

# **Vanhal's Bass concerto and the Viennese school of bass playing**

**Historical and contextual notes**

Travail réalisé pour l'obtention du Diplôme d'enseignement  
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## 1) Introduction

When confronted with the idea of writing a paper based on my Bachelor exam, I reflected on the list of repertoire that I had chosen and thought about how I felt regarding my knowledge of these pieces. The idea to choose Vanhal and his concerto was clear since of all the composers that were in my program (Bach, Handel, Hindemith and Koussevitzky), he was the one about whom I had less knowledge and information, and therefore, I thought that I would take the opportunity to my own benefit. So the questions came to my mind, where did he come from. Why would he decide to write a bass concerto? Which composers did he know in his time in Vienna? Sometimes we decide to study a new piece and approach it in a peripheral way, we know the general style of the period it was written in, we have heard performances of it, and we have dealt with the technical difficulties. Moreover, perhaps we can just with this give a decent enough rendering of the piece, to some degree the peripheral knowledge and our intuition together form an idea of how it should be. Clearly, music is something in itself, we do not need perhaps to know every detail of a composer's life to understand what he wrote, but there is an unexplainable connection that we make with a composer and his music when we make the effort to know more about the circumstances that surrounded the inception of his compositions. In the case of the great composers, we are (hopefully) bombarded with information from the time that we begin our musical studies but with lesser-known composers, that is not the case, and we sometimes intuitively feel that we are not as close to them, to their idea. Now the details of this relationship of specific knowledge, and how it might affect our musical thinking process and intuition, are probably not quantifiable but in my case, the more I read about Vanhal and his time, the more I felt at home with this simple and elegant music that he wrote.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word interpretation in musical context is defined as “the rendering of a musical composition according to one's conception of the author's idea” And the composer's idea, whatever it is, is certainly part of a given time. A composer is a man, who is immersed in a musical scene, influenced by others, perhaps helped by some to find his place professionally and artistically. Musical fashions or other specific developments in a musical instrument might help to fuel a new string of compositions, as we will see, that was the case in late eighteenth century Vienna. Regarding the concerto for double bass by Vanhal, we must consider the composer and his life but also the fact that this composition is born at a special moment in the

history of the double bass. At this moment in Vienna, a school of bass playing known as the Viennese bass school developed a special approach to bass construction, tuning and setup that for a while channeled the effort of Vienna's best double bass instrumentalists. These individuals catapulted the possibilities of the lowest member of the string family and in turn opened the doors to composers to experiment with this instrument that never before had been taken seriously as a solo instrument. This did not happen from one day to the next, however, and my wish in this paper is to describe briefly the context and main elements that gave rise to this bass school and Vanhal's bass concerto. I will therefore attempt to describe briefly the different areas relevant to this goal. The first part will consist of a brief introduction to Vanhal's biography and works and the second a brief accounting of the emergence of the Viennese bass school.

## **2) Vanhal: General Biographical notes**

Jean Baptiste Vanhal was born in 1739 in Kralove, Bohemia (now called Nechanice). His family name was also written with the German spelling of "Wanhal" and even today there are partitions and that refer to him with this spelling. Although the origin of his family was probably the Netherlands, they had settled in Bohemia for several generations. His family was bonded to the count Schaffgotsch and thus lived in his estate. As a young boy, he was taught (probably by his parents) to sing and learned several wind and string instruments as well. His parents, recognizing his brilliant talent, encouraged him with his musical instruction as well as with study of the German language in order to prepare him for a future musical career in Vienna. His first musical job was at the age of 13 as an organist in the city of Opoczna, he then went on to become choir director in Niemczowes, located in the province of Jicin. It was at this moment that he was trained by Mathias Nowak to be a virtuoso violinist. Vanhal wrote concertos for violin as well as for organ in which he performed as soloist himself.

