Universiteit Leiden
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Giovanni Punto (1746-1803) Cor basse célèbre

Zwart, T. van der

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Abstract

My research focused on how the horn player Giovanni Punto sounded when he impressed audiences throughout Europe, and which elements of his playing might contribute to a more diverse performance practice of solo horn parts and chamber music for horn from the classical period.

I have immersed myself in the life, techniques, and influence of this traveling horn virtuoso. Important facets of Punto's heritage seem to have faded from the collective consciousness of horn players and their audiences over the past two centuries. The chapters of this thesis all explore that lost legacy.

I describe relevant facts from Punto's life, his connections with other horn players and composers, and the reactions of critics to his performances, from which conclusions can be drawn about sound and technique. I have paid much attention to the legacy of his teacher Anton Joseph Hampel, the alleged inventor of the stopped notes (a technique of producing tones outside the harmonic series by manipulations of the hand in the bell of the horn). The student Punto proves to be more reserved than his teacher in using this relatively new method of hand stopping.

A different sound ideal, with a distinction in timbre between cor alto (high horn) and cor basse (low horn), more diversity in articulation and the addition of more or less spontaneous ornamentation, are the most striking differences between what is documented in sources from the performance practice around 1800 and the current standard.

Around 1794, the *Seule et Vraie Méthode pour apprendre facilement les Élémens des Premier et Second Cors* (single and true method for easily learning the elements of the first and second horn) appeared under the names of Hampel and Punto. In 1795, Punto published a book of etudes, *Étude ou Exercise Journalier, Ouvrage Periodique pour le Cor* (Daily Exercises for the Horn). Both publications have constantly been on my music stand for the past years. Through continued theoretical/practical study of these sources, I hoped to gain the tacit knowledge that would bring me closer to the maestro's distinctive playing style. I have spent countless hours on the subtleties of articulation on the horn described in the *Seule et Vraie Méthode*. Perhaps the most important aspect of the *Méthode* is the

addition of ornamentation to the melody, a performance strategy that has largely fallen into disuse among horn players. I combined literature research with empirical research by devoting daily study time on the horn to the many variations on a theme in the *Méthode*. In the end it turned out to be a relief to no longer have the literal reproduction of the printed musical text as the main goal. More freedom in performance led to more excitement on stage.

Various sources describe how Punto caused a stir with double tones and even chords on the horn. Despite its reputation as a cheap trick, I explored the capabilities of these multiphonics and analyzed the few available notated examples from the classical period for their feasibility.

The notion that Punto, the celebrated horn virtuoso of the eighteenth century, was a specialist on the cor basse, the low horn, resonates throughout my thesis. Besides the descriptions of the distinctive sound of this instrument, my own experiences with typical cor basse mouthpieces with a relatively wide inner rim have proved most relevant to the research. The timbre of the instrument becomes substantially darker, less concise, and therefore airier when using the larger mouthpiece prescribed in historical methods. Moreover, this mouthpiece model facilitates the execution of fast broken chords that are so typical for cor basse parts.

My research shows that Beethoven, who shared the stage with Punto and wrote his Sonata for piano and horn, op.17 for him, was aware of the distinction between the different horn types and opted for the mellower, velvety sound of the cor basse for horn solos in some of his orchestral works.

The thesis is accompanied by a CD with works for cor basse and piano from the time of Punto and shortly afterwards.

Finally, I express the hope that my research will inspire more diversity in the performances of horn players, and that it will thus make an important contribution to a multi-colored concert practice.