Nourrit, voice professor and the Opéra's principal tenor—convened to review the questions raised by the Commission. The minutes of this meeting are revealing of contemporary opinion of both French and foreign double bass players, the recruitment process at the conservatory, and Dragonetti's authority and the extent of his fame.

To the first question posed by the commission, it was replied that the progress of double bass players in France was not in keeping with that obtained in other countries. A member pointed out on this occasion that he had nowhere heard better double bassists than in London, and that he is inclined to attribute this superiority to the improvements introduced by Dragonetti.

Of the second question, the committee thinks that France possesses artists capable of introducing those improvements of which the necessity is recognized. Before pronouncing on this part of the question relative to the merit of the two proposed candidates, it decided that they would be heard and examined immediately.

132. "Concours du conservatoire de musique," *Revue musicale* 12 (February 1832–January 1833): 221: *Il y a beaucoup à faire pour amener la contrebasse à un état satisfaisant parmi nous. Nous avons déjà parlé plusieurs fois des défauts de l'accord de la contrebasse française, et de ceux du maniement d'archet que les contrebassistes français s'obstinent à conserver. Il paraît qu'on s'est enfin déterminé à quitter l'accord par quintes pour adopter celui de quarts au moyen de quatre cordes substituées aux trois existantes. Ce sera quelque chose; mais ce ne sera pas tout. L'instrument a des défauts qu'il faudra corriger, afin de le mettre plus en rapport avec la force physique des exécutants. La nécessité du perfectionnement dont nous voulons parler est comprise par plusieurs artistes; il ne nous reste que des vœux à faire pour sa prompte réalisation.*

133. Archives Nationales, F²¹ 1282.

Summoned first, Mr. *Gelinek* declared that for the last two years he has ceased to devote himself to playing the double bass, a circumstance that was unknown to the members of the committee and the director who, presenting this artist as a candidate, based his decision on his past history as a former double bass of the Opéra and the Chapel Royal, and also on his having obtained six votes from the board of directors during the audition on *May 15, 1827*. Mr. *Gelinek* added that for the reason mentioned above, he could not perform at first sight the piece selected for the audition, knowing the theory better than the practice of this instrument, and believing moreover that the former knowledge makes a better professor than the latter. This opinion was not shared by the committee who judged that the declaration by Mr. *Gelinek* took him out of the running.

Mr. *Chaft* was summoned in turn. He performed without hesitation and at first sight the piece designated for the audition. The committee was very satisfied with this performance, and, after questioning Mr. *Chaft* who accepted to teach the four-string double bass, unanimously designated this artist, by secret ballot, for selection by the Commission, pointing out that it was urgent to replace Mr. *Lamy* immediately.

A discussion was raised over the solution to the third question. One member thought that any idea for improvement must be welcomed, and that it would be all the more useful to send a graduate of the Conservatory to London to study the method of the famous *Dragonetti* since it could not fail to excite emulation among the students. The committee went along with this opinion, and urged Mr. *Cherubini* to inquire of *Dragonetti* if he would be disposed to welcome the proposal made by the Commission, attending to the student who would be sent to him. It believes that a request of this nature, transmitted by the intermediary of a man of European reputation, could not fail to be accepted by the foreign artist whose method is sought for adoption in France.¹³⁴

134. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 193, 3c, f° 44-46:

Sur la première question posée par la commission, il a été répondu que les Progrès des Contrebassistes en France n'étaient pas en rapport avec ceux obtenus dans d'autres pays. Un membre fait observer à cette occasion qu'il n'a entendu nulle part de meilleurs contrebassistes qu'à Londres, & qu'il est disposé à attribuer cette supériorité aux améliorations introduites par Dragonetti.

Sur la seconde question, le comité pense que la France possède des artistes capables d'introduire les Perfectionnemens dont la nécessité est reconnue. Avant de se prononcer sur la partie de cette question relative au mérite des deux candidats proposés, il décide qu'ils seront immédiatement entendus & examinés.

