2025

Domenico Dragonetti and his twelve waltzes: sexuality and the double bass

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Thesis

DOMENICO DRAGONETTI AND HIS TWELVE WALTZES:

SEXUALITY AND THE DOUBLE BASS

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B.S., Portland State University, 2020

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

2025

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ABSTRACT

Venetian double-bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti (1763–1846) had a significant hand in establishing the double bass as a strong and capable ensemble and solo instrument. As with many virtuosos of his time, Dragonetti was often described by his associates as eccentric and bizarre. In fact, many aspects of his personal life seem enigmatic and strange. One of the least understood aspects of Dragonetti as a person is his sexual identity. He remained a bachelor his entire life and seemed not to pursue any sexual or romantic relationships. Instead, he referred to his double bass as his "wife."

To make sense of this sexual ambiguity, I have deployed contemporary theories on gender and sexuality in an attempt to unearth a more descriptive sexual identity for Dragonetti. Through analysis, I argue for a possible asexual and aromantic identity.

To explore the relationship Dragonetti had with his bass, I analyze what is believed to have been one of Dragonetti's last compositions, a set of twelve unaccompanied waltzes for double bass. These compositions seem to have been

very personal to the virtuoso and were only heard by a single, close friend, Vincent Novello. The waltzes seem to be private and personal engagements between Dragonetti and his "wife." By analyzing the inner workings of these dances, I aim to gain a better understanding of Dragonetti's sexual and romantic orientations as well as his relationship with his beloved double bass.

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Introduction

Domenico Carlo Maria Dragonetti was perhaps the first virtuoso of what we would today call the double bass. Born in Venice in 1763, Dragonetti lived a long life and had a fruitful career as a virtuoso performer, ensemble musician, and composer, passing away in 1846 in London. His remarkable feats on the instrument are believed to have significantly influenced bass playing and composition into the late nineteenth century.

From when Dragonetti started learning bass as a child in Venice to when he passed away at the age of 83, there was no standard school for double-bass playing. The instrument itself varied from region to region, as did the technique of playing it. During the late eighteenth century and through the start of the nineteenth, some basses had five strings, such as the Viennese violone[1], while everywhere else in Europe, three- and four-stringed instruments were popular. Unlike the violone, these three- and four-stringed double-bass instruments had no standard tuning and were usually tuned to accommodate whatever composition was being performed.

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[1] The violone, popular in Vienna until its eventual obsolescence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was one of the last instruments of the viol family used in concert ensembles. This five-stringed instrument was tuned in fourths and thirds (F-A-D-F#-A). This tuning limited its ability to play in certain keys, which led to its abandonment.

While Dragonetti left no treatise or method book for later generations to understand exactly how he played his instrument, we know from our minimal records and through analysis of his compositions that he preferred a three-stringed instrument tuned in fourths (A, D, G).[2] This tuning in fourths eventually became standardized throughout the nineteenth century, perhaps through Dragonetti's adoption of it. Modern basses use this same tuning in fourths but with four strings, adding a low E below the A string. Though not as common, some basses have five strings, with an added B string below the low E.[3]

Dragonetti's choice of bow was far more unusual. While he experimented with many different bow types,[4] he clearly preferred an Italian-style bow, which was then obsolete. This bow had a large convex arch held underhand (as in modern German technique). Both the bow shape and underhand grip allow for a loud and full sound.

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[2] Jury T. Kobayashi, "Domenico Dragonetti: A Case Study of the 12 Unaccompanied Waltzes" (MA Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2020), 2.

[3] Another recent trend in double-bass playing is tuning the instrument in fifths, resulting in the tuning an octave below the cello (C-G-D-A). While tuning in fifths was popular in France during Dragonetti's time, it has since reemerged in popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century with bassists such as Joel Quarrington and Red Mitchel. Dragonetti would likely have experimented with tuning in fifths, as such tuning was common among French bassists of the time.

[4] Fiona Palmer, *Domenico Dragonetti in England (1794–1846): The Career of a Double Bass Virtuoso* (Clarendon Press, 1997), 82–83.