Vanhal moved to Vienna in 1760-61 where he stayed until 1769, there are conflicting accounts of how his Vienna period began (P.R. Bryan , 2001) but it could have been through the patronage of countess Schaffgotsch of Bohemia who was proud of his accomplishments and wanted to give him opportunity to advance. He began working by giving instrumental and singing lessons and even had distinguished pupils such as Ignace Pleyel in the keyboard (Bryan , 2009). At the time of his arrival in Vienna, Metastasio was court poet and Gluck, who was made court composer in 1760 was very in demand for opera. The period from around 1750 to 1780, marks one of the most interesting and active periods in musical history of Vienna (Bryan , 2001) in part because of the

musical culture that the aristocracy delighted and sponsored during the reign of the empress Maria Theresa.

From the beginning of his stay in Vienna, Vanhal had contact with many of the important musicians and composers of the moment. In his autobiography, Dittersdorf lists Vanhal as a pupil in the years 1762-63 but it seems that he was not really his pupil but more of a protégé. (P.R. Bryan , 2001). This can be inferred because Vanhal never referred to him as his teacher and there is little evidence of his influence in Vanhal's music (Bryan , 2001). Vanhal seems, however, to have sought often the advice of Dittersdorf who, even if his same age, had grown up in Vienna and had already solid professional connections with count Giacomo Durazzo and Gluck (Grave and Lane , 2009) as well as being a recognized leading violinist and member of the Imperial Court. In 1762, Vanhal is reported to have met the child Mozart. He was listed as first violinist in a performance of Gluck's *Orfeo* in 1763 and is listed as playing in a quartet with no less than Haydn, Dittersdorf and Mozart in 1764, participating most probably as a cellist (Bryan , 2009). During this first period in Vienna Vanhal quickly established himself as one of the leading composers in Vienna and is said to have contributed to the rise of the "*Viennese Style*" (Bryan , 2009). Later Vanhal travelled to Italy under the patronage of the Baron Riesch of Dresden. During this trip, he met Gluck and possibly composed two operas in Rome with texts by Metastasio but both of these have been lost. During his return to Vienna in 1771, he turned down the Kapellmeister position in Dresden and found a new patron, Count Ladislaus Erdody of Varazdin (now in Croatia) (Bryan , 2009) but decided to stay in Vienna. He turned away from symphonies and string quartets in the late 1770's in part, as a reaction to the changing musical tastes in Vienna and in part as he adapted himself to the new publishing industry, which grew considerably in these years in Vienna. More than 270 prints of his music were issued. Later in his life Vanhal concentrated more and more on church music and keyboard music, but most of his church music was never published. He is said to have been a devout Christian and a man of a very arduous and tenacious character. Well liked and respected as a man, composer and as a virtuoso violin performer, he died unmarried, and living in modest circumstances, in Vienna (Bryan , 2009).

### **3) Vanhal in Vienna: context notes**

While the vast majority of Vanhal's works from his period as composer in Bohemia was lost, there are adequate accounts of his compositional activity in Vienna. Once in Vienna, Vanhal decided to begin by focusing the new genres of symphony and chamber music (Bryan , 2009). Just during his first period in Vienna, Vanhal composed at least 34 symphonies. During this period and in this set of symphonies, he is said to have gotten closer to the more dramatic currents of "*Sturm und Drang*"

expressive style particularly in the minor mode symphonies. Some people consider his symphony in g minor<sup>1</sup> of circa 1770 to be a particularly good example of this style of composition and one of his most transcendent works, compared sometimes to Mozart's symphony (no 25) in g minor no K.183 written a few years later (Free Lib. Online , 2005). It is my estimation that Vanhal composed his bass concerto during this same early Vienna period as well. I say my estimation because after looking extensively, I have not found any reference that even attempts to specify the year of composition for this concerto. However, given his flourishing friendship with Dittersdorf (who composed his bass concertos in 1762-63) upon arriving in Vienna and the appearance of other compositions for bass in this same period coinciding as well, it seems likely he would have been interested to experiment also. As far as his first hand knowledge of the double bass, there are no accounts that mention Vanhal playing the bass himself but he did play to some considerable extent the cello (Bryan , 2009). If we judge from the point of view that he was a very pragmatic man, we can infer that his interest in writing a bass concerto must have stemmed from a clear public interest at this time in Vienna for using such instruments as soloist. During this time in Vienna, many other composers besides Ditterdorf, wrote concertos for bass, among the more well known composers we find Hoffmeister and Zimmermann. Nevertheless, even a major composer such as Haydn wrote a bass concerto during this time according to the one catalog (Webster and Feder). Mozart also participated in writing for the instrument even if not in concerto form. From him we have the aria "*Per questa bella mano*" for bass singer and double bass, a work performed even today rather often though it being very difficult to perform in the modern double bass due to differences in tuning scordatura and other technical factors which I will describe further in the next section.