M. Gelinek appelé le premier déclare que depuis 2 ans il a cessé de se livrer à la pratique de la contrebasse, circonstance qui était ignorée de M.M. les Membres du comité & du Directeur qui, en présentant cet artiste comme candidat, avait été déterminé par ses antécédens comme ancienne contrebasse de l'opéra & de la chapelle, & aussi comme ayant obtenu 6 voix du conseil d'administration, lors du concours du 15 mai 1827.—M. Gelinek ajoute que par le motif spécifié plus haut, il ne pourrait exécuter à la 1^{ère} vue le morceau choisi pour le concours, connaissant mieux la théorie que la pratique de cet instrument, et pensant d'ailleurs que la première de ces connaissances constituait bien plus un bon Professeur que la seconde. Cette opinion n'a pas été partagée par le comité qui a jugé que la déclaration de M. Gelinek le plaçait hors de concours.

The members obviously sought to placate the wounded pride of the director by this last bit of flattery. Cherubini transmitted the minutes to the Commission on October 23, tersely requesting that it submit the proposal to the Minister for approval.¹³⁵ The Commission took its time responding, finally transmitting to Cherubini the decree appointing Chافت five days after its proclamation on November 15.¹³⁶ Cherubini, considering the case closed, never bothered to write to Dragonetti, who might well have been receptive to such a proposal. It is astonishing to contemplate that had Cherubini not resisted the idea, the influence of Dragonetti might have been as direct and far-reaching on double bass playing in France as it was in England. Direct, because Dragonetti would have instructed the future professor himself, which was not the case with Chenié; far-reaching, because of the position of influence enjoyed by the professor of the conservatory. As the instruction at the conservatory was without equal in France, its graduates, playing on a Dragonetti bow, would inevitably have caused this to supplant the French model as more and more of them entered the major orchestras—and when one examines the rosters of the Opéra orchestra, for example, the new players are consistently graduates of the conservatory, even when the professor was not the principal of that ensemble.¹³⁷ In theory, only graduates of the conservatory were accepted into the ranks of the Société des Concerts, considered to be Europe's finest orchestra. The professor, regardless of his schooling, was therefore in a position to have a major impact on double bass technique in France.

If the Dragonetti bow never really took hold, it is probably because neither Chenié, Lamy, nor Chافت had direct contact with Dragonetti. In

M. *Schaft* est appelé à son tour. Il exécute sans hésitation & à 1^{re} vue le morceau indiqué pour le concours. Le comité a été très satisfait de cette exécution, &, après avoir interrogé M. *Schaft* qui a pris l'engagement d'enseigner la contrebasse à 4 cordes, désigne unanimement cet artiste, par la voie d'un scrutin secret, au choix de la Commission, en faisant remarquer qu'il était urgent de pourvoir immédiatement au remplacement de M. Lamy.

Une discussion s'élève sur la solution de la 3^e question. Un membre pense que toute idée d'amélioration doit être accueillie, & qu'il serait d'autant plus utile d'envoyer à Londres un Elève lauréat du Conservatoire pour étudier la méthode du célèbre Dragonetti, que ce moyen ne pourrait qu'exciter l'émulation parmi les Elèves. Le comité se range à cette opinion, & prie M. Cherubini de s'informer auprès de Dragonetti s'il serait disposé à accueillir la proposition qui a été faite par la Commission, en donnant ses soins à l'Elève du Conservatoire qui lui serait adressé. Il pense qu'une demande de cette nature transmise par l'intermédiaire d'un homme dont la réputation est Européenne, ne peut manquer d'être admise par l'artiste étranger dont on désire naturaliser la méthode en France.