While Dragonetti was based in London for most of his career, he often traveled around Europe, meeting and befriending many contemporary musicians and composers. Some notable figures include (but are not limited to) Beethoven, Paganini, and Rossini. The encounter with Beethoven was noteworthy, as Dragonetti's performance on his double bass of Beethoven's Cello Sonata, Op. 5 No. 2, amazed the composer enough for him to leap up from the piano and hug Dragonetti.[5]

Another instrumentalist to whom Dragonetti was close was violinist Giovanni Viotti (1755–1824). One account of their meetings, recalled by Francesco Caffi,[6] tells of Viotti inviting Dragonetti to his home to play some violin duets that he had written. While expecting Dragonetti to arrive with a violin (which he could also play), Viotti was surprised to see that Dragonetti had brought only his bass and assumed it was a joke. When Viotti inquired, Dragonetti stated, "It's not a joke, this is my violin, I never had another."[7]

Dragonetti was also well acquainted with Haydn during his London years. Haydn marveled at Dragonetti's abilities on the bass, and both gentlemen

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[5] Elliot Forbes, ed., "The Years 1798 and 1799," in *Thayer's Life of Beethoven, Part I*, 203–18 (Princeton University Press, 1967), 203–18 at 208.
[6] Francesco Caffi, *Storia della musica sacra nella già Cappella ducale di S. Marco in Venezia (dal 1318 al 1797),* ed. Surian Elvidio (Leo S. Olschki, 1987), 431.
[7] Ibid.

were collectors of dolls.[8]

Indeed, some of the feats Dragonetti was reported to have achieved on his instrument seem to challenge reality. Alfred Novello, a close friend of Dragonetti's and son of Vincent Novello, the famous nineteenth-century composer and music publisher, details many of these astonishing feats. One instance he recalls in his magazine, *The Musical World*, was when he invited Dragonetti to take part in a small private concert in his house in which Mozart's Mass, K. 49, was to be performed. Dragonetti arrived only to find that there was already a bass player, so Dragonetti then played the second violin part on his double bass, to everyone's astonishment and amusement.[9] The younger Novello also praised the great virtuoso as better than his contemporaries, saying: "We have heard him play a solo upon one string, and felt that on the score of achievement, Paganini had accomplished little in comparison."[10] It is stories like this that only add to the mystery of this remarkable virtuoso.

In my early years of playing the double bass in my undergraduate studies, I was seldom exposed to the music of Dragonetti. I had heard about him and

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[8] Karl Geiringer, *Haydn: A Creative Life in Music*, 1st ed. (W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1946), 127.
[9] Vincent Novello, "Orchestral Sketches," *The Musical World, A Weekly Record of Musical Science, Literature, and Intelligence*, vol. 1 (J. Alfred Novello, 1836), viii-xvi, at xiv.
[10] Ibid.

some of his accomplishments as a virtuoso, but his compositions, particularly his concertos, didn't interest me or my colleagues as much as those by Bottesini or Koussevitzky. Only when I was introduced to his unaccompanied waltzes did I begin to see the beauty of his compositional style and how idiomatic these works were for the bass. This started my ever-growing fascination with Dragonetti as a performer, a composer, and as an individual.

I became amazed and fascinated by his strange and eccentric personality. He was someone whose career was based on extraordinary and showy performances on an instrument that contemporary audiences had never heard played in that manner, so it is not so surprising that he had a personality to match.

In addition to his unusual performances, his personality and behavior were described as odd by all those who knew him. His manner of speaking was perhaps the most recognizable. When not speaking his native Venetian, he'd often blend his poor grasp of other languages together in an exotic manner.[11] Only those close to him could comprehend his perplexing speech.[12]

He also collected a variety of different things, including but not limited to

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[11] Novello, "Orchestral Sketches," xv.
[12] Ibid.

instruments, artwork, snuff boxes, and dolls. These dolls, which I discuss in the next chapter, represent a fascinating insight into Dragonetti as a person. While the act of collecting dolls in this era was not uncommon, it was bizarre that he reportedly referred to his doll collection as his "family" and brought them along during his travels to show spectators.[13]

It is hard to explain some of his bizarre characteristics. It is difficult to determine if these elements of his personality are truly authentic, deliberately imposed, or perhaps exaggerated for the purpose of attention. Dragonetti is by no means the only virtuoso with a cult of personality, and some of the stories about his character should be looked at with some level of skepticism. Despite this skepticism, I have always found myself asking a number of unanswerable questions in relation to Dragonetti, particularly related to his personal life and his relationships with the people around him.