#### 4) The Viennese Bass School

In order to understand the Viennese bass school we must see that up until this point, the bass was in a period of evolution and there was a great amount of experimentation that differed in just about every different cultural region in Western Europe. Many different approaches were being experimented in the different regional "schools" of playing with regarding to tuning (whether to tune in fifths or fourths), quantity of strings (three, four or five strings), different types of bows (underhand and overhand) and whether to use frets or not. The major treatises and methods about double bass playing of the 18<sup>th</sup> century such as Michel Corrette's method of 1781 did not seem

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<sup>1</sup> Labeled g1 in Paul Bryan's catalogue of

totally decided upon many of these questions and did not seem to suggest a very high playing standard at the time of its writing in France or at least not a standard in which the double bass would be often seen as a solo instrument. The lack of a general high standard of playing was still seen in complaints by commentators such as Quantz who said in his *“Essai d’ une methode pour apprendre a jouer de la flute traversiere”* of 1752 that few double bass players could be found that were capable of going further than g on their instruments (Brun , 1989).

The development of the double bass in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is a complex topic, there were clearly many different tendencies regionally but also there was much experimentation happening with different tunings in just about every region of Europe. A full accounting of these developments is beyond the scope of this paper but I wish to mention some examples. It is clear that some of the early double basses by masters such as Gasparo da Salo’s famous bass later used by the Italian Virtuoso Dragonetti were originally built as a 5 string Violone. Yet many instruments such as these are today considered as “classic modern” double basses simply because they are strung in the modern fashion of four strings tuned in fourths. (Slatford and Shipton 2009) and of course because the construction technique was already much closer to the violin family instrument than their predecessors.

Matters are even more complicated when we consider that the term “violone” could mean the bass member of the viol family in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but was also used to describe a number of varieties of different double basses in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The transition from 5 or 6 string violone to a standard “modern” double bass was a long one and it would last longer and continue even after the rise and fall of the Viennese school. This period in the history of the double bass is full of contradictions in which some commentators describe their preference for the sweet sound of the Violone versus the Bass violin (this being the cello) and yet there is Quantz quoted as saying that the german 6 string violone was being “justly abandoned” in his 1752 treatise (Brun , 1989).

At this time, different tunings for the double bass abounded, obviously the first tunings with 5 or 6 strings resembled the tuning of viols, a tuning of fourths with a major third in the middle was described in Italy in 1609 yet later in Italy they preferred a three string setup tuned in fourths or fifths. In Austria and Germany, however, the 5 string setups tuned F,A,D,F#,B was cited by Prinner in *Musicalischer Scilissl* in 1677 but more common after the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century in Austria was the F,A,D,F#,A cited in 1790 by Albrechtsberger. (Slatford and Shipton , 2009) As captivating as this whole historical development of the double bass can be, and as necessary as such a process of evolution might be in the esthetical development of western music, it was also this particular lack of standardization and general agreement about technique, construction and setup that had prevented

the rise of a High school of playing of the double bass before this point. Within this situational backdrop comes an epoch referred to as "*The Golden Age of Virtuosity*" by Paul Brun in his book *A history of the Double Bass*. One of the special aspects of this Viennese school of playing is precisely the fact that it demonstrates the difference in possibilities that arose for the instrument simply because a unified school of playing gave rise to the possibilities of this type of composition. Many precedents were important for the development of this type of school of bass playing. We know for sure that at least in Dresden Bach had already observed that the musicians there were no longer required to play as many instruments by the court and were able to specialize on their instruments (notably double bassists) (Brun , 1989). This took place sometime before the Viennese school was fully developed and it was in Germany, but we can see that a trend in the Germanic countries began which allowed musicians to further their specialization on the double bass instruments playing, a true necessity for the development of a school of playing.