135. Archives Nationales, Aj³⁷ 3, 5, f° 290.

136. Archives Nationales, Aj³⁷ 10, 1, f° 133.

137. Paris, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, PE 4, PE 5, PE 7, PE 10, PE 130.

England, on the other hand, the Dragonetti bow remained in use long after Dragonetti's death not only because of his fame, but because his precepts were perpetuated by his disciples J. P. Anfossi and James Howell (1811–1879).¹³⁸ The disappearance of the bow from England has been attributed to the imposition of the French model by the conductor Hans Richter in 1904, nearly sixty years after Dragonetti's death.¹³⁹ Considering that the teaching of the Dragonetti bow at the conservatory was similarly backed by some of the most powerful musical figures in France—Cherubini, Rossini, Habeneck, Meyerbeer, and an entire government commission—a graduate properly prepared by Dragonetti to teach would no doubt have enjoyed authoritative support in his efforts, and success in maintaining the use of the Dragonetti bow. If no further mention is made of the bow in the records of the conservatory, its disappearance nonetheless must be explained. My hypothesis is that Chaft took advantage of Cherubini's resignation on February 4, 1842 to surreptitiously introduce a new hybrid model, a French bow with a tip resembling that of the Dragonetti bow (fig. 12). This could explain why the *Concertino* composed by Labro for the *concours* of 1839—a piece which might have been difficult to master using a Dragonetti bow—does not appear on record until 1843. It is also possible that the switch occurred during Cherubini's mandate, the director leaving the choice to Chaft's discretion as long as the desired results were obtained, but if this were the case some allusion ought to be found in the minute notes that Cherubini kept, and none has yet been uncovered.

Whatever the circumstances, Chaft would hold his post for twenty years until retiring on December 1, 1853. It is under Chaft that the study of the four-string instrument tuned in fourths would finally begin: the notes taken by the jurors during the exam on June 5, 1833 mention, for the first and only time, the aptitude of each student to play on four strings. (Cherubini notes in particular that Denis-Charlemagne Loisel, a student since 1830, "loathes playing on four strings."¹⁴⁰) It was now only a matter of time before the Dragonetti bow would disappear from the scene and the four-string double bass would supplant the three-string instrument in France for good, but not without the issue of tuning resurfacing one last time. Nearly seventy years later, Joseph-Napoléon Viseur

138. Palmer, 66, 86.

139. Elgar, *Introduction to the Double Bass*, 81. Brun provides the date which does not appear in the passage by Elgar from which he quotes (Brun, "Bow Battles," 22).

140. Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 208, 2: *a de la répugnance à jouer à 4 cordes*.



FIGURE 12. Double bass bow, anonymous, Paris, nineteenth century. Pernambuco stick and heel, brass button, length 66 cm, weight 155 g. Paris, Collection Musée de la musique, E.980.2.237. Photo: Billing.

(1847–1902), professor of double bass from 1893 until his death, proposed tuning the instrument $C'-G'-D-G$, “which would allow, for example, the great symphonies of Beethoven to be played as they are written.”¹⁴¹ This modification was approved unanimously on May 9, 1898, by the conservatory’s *conseil supérieur*, which included Camille Saint-Saëns, but according to a note added later to the minutes of the meeting, was “abandoned after the death of the professor due to mediocre results in the *concours*.”¹⁴² What goes around, comes around, however: the soloist Gary Karr has recently proposed tuning the double bass in this manner,¹⁴³ while Joel Quarrington, principal bass of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, advocates tuning the instrument one octave below the violoncello, in fifths ($C'-G'-D-A$).¹⁴⁴

The *Archives Nationales* constitute an unparalleled primary source for a debate which previously was documented—with the exception of Gelinek’s article, the original purpose of which is now known—on the basis of a small number of second-hand accounts. The letters submitted by the players represent a rare example of contemporary nineteenth-century views on instrumental technique. The minutes of the committee

141. Archives Nationales AJ³⁷ 195, 5, f° 53: *ce qui permet, par exemple, de jouer les grandes symphonies de Beethoven telles qu’elles sont écrites*.

142. Ibid.: *abandonné à la mort du professeur dont les concours ont donné des résultats médiocres*.

143. Gary Karr, “Karr Talk: Name That Tuning!” *International Society of Bassists* 20/3 (1996): 4–7.

144. Barb McDougall, “Quintessential Quarrington,” *Double Bassist* 7 (Autumn/Winter 1998): 34–39.

and board meetings, the notes taken by the examiners, and the correspondence between Cherubini and his superiors demonstrate that far from being indifferent, composers and musical authorities were on the contrary keenly aware of the instrument's potential and intent on improving its technique. This should certainly dispel the persistent notion among double bassists, born of the trend in recent years to consider the double bass as a solo instrument exclusively and the obligation to play it in orchestra a necessary evil, that because composers wrote no concertos for the instrument, they neglected it. Among the players, if there is admiration for Dragonetti but little desire to emulate him, this does not imply an attitude of indifference towards the instrument: they have definite ideas about how the double bass should be played, stemming from a different, but not inferior, esthetic. Moreover, in her recent biography Fiona Palmer has demonstrated that, with one exception, Dragonetti ceased performing concertos in public after 1801, and owed his reputation to chamber music and orchestral concerts;¹⁴⁵ judging from the testimony of Berlioz, Cheni  must also have been a formidable ensemble player. However, if neither he nor many other double bassists aspired to be soloists, it is because they probably considered the natural role of the instrument to be in the orchestra. When they sought to express themselves individually, they did so through more conventional channels: Mari  embarked on a career as an opera singer, Dietsch became a composer and conductor, Cheni  composed and played the organ, and so on.