Unfortunately, the sources needed to understand Dragonetti's interpersonal relationships are not well understood. Dragonetti research is minimal, only taking significant strides thanks to Fiona Palmer's 1993 book *Domenico Dragonetti in England (1794–1846): The Career of a Double Bass Virtuoso*.

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[13] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 36–38.

The two largest collections of Dragonetti's correspondences and music are at the British Library and Northwestern University. While it is fortunate these collections exist, they are not thoroughly cataloged or researched. Not just his correspondence (which is essential for my research) but even his compositions are not fully known or cataloged.[14] The inaccessibility of these sources presents significant challenges in research. Therefore, much of my research relies on what sources are available online or what other researchers (who had the opportunity to go through these collections) have found. Palmer's book contains a significant amount of research not just on his career but also on his social life in London.

He seems to have been a very social individual, very well-known, and popular among the London musical community at the time. He had many close and long-lasting friendships, especially in the London musical scene. The aforementioned Vincent Novello, as well as Robert Lindley, a cellist and composer who performed for decades with Dragonetti, were some of his closest companions. Dragonetti even developed strong relationships with the children of his friends, including those of Vincent Novello and John Barnett.[15] He seems to have held family and friendship in high regard. Not much is known about his

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[14] Paul Nemeth, "The Early Publication History of Domenico Dragonetti" (DMA Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2019), 230.
[15] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 54–58.

Venetian family after he moved to London. Caffi mentions that he had no family back home besides his sister, Maria, to whom he sent financial assistance until 1843.[16] This devotion to his distant sister and his London peers seems quite the norm for his Catholic and Venetian upbringing. Curiously, however, Dragonetti remained a bachelor his entire life, not seeking a family of his own despite certain societal and religious pressures to do so. The question of why he did not pursue a family of his own cannot be definitively answered; instead, it opens up a host of new questions about his sexual and romantic interests.

Was he heterosexual and simply didn't want to put the time into starting his own family? Was he a closeted homosexual and didn't want to marry, perhaps using his demanding music career as an excuse to remain single? Or was there something else? First, I think that dealing with absolutes, as in gay or straight, is not necessarily helpful, especially considering the lack of supporting evidence for either. In my first chapter, I argue that a more detailed look at his life, combined with a modern understanding of gender and sexuality, can help us reach a more profound consideration of Dragonetti as an individual as well as his relationship to his music.

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[16] Caffi, *Storia Della Musica Sacra*, 436.

To support this theory, I present a chapter on his relationship with physical objects, of which he collected many, but primarily in relation to his double bass, which he referred to as his "wife." Then, I shall present a case study on one of his final compositions, the *Twelve Waltzes for Unaccompanied Bass*, according to his autograph manuscript, which remained unpublished at his death. These particular works are an anomaly in themselves: they were very personal works to him, and they were never performed in public. They obviously require no one else for Dragonetti to perform with and no other musicians to accompany him — only Dragonetti and his beloved double bass.

Chapter 1: Dragonetti's Sexuality Reexamined

A More Thorough Understanding of Sexual Differences

Sexuality is a difficult and, unfortunately, controversial topic to discuss, especially regarding historical figures. In this chapter, I wish to dive into this topic despite the many pitfalls. I understand the controversies surrounding the application of contemporary theories of gender and sexuality to historical figures who could not have possibly identified in the ways we understand now. Despite this, I continue my analysis along these lines, not in an effort to impose a fixed identity on Dragonetti but rather to attempt to understand the ambiguity that comes from our available information on his life. In addition, while I will be utilizing contemporary theories and ideas about sexuality and its relationship to music, I find even them to be limiting in conveying the immense variety of sexual expression we as humans experience.