The best evidence of this school's time frame, other than conjectures based upon commentary, is the large number of compositions for the Viennese double bass in this given period. We can deduce from the level and type of technical difficulties found in this that the similarities in keys, texture and triadic virtuosity provides proof in itself of a certain unity of style and standardized techniques. This group of compositions presupposed the existence of a certain type of double bass found in this part of Austria, this instrument became known as the Viennese double bass or Viennese violone. This Viennese double bass had five strings and was tuned upwards from F in a series of thirds with one perfect fourth in the middle (F, A, d, f#, a). This tuning became adopted in general use not only in solo performance but also in orchestras. Before this, the bases tuned in fourths E, A, d, g were becoming standard in Germany for orchestral use was also somewhat put aside in Vienna (Brun , 1989). The type of double bass that took prominence in Vienna at the time of the Viennese bass school was therefore somewhat different to double basses being produced in the other regions of Europe, and this particular type was and is frequently referred to even today as the Viennese violone.

The typical Viennese violone developed a rather characteristic style of construction with clear differences from instruments constructed in Italy and the Tyrol. They used a viol shape with sloping shoulders rather than violin shaped shoulders. This particular tendency in construction developed as they sought to ease the access to upper register of the instrument. Frets also became standard with 5 to 7 frets being used, this was due in part to the fact that they adopted also special gut strings for solo performances but these were much thinner than regular strings and would flap against the fingerboard if not prevented by the frets. They could produce however, a clearer and

more projecting sound. There was debate whether these frets also limited the capabilities of expression but many writers such as Quantz felt that frets were justified precisely given the results that players of this school were able to achieve as soloists on their fretted instruments (Brun , 1989).

One of the first compositions that we find that is technically and idiomatically characteristic of the writing of this school appears in 1745, it was piece by Georg Matthias Mann. A partita for violin and bass, the difficulty level of this piece was considerably higher than most compositions until this point and upon rediscovery of this piece one century later it was considered as having “unsurmountable” technical difficulty (Brun , 1989). This piece is important given the fact that by being considered technically unsormountable one century later we can infer this was greatly due to the fact that the Viennese tuning had all but disappeared from usage and it was this tuning and the other characteristics of the Viennese violone that made the difference in difficulty for the new players, which used mostly four string basses tuned in fourths.

At this point, I would like to first list the composers most relevant to the Viennese School these are: Karl Ditters von Ditterdorf (1739-1799), Wenzl Pichl (1741-1804), Johann Baptist Vanhal (1739-1813), Johann-Mathias Sperger (1750-1812), Anton Zimmermann (1741-1781), Anton Hoffmeister (1754-1812). From these composers we see the first concertos for double bass appearing from Dittersdorf and Pichl in the 1760’s. Dittersdorf went on to write pieces for concertante bass and viola, duets for bass and viola and six quintets from 1782, which include a “contrabasso”. After these and in around the next decade followed concertos by Vanhal, Hoffmeister and Sperger. Of these, Vanhal also wrote chamber works which included double bass such as the Quintet for violin, viola, two horns and “*Violone*” (Brun , 1989).

To this list, we add Joseph Haydn who wrote his now lost, “*Concerto per il Violone*” in D major of 1763 (Webster and Feder , 2009) as well as including solos for double bass in many of his symphonies, particularly those written in the years 1760-62 and in his “Farewell symphony” of 1772. Most of these solos were to be played by the solo bassist in his Esterhazy estate orchestra, the above-mentioned Johan-Matthias Sperger. In addition, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart who in 1791 composed his aria for Viennese violone and bass singer, “per questa bella mano” (Slatford and Shipton , 2009) was obviously a witness and admirer of the possibilities of this school. Again in this list we see the unity of time and milieu that proves how fashionable was at this point in time to even touch the sensibility of two of the greatest composers of this or any other time in music history.

Music however continued to develop and towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the currents of sturm und drang leading to early romanticism began to change the musical ideals and sensibility.