Aside from these general observations, what is the relevance of this documentation for the practitioner? It can be concluded that at least as early as 1792, the date that Perne joined the Op ra,¹⁴⁶ and before 1832, the double bass in France was equipped with three strings tuned in fifths: while the lowest string might be tuned down occasionally below its usual pitch of *G*' to perform a pedal, the range of *C*' to *F*'# that appears in works such as those by Beethoven premiered in Paris during this time would not have been heard. After 1832, the double bass was to be equipped, at least in principle, with four strings tuned in fourths, but beginning on *E*', which would be the lower limit of its range. Concerning the bow it is not possible to be as categorical. The Dragonetti bow would not have been used in Paris before July 1827, and would have coexisted with the French model, influencing the modification of its form, until as

145. Palmer, 85, 198.

146. Archives Nationales, AJ¹³ 54, f  66.

late as perhaps 1842. There is thus sufficient evidence of the use of both techniques for practitioners to justify equally the selection of one bow over the other. The range of options available should remind practitioners of the danger in making categorical statements regarding period performance techniques; the attitude of many of the players themselves exhibited open-mindedness. This can similarly provide a valuable lesson in the current debate, often heated, concerning “schools” of playing. If one can speak today of a “French school” of double bass playing, it would not be so much the product of indigenous original innovation, transmitted uninterruptedly by the professors of the conservatory, as the result of a period of experimentation during which players successively tried and adopted or rejected techniques originating in other countries—in this case an Italian bow and a German tuning. Far from implying inferiority, this demonstrates a characteristic French quality: the ability, in any domain, whether music, art, architecture, philosophy, or literature, to discern and select what are perceived to be the best aspects in a variety of national styles, synthesizing them to produce one which will be uniquely French.¹⁴⁷

APPENDIX

Text of the letters to Cherubini in Archives Nationales, AJ³⁷ 84, 7c

1. Letter from Höffelmayer

Je suis d'accorde avec Monsieur Cherubini, qu'une Contre-basse accordé par quarte donnera plus de facilité, et par consequence permet de faire plus de notes, mais j'observerai que la 3^{me} Corde perd le la bémol, et le sol, qui sont des notes essentielle pour la Contre-basse, et qu'il sera très difficile de monter plus haut que le fa sur la première corde ce qu'on rencontre dans presque tous les ouvrage [sic] de nos jours, car on monte souvent jusqu'au fa dièse, sol, sol dièse, et la, pour ce qui regarde l'archet, et la manière de s'en servir; l'habitude fera tous [sic].

J'ai l'honneur d'être votre très humble et très obéissant serviteur
Höffelmayer
le 22 fevrier 1827

147. My thanks to Joëlle Fancher Morton of the International Society of Bassists, J.-F. Ravet of the Université de Paris IV–Sorbonne, Anne Houssay and Patrice Verrier of the Musée de la Musique, Paris, Don L. Roberts of the Northwestern University Music Library, Michel Crichton and Denys Houllé of Alphonse Leduc & Cie, Paris, Richard Myron of the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, Joseph Carver of the State University of New York (Stony Brook), Giovanni Cremonini, Marie-Christine Martinie, and the Parisian bowmaker Nelly Poidevin, for their assistance in preparing this article.

I agree with Mr. Cherubini that a double bass tuned in fourths would give greater facility, and in consequence allow more notes to be played, but I would point out that the third string would lose the *A'-flat* and the *G'*, which are essential notes for the double bass, and that it will be very difficult to play higher than the *f* on the first string, which is encountered in almost all of our contemporary works, since often one must play up to *f-sharp*, *g*, *g-sharp* and *a*, concerning the bow and the manner of using it, habit will do all.