Far too often, we create rigid categories in regard to sexuality that narrow our perception of the human experience. Heteronormativity leads to queer erasure; too often have historians assumed historical figures to be straight and even come up with apologetics to suppress evidence of queer identity. While the shift to more queer-inclusive historiography has been extremely validating (for

queer individuals such as myself) and fruitful in its ability to enrich our understanding of musicians'/composers' relationships with music, it is still quite limiting and continues to perpetuate the erasure of different identities. Queer identity, according to our contemporary understanding, includes a rich and diverse spectrum of possibilities.

Speaking from experience for a moment, when exploring my own gender identity and sexuality, I found it difficult to fit into the rigid binaries of gay/straight, man/woman, etc. I am by no means an anomaly in this respect. Individuals such as myself, who have a hard time identifying with a binary definition, have been around throughout history.[17] As I cannot speak for all historical figures, I will speak for myself: I have found my sexual and gender identities to be ambiguous; these identities are not a product of contemporary terminology or theories, but they do help me communicate the complex ambiguities of my true self. In other words, I am queer— I am ambiguous because that is who I am and not because there are now theories that explain my identity.

If I'm not alone in my inability to conform to rigid binary definitions, then

[17] Anthony F. Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 33–35.

why would we expect the historical figures we study to fall into these same rigid categories? If, instead, we embrace a broader, more nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality, we can perhaps make better sense of people's unique experiences.

Every individual person's life experience is unique, and in many instances, it may be inappropriate to speculate as to someone's gender or sexual identity. That's why I strongly believe that one's own identity is what one says it is. However, people of the past cannot tell us their identity. Could someone have been homosexual before the modern understanding of such a term? Certainly. Could a man in the late nineteenth century who engaged in sexual acts with both men and women (what we would today call bisexual) still have been considered in his time as homosexual? Absolutely.

In order to unravel this complicated issue, I suggest that we attempt to view things not in binary absolutes but across a spectrum. Sexuality would seem to be fundamental to understanding the historical Dragonetti. However, in order to talk about sexuality, we first need to broaden our understanding of interpersonal relationships in general. First, there needs to be a clear distinction between romanticism and sexuality, both of which exist on a spectrum.

To illustrate the difference between romanticism and sexuality, I will regard both in relation to *attraction*. A person may be *sexually* attracted to someone but, at the same time, not *romantically* attracted to that person. The same can work in reverse: one might be romantically attracted to someone but not sexually attracted to them. These types of attractions are different from one another despite being aligned in many individuals. Both of them may be viewed across a spectrum. Also, some individuals experience attraction (whether sexual or romantic) with many different individuals they encounter in their lives. On the other hand, some don't feel any sort of attraction (sexual or romantic) towards anyone. That is why a wide perspective is necessary to understand such nuances.

Since these two types of attraction don't always overlap, then what we understand to be *sexual orientation* should also include *romantic orientation*. I shall discuss this in more detail later.

A further distinction must be made specifically with sexuality. Sexual *attraction* is not the only dimension that should be considered. There is also sexual *desire,* and like the independence between sexuality and romanticism, it must be understood as independent of sexual *attraction*. This one can be a bit more difficult to comprehend, but it is crucial to the understanding of

individuals who are *asexual*. Put simply, asexual people don't experience sexual *attraction* but can often still experience sexual *desires*. So what does this mean? It means that asexual individuals may not find other people sexually attractive but still may experience sexual fantasies or *desires* that may not involve sexual interactions with other people.[18] This is not to be confused with celibacy, as some who practice celibacy do experience sexual attraction but don't act upon it for external reasons (religion, personal choice, etc.). As pointed out above, romantic and sexual *attraction* can be independent of one another, meaning that people who are or identify as asexual can engage in romantic relationships, unless such an individual is also aromantic, in which case said individual would not experience romantic *attraction*.

Dragonetti's Sexual Ambiguity

Our current understanding of Dragonetti's sexuality and romantic attractions or desires is shrouded in mystery. When examining a historical figure, we cannot simply ask the individual or expect to find some record of them describing their experience using our contemporary understanding of the topic. Therefore, we

[18] Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever, "Asexuality," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 503–4.

must look at their behavior and personality and see if it aligns with our current understanding. This, of course, is not a foolproof method. There is so much that will always be lost to history, so many unrecorded events and conversations that, if we were familiar with them today, might completely change our perspective. I don't believe this should stop us from trying, however. There is too much at stake — too much that can be learned about an individual and their relationship to music not to ask these difficult questions.