And so the Viennese bass school which had thrived because of its disciplined standardization, focus on creating agile sonorities and facilitation of a certain type of virtuosity, began however to suffer from the downside, the limitations of their adopted tuning to adapt to newer currents in music. The system of tuning that had been adopted by the school was particularly useful for certain type of triadic effects achieved by facilitating the use of arpeggiated cords and double stops but when more modern music began to appear as the romanticism approached, the system of tuning and the lighter sonority of the Viennese violone began to fall out of favor. When the rather crude wind instruments of this period began to improve and thus allowed for more harmonic modulations in orchestral and chamber music, the Viennese tuning started to lose favor. This is because this type of tuning was, in a practical sense, limited to a few keys such as D major, A major and their relative minor keys, where it could be used for dazzling virtuoso effects using harmonics and open strings (Dalla Torre ,2005). Another factor in this downfall was the increasing desire of classical romantic composers for a deeper and perhaps stronger tone achievable by three and four string instruments. These instruments used more robust strings and were tuned mostly in fourths. Even admirers of the Viennese bass such as Leopold Mozart who as late as 1788 had paid tribute to this instrument, had also complained that these instruments had some recurring problems of touching adjacent strings when playing in loud passages (Brun , 1989). And in 1806 Christian Schubart wrote in his “ *Ideen zu einer Aesthetic der Tonkunst*”, that even though there still were five-stringed basses in general use for solos and trios, the common double basses to be found in the orchestra were generally three string basses (Brun , 1989).

With the death of Johann-Matthias Sperger in 1812, the Golden age of the Vienna double bass school came to an end. There were performances after this moment that surely must have used occasionally the Viennese bass and even in 1828 there is record of a concert by Johann Hindl in Prague who was an exponent of this school. But after, and even before, the death of Sperger, it is clear just by the decline of the number of compositions written for the instrument that this Golden age of Viennese virtuosity was over and would be for a rather long period of time, largely forgotten (Brun , 1989).

## **5) Vanhal's bass concerto: context notes**

Vanhal's concerto for bass is, together with Dittersdorf's concerto, one of the staples of the modern double bass repertoire from the Classic period. Of all the concertos for bass from this said Viennese period, they are the two most often played in exams and professional auditions for orchestra, with the Dittersdorf concerto playing an even more prominent aspect in this regard. In

itself a piece both of Vanhal and his time, in this piece we can find all the characteristics of this period and type of writing. The piece is fresh, dynamic, and not without humor. Vanhal's concerto just as Dittersdorf's follows the same general standard form for concertos of this period, a first movement *Allegro moderato* followed by a lyrical second movement *Adagio* and a *Rondo* movement for the finale.

In Vanhal's concerto, however, there is a more virtuosic element throughout, as the concerto uses a considerably wider tessitura throughout and displays formal sections in the first and second movements that are more extended than those of Dittersdorf. At first, this apparent simplicity of Dittersdorf's concerto can lead us to believe that in comparison to Vanhal's concerto, it is a much easier piece to play, but this impression is not one many bassists would probably agree upon. Dittersdorf's simplicity of notes hides the fact that because it was written for the Viennese tuning, many of its passages translate to fingerings and bowings on the modern double bass that are honestly awkward to say the least. Vanhal's concerto is in many ways more suited to the modern instrument even in spite of it being a more virtuosic piece. In a sense, its passages are more linear and require less awkward fingerings, shifting and string crossings than those of Dittersdorf's when being played with modern tuning in fourths. There are some exceptions to this however such as the passages in the second half of the re-exposition in which the triadic nature of these figurations would certainly be much easier played with the original Viennese setup. Even in this case, however, the fingering solution in the modern tuning requires less shifting than the "difficult" passages in the Dittersdorf concerto development section for example. Therefore, in my opinion, Vanhal's concerto even with its considerably larger quantity of notes, material, and rapid passages is one that is feels more secure technically when played under pressure than Dittersdorf's with its dangerous compositional signature of simplicity.