I have the honor to be your very humble and very obedient servant

Höffelmayer

22 February 1827

2. Letter from Sorne

Belleville le 3 mars 1827

Monsieur,

Pour répondre au désir que vous m'avez témoigné, d'avoir par écrit mon opinion, sur la manière d'accorder la contrebasse par intervalles de quarts; je ne puis que vous repetteler [sic] en partie, ce que j'ai eu l'honneur de vous dire dans la dernière conférence que j'ai eue avec vous, et trois de mes confrères.

L'avantage du passage d'une corde à l'autre sans déplacer la main, se trouve balancé [sic] par l'inconvénient, ou la perte des trois notes, les plus importantes de l'instrument, puisqu'elle sont les plus graves; ces trois notes sont comme vous le savez, Sol, Sol diese, et, la bémol, observez que la même perte d'un ton existe à l'octave au dessus, car l'étendue naturel des trois cordes à vide dans la contrebasse accordée en quarte n'est que d'une septième mineure, la. sol. tandis que lorsqu'elle est accordée en quinte, elle est d'une neuvième majeure Sol. la.

Observez de plus, que la perte de ces deux tons est de la plus grande importance pour l'effet de l'instrument, par la raison que cette manière d'accorder ne donne à la chanterelle que le ton de Sol. et que dans l'accord par quinte elle se trouve être un la. ce qui rend cette corde beaucoup plus sonore et facilite le moyen de monter jusqu'à l'octave au dessus, et ce qui donne à l'instrument accordé par quinte l'étendue de deux octaves et un ton, au lieu que par quarte elle n'est que d'une octave et d'une septième mineure, car il n'est guère possible de faire raisonner [sic] les notes qui sont au dessus du milieu de la chanterelle convenablement.

Je pourrais multiplier les observations qu'une longue expérience m'a mis à même de faire sur cet instrument, tant sur le doigté, que sur la longueur et la grosseur des cordes; mais comme ces observations sont applicables aux deux manières d'accorder, elles ne sont pas nécessaire à la préférence que l'on doit donner à l'une, ou à l'autre.

A l'égard de la manière de tenir l'archet, celle qui nous est indiquée, ne me parroit [sic] pas préférable à celle qui est pratiquée présentement par tous les bassiers étrangers et nationaux, elle pouvoit convenir à ceux qui jouaient anciennement de la basse de viole [sic] sur laquelle on mêloit plus de cordes.

Enfin d'après ces observations Je conclus que les moyens qui nous sont présentés comme des améliorations, produiraient l'effet contraire, si ils étaient adoptées; J'en ai pour preuve l'exemple de plusieurs musiciens qui ont été obligés d'y dénoncer, et ma propre expérience.

Veillez bien Monsieur agréer l'assurance de ma haute considération, et de mes très humbles salutations.

Sorne

Belleville, 3 March 1827

Sir,

In reply to your request to have in writing my opinion on the tuning of the double bass by intervals of a fourth, I can only partly repeat what I had the honor of telling you during the last conference that I had with you and three of my colleagues.

The advantage of passing from one string to another without changing position is counterbalanced by the inconvenience of losing three notes, the instrument's most important ones, since they are the lowest; these three notes are, as you know, *G'*, *G'-sharp*, and *A'-flat*. Notice that the same loss of one tone exists in the upper octave, since the natural range of the three open strings of the double bass tuned in fourths is only a minor seventh, *A'-G*, whereas when tuned in fifths it is a major ninth *G'-A*.

Notice moreover that the loss of these two tones is of the greatest importance for the instrument's effect, since in this tuning the chanterelle is only tuned to *G* [whereas] in the tuning by fifths it is an *A*, which renders this string much more sonorous and facilitates climbing to the octave above, and which gives the instrument tuned in fifths a range of two octaves and one tone, while in fourths it is only an octave and a minor seventh, because it is hardly possible to make the notes above the middle of the chanterelle resonate suitably.

I could multiply the observations that a long experience has left me in a position to make concerning the instrument, about fingering as well as the length and thickness of the strings; but as these observations apply to both tunings, they have no influence on giving preference to one over the other.

Concerning the manner of holding the bow, that which is presented to us does not seem to me preferable to that presently practiced by all foreign and national bassists, it could suit those who formerly played the bass viol on which there were more strings.