To start with the reexamination of Dragonetti's sexuality, let's review what we do know about him and his possible romantic interests. As we already know, Dragonetti remained a bachelor his whole life. As Palmer points out in her book, only two correspondences seem to hint at any romantic entanglements. First is a letter addressed to Dragonetti by a woman named Teresa Battagia in which she implies that the two of them were engaged to be married and expressed her sorrow for his leaving her and moving to London:[19]

> You left without letting me see you, in fact you treated me with contempt. My family tried to convince me that I would receive a letter from you but even that has not materialized. All of this shows that you have not spared a thought for the poor, unhappy girl who is completely dedicated to you; you must consider me to be so if you have a reasonable soul. God has moved Madame Vittoria's heart. She, aware of my sorrow, asked me to stay with her to alleviate my fixation, and at present I am with her.

[19] Palmer, *Dragonetti in London*, 48–50.

> Nothing can comfort me, and as far as entering an enclosed convent is concerned it has been so difficult to find a place here that Padua is now being tried. If we find a place, I shall not hesitate to accept it, although it will cause me pain to leave my fatherland and my family. All these sacrifices are necessary because of you. Your father visited me yesterday and he allowed me to read two letters from you in which there were greetings for me and news of your good health. Your mother has told me that I must cheer up and start work again and then some other suitor may present himself. This proposition, which brought back memories of your promises, hurt me cruelly with its suggestion that I could meet someone else. God willing, I hope that if I get into a convent, you will at least not fail to make a donation as you promised. This is as much to protect your reputation as it is for the one who trusted you. I hope that this soulful and passionate letter of mine will be accorded the grace of a reply. I hope that the help and blessing of God may be yours, as much as my wounded heart can hope these things, and I call myself your very faithful Teresa Battagia. 6 October 1794.[20]

If this letter is authentic, and there seems no reason to question its authenticity, then why did Dragonetti leave? Was it simply to start his career in London, or was there no interest on Dragonetti's part in getting married? Why would he have been engaged only to not go through with it? Perhaps there was social pressure to get married despite his reluctance, and the career opportunity in London gave him an acceptable excuse to back out of the engagement. But if he was interested in marrying, why did he not do so in London?

There is only one other example of a possible romantic interest, again one

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[20]Teresa Battagia, 6 October 1794 letter to Dragonetti, "Partiste senza lasciare . . . ," Moldenhauer Collection, Northwestern University Libraries. Translation by Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 49.

that Palmer cites, but it seems to bring forth more questions than answers. This example is a letter from Dragonetti in which he declares his love for an unidentified individual:

> Dear friend, I hope you will forgive me for being late in doing my duty, but you can be certain that your D. has not allowed you to leave his heart for a moment. I received the first letter on a Monday evening, at two after midnight, and I went instantly to make the test [do the experiment] you indicated, but that accursed magic ink made me go mad for over an hour; when I put the paper next to the light a few words appeared and then they disappeared like the devil does, so I could not read anything. In the end I lit the fire and then I was able to read a little, but just as I was beginning to enjoy myself the paper caught fire and there I was, unhappy, and unable to read the rest of the dear letter. I understood the second letter very well and was pleased to read that you remember your dear friend, but it seems to me that your D is not the only one in your heart and I think that, were I able to love you to a lesser degree, I would imitate you well, but I am unable to do so. In fact, I love you more all the time and I adore you like my own soul. I can't live without you. I am leading a miserable life and, I swear, I think only of you and am very unhappy. Please write soon and tell me when you would like me to come and see you, if Saturday or Sunday is convenient for you, I am free. Embracing you with a true heart, goodbye.[21]

It is truly unfortunate that we don't have more information concerning this letter. We don't know to whom it was addressed nor when or where it was written.[22] The unique contents of this letter amongst his known surviving letters

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[21] Domenico Dragonetti, Autographed letter from Dragonetti, "Cara amica, Spero . . . ," British Library Department of Manuscripts, MS 17838, f. 410. Translation by Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 50.