The second movement of Vanhal's concerto also has a very different feel to it when compared to that of Dittersdorf. Again, the tessitura is considerably larger and the formal sections more complex and extended. The second movement of Vanhal's concerto ventures all the way to the high register of the instrument, and has a more paused and somewhat episodic feel to it. The middle section with its minor modes section exudes at times clear signs of a "*Sturm und Drang*" romantic quality. It can be noted that many of this features in the second movement in particular are in accord with the view that Vanhal's music at many times displayed characteristics of the "*Sturm und Drang*" style in some of his symphonies particularly those in minor mode (Bryan , 2009) (Free Lib. Online , 2005).

There are many different editions of the Vanhal concerto, the majority of them are written to be fingered in D major though with modern solo scordatura it will sound in E major<sup>2</sup>. Yet there are also editions in C major (sounding in D major with scordatura) and this is the one that I play. There are different reasons why performers prefer different keys since each one offers some advantages. The D major version of the concerto has the clear advantage of having the open A and d strings as well as their respective harmonics. This version will prove to be better suited for those who prefer having the dominant A as an open third string as opposed to having the open g string as dominant of the C major version for example. In certain chords and passages in which the dominant or tonic are used as repetitive pedals the D major version offers the better advantage for variety of sonority and also for displaying virtuosity in the cadenzas of the first and last movements. Yet in some other passages having the g open string as dominant provides for a different type of sonority.

In my first bass lesson this academic year, my professor Michel Veillon expressed the opinion that overall the D major version is more natural to play for the reasons stated above of open strings, harmonics and points of reference. The C major version however creates in my opinion a bit of a darker sonority even if some passages might prove somewhat more difficult. Added to this variety of possibilities is the fact that in different editions some passages are written to be played an octave higher either ad libitum or specifically and in some countries and orchestras, it is expected for one specific to be played that way when participating in a professional audition. A somewhat recent recording by Mrs. Chi chi Nwanoku, professor of bass in London Trinity College of Music, provides a brilliant example of the contrasts possible with this type of performance playing the second theme of the first movement in the high octave as well as the restatement of the main theme in the second movement also in the high register. (Nwanoku , 2000)

Prof. Franco Petracchi who was the professor for many years in the conservatory of Geneva, disagrees with this view of playing some of the passages in the higher octave however, and prefers playing these passages whenever possible in the middle range of the instrument as shown in his personal edition of the concerto. He argues that though it is possible to play them in the higher octave without great difficulty, the natural sonority and color of the double bass in the middle range better serves the character of the music and better the shows the true nature of the double bass. In the end, these types of considerations are very personal and I believe that the best solution for a final performance differs from player to player and in some cases, the instrument itself might make a difference in the decision making process.

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<sup>2</sup> The modern solo scordatura for double bass tunes the strings up one tone to F#,B,e,a therefore pieces sound one tone higher than fingered.

## 6) Conclusion

As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper the idea of writing came to me from coming upon the realization that there was simply too much that I did not know about Vanhal the major factors that influenced or inspired his reasons for deciding to write a bass concerto. These factors being, the musical context and stylistic current of the time, the development and level of double bass technique in Vienna and elsewhere, and the tone of this period theorists and musical commentators. Throughout the process of actually researching and writing, my original ideas on these factors changed considerably. I saw that, as an exercise in itself, researching this particular composer led me to encounter and consider not only a better understanding of his concerto but also a deeper appreciation for the musical world in which he lived. And I came to believe that the story Vanhal's concerto, fitted as a good example of how oftentimes a musical piece is born as part of a concurrence of factors that take place as part of musical history culminating in the specific shape of one man's conception. Certainly, aside from this global view, the most important or perhaps relevant part at play was the rise of the Viennese school of double bass, which inspired not just Vanhal but many other composers and coincided with his arrival in Vienna just at the time when the fashion for solo bass playing was taking off. One of the things that I feel I discovered in this process and which has amazed me since is precisely how interwoven were all of this factors. A fact that actually becomes clearer in the case of an instrument such as the double bass, which after this brief Golden age of Virtuosity in Vienna, had to wait again for some time before gaining an even minor level of recognition as a solo instrument from mainstream composers.

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