Finally, from these observations I conclude that the means presented to us as improvements would produce the opposite effect if adopted. I have for proof the example of several musicians who have been obliged to denounce them, and my own experience.

Please accept, Sir, the assurance of my highest consideration, and my most humble greetings.

Sorne

3. Letter from Gelinek

Dans mes notes sur la Contrebasse j'ai dit, au sujet de l'archet, et avant d'avoir vu celui de Mr. Dragonetti: Les Allemands n'ont pas manqué d'apercevoir les avantages résultant de la longueur et de la tenue de l'archet et. . .

Je le répéterai encore l'on ne peut comparer une corde de Basse, dont la tension est du poids de 20 livres à celle de la Contrebasse qui est de 85 livres. Il faut donc, comparativement, quatre fois plus de force pour faire vibrer cette dernière. Cette force n'existe pas dans la tenue ordinaire de l'archet et on l'acquiert par le système de Mr Dragonetti. C'est ce que je vais chercher à démontrer phisiquement.

La pose naturelle du bras et de la main est, comme dans le port d'armes, d'après la théorie militaire, si je puis me servir de cette comparaison: Le bras tendu sans roideur; le petit doigt contre la couture de la culotte. Dans cette pose, dis-je, sans le secours du bras la main, par le seul mouvement du poignet, peut faire un quart de tour à gauche ou un demi quart à droite, et, de la manière dont Mr Dragonetti tient son archet, la main est dans sa position naturelle; les doigts coopèrent, même, à faire appuyer les crins sur les cordes et le poignet a encore son quart de tour pour relever l'archet de dessus les cordes: outre ce mouvement de rotation, le poignet a de plus ceux en avant ou en arrière le tout sans que le bras se trouve gêné en dirigeant l'archet sur les cordes.

Il n'en est pas de même de la tenue ordinaire de l'archet; car, dans cette position, le poignet a fait son mouvement à gauche et il ne peut plus tourner pour faire appuyer les crins sur les cordes; et c'est le bras que l'on emploie pour cette pression de l'archet ainsi que pour le tirer et pousser. On voit que le bras fait deux offices et l'on conçoit que les mouvements de côté du poignet sont si petit que dans un Fortissimo soutenu, et s'il y a multiplicité de notes, le bras, faisant deux mouvements contraires, se fatigue, le poignet se roidit, les doigts s'engourdissent et il en résulte une mauvaise exécution.

Gelinek

1827

In my remarks on the double-bass, speaking of the bow, I said, before having seen that of Mr. Dragonetti, *the Germans have not failed to perceive the advantages resulting from the length and steadiness of the bow, &c.*

I will repeat that a violoncello string, the tension of which is of the weight of twenty pounds, cannot be compared with that of a double-bass, which is of eighty-five pounds. Comparatively speaking, the latter will require four times the power for its vibration. This power does not exist in the ordinary compass of the bow, but is acquired by the system of Mr. Dragonetti. This I shall endeavour to demonstrate physically.

The natural position of the hand and arm is shewn in *carrying arms* according to military theory, if I may be allowed the comparison—the arm extended, without stiffness, and the little finger against the seam of the trowsers. In this position, without the assistance of the arm, simply by movement of the wrist, the hand may make a fourth of a turn to the left, or half of a fourth to the right—and, by the mode in which Mr. Dragonetti holds his bow, the hand is in its natural position, the fingers even co-operate in supporting the hair on the strings, and the wrist has still its fourth of a turn to supply power, or a half fourth to raise the bow above the strings. Besides this rotatory movement, the wrist has those in front or behind—and all without tiring the arm in directing the bow over the strings.

The same is not the case with the ordinary holding of the bow: for, in that position, the wrist has made its movement to the left, and cannot turn again

to support the hair on the strings, and the arm is employed for that pressure of the bow, as also for passing and re-passing it.

It will be seen that the arm performs two functions, and that the side-movements of the wrist are so small, that in a sustained *fortissimo*, and if there be a multiplicity of notes, the arm making two contrary movements becomes fatigued, the wrist stiffened, the fingers benumbed, and the result is—a bad performance.

Gelinek
1827

4. Letter from Chenié

Monsieur le Directeur,

J'ai l'honneur de répondre à la confiance que vous avez bien voulu m'accorder en déclarant avec impartialité mon opinion sur le nouveau système que l'on se propose d'adopter à l'école royale de musique, pour la formation d'une classe de contrebasse.