[22] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 50.

might suggest that this relationship was short-lived or not reciprocated. Of course, without any additional information, it is impossible to conclude anything about this potential relationship.

Besides these two examples, there are no other records at all of romantic or sexual relationships. This leaves the Dragonetti question perhaps unanswerable. However, given what information we have, we can create some theories as to his true nature. Palmer discourages the speculation that he was actually gay.[23] While I agree that there is not enough evidence here to say that he was homosexual, I don't think the idea should be completely discounted. For I don't think that these two letters alone are enough to "prove Dragonetti straight."

To make sense of this clear ambiguity, I call upon our newly extended understanding of romantic and sexual attraction as a possible method to fill in the gaps. To do this, it seems better to see how he *doesn't* behave rather than use minimal information on how he *does* behave. Palmer's theory in regard to his lack of a romantic partner is that he was instead solely focusing on his career as a performer and a composer.[24] I don't have a problem with this theory, though I

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[23] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 51.
[24] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 51.

fear it may cause possibly incorrect assumptions. It could allow researchers to assume automatically that he was heterosexual and just didn't have time for marriage. I will not argue that Dragonetti wasn't hard-working or very focused on his career, but he very well could have been bisexual/biromantic, and the theory could still stand. In addition, his seemingly wide group of friends and his social extroversion seem to poke holes in the "he didn't have time for a wife" theory.

Everything around his sexuality and his relationships is so ambiguous; there are so many unknowns. Why the ambiguity? Why the unknowns? Surely, any deviation from heterosexual norms would have had social implications (as is still the case today). Perhaps this could be a reason for such ambiguity. That brings us to the question: does the nonconformity to heterosexual norms imply queerness? In a social sense, he very well might have been— but in what way would Dragonetti be queer? Let's explore this hypothesis of a queer Dragonetti. I do not seek to label him as such, but exploring a hypothetical sexuality might explain some of the ambiguities in the history of his life.

I suggest that Dragonetti may have been asexual. He may also have been aromantic due to the minimal evidence of romantic desires. Since we don't know the exact date of the second letter, it's possible that this aspect of his personality

was fluid and changed throughout his long life. For that reason, I am slightly skeptical of the aromantic theory, but I believe it should be entertained.

As far as sexual *attraction* goes, there doesn't seem to be any evidence of this. One would think that a socially active, public figure such as Dragonetti would have left some evidence regarding sexual desires or attraction to others in his orbit (whether male or female). Of the hundreds of items of correspondence contained in the British Library and Northwestern, as well as written accounts by close friends (Caffi, the Novello family, etc.), it is interesting there is no evidence of romantic and sexual desires aside from the two letters found by Palmer. The theory that he was asexual (and possible aromantic) seems a better explanation than Palmer's theory that he wished to focus on his career. Perhaps he had no desire to be in a relationship, not just for his career but simply because he had no interest in involving himself with someone else, either sexually or romantically.

This brings us to the sexual *desire* of Dragonetti. If he was truly asexual, there remains the possibility that he still experienced some amount of sexual *desire*. How this desire manifested itself or how he acted on it will probably never be known, as this, for many asexual individuals,[25] is very personal and probably

[25] Brunning and McKeever, "Asexuality," 498–500.

not something he would have discussed even with his closest friends. If rooted in fantasy or disconnected from any individual, such desires could have manifested themselves in other ways.

Chapter 2: Dragonetti's Wife

Regardless of Domenico Dragonetti's true sexual or romantic orientation, he clearly had a number of strong passions and interests throughout his life that seemed to be quite fulfilling to him. Perhaps his asexual and possibly aromantic orientation gave him the time to pursue what he actually loved while defying the social pressures to conform to a heteronormative lifestyle. Was this strong dedication to music and platonic friends a way to hide his true identity, or was it circumstantial that his preoccupation with other interests (musical or otherwise) just happened to dovetail perfectly with his true sense of self?

With the exception of the second letter quoted above, in which he expressed that he was living "a miserable life," it does seem as though he did live a fulfilling and happy life. The phrase