On prend pour base et preuve la manière dont le célèbre Dragonetti à Londres tire parti de cet instrument accordé par quarte cet homme extraordinaire que j'aurais désirer entendre à Paris pour fixer mon jugement invariablement m'a donné le désir de savoir à quelle école il a été formé, et les enseignements que j'ai eu occasion de me procurer à ce sujet m'ont appris qu'il n'a pas eu besoin de maître, et que son talent est un don de la nature.

Dans le nouveau système on nous ôte un Sol, un Sol # et un la b dans le grave; en sorte que lorsque ces notes se présentent nous sommes obligés de nous porter à chaque instant sur le ré ce qui nous range nécessairement dans la catégorie des violoncelles; et le la qui devient sol donne à cette corde descendue d'un ton, une mollesse qui fait tort à la qualité des autres sons.

Dans le bel ouvrage du Siège de Corinthe de Monsieur Rossini je descends un moment mon sol à la fin du premier acte, pour avoir un fa # qui se trouve à l'octave au dessous du violoncelle qui se fait sur l'ut, et ce fa # qui dure quelques instants, produit un superbe effet.

Que de beaux sons graves Monsieur le Directeur se trouveraient perdus dans votre sublime messe des morts, et dans toutes celles que nous exécutons à la chapelle du Roi! En supposant que l'on pût ajouter une quatrième corde je serais charmé de pouvoir éviter de faire le fa sur le ré. Monsieur Spontini pensait comme moi à cet égard.

Je termine Monsieur le Directeur en vous observant que la perte des trois sons graves, dont il est question, et qui se multiplient sans cesse dans l'ordre des différentes gammes, ferait beaucoup de tort à la beauté de cet instrument, puisqu'il faudrait les porter tous sur le ré.

D'après les motifs que j'ai eu l'honneur de vous soumettre, et après avoir réfléchi sur le nouveau système, je pense que les contrebasses accordées par quarte peuvent convenir pour des solos, mais que pour l'accompagnement des beaux ouvrages religieux et dramatiques, et avoir de véritables contrebasses d'orchestre, l'accord par quinte est préférable.

*Daignez agréer,
Monsieur le Directeur*

l'assurance de mon profond respect

Chenié

première contrebasse de l'opéra

7 mars 1827

Mr. Director,

I am honored to reply to the trust you have shown me by declaring with impartiality my opinion of the new system that is proposed for adoption at the Royal School of Music, for the institution of a double bass class.

The manner in which the famous Dragonetti of London plays this instrument, tuned in *fourths*, is taken as the model. This extraordinary man whom I would have liked to hear in Paris in order to make a final decision invariably gave me the desire to know where he studied, and from the information I obtained I learned that he had no need of a teacher, and that his talent is a gift of nature.

In the new system, we are deprived of a G' , a $G'\sharp$, and an $A'\flat$ in the lower register, such that when these notes occur we are obliged to play them each time on the *D* string, which places us in the range of the violoncellos; and the *A* which becomes *G* gives this string, lowered by a tone, a flaccidity which spoils the quality of the other sounds.

In Mr. Rossini's beautiful *Siège de Corinthe*, I momentarily lower my G' string at the end of the first act to obtain an $F\sharp'$ one octave below that played on the violoncello's *C* string, and this $F\sharp'$, which lasts several instants, produces a superb effect.

Mr. Director, how many beautiful low sounds would be missing from your sublime mass for the dead, and all those that we perform at the Chapel Royal! Supposing that we could add a fourth string I would be charmed to be able to avoid playing the F' on the *D* string. Mr. Spontini was of my opinion in this regard.

I conclude, Mr. Director, by drawing to your attention that the loss of the three low notes in question, which is multiplied incessantly throughout the different keys, would harm the beauty of this instrument, since it would be necessary to perform them all on the *D* string.

For the reasons that I have had the honor to submit to you, and after consideration of the new system, I think that double basses tuned in *fourths* may be suitable for solos, but for the accompaniment of beautiful religious and dramatic works, and to have true orchestral double basses, tuning in fifths is preferable.

Please accept,

Mr. Director

the assurance of my deepest respect

Chenié

First Double Bass of the Opéra

7 March 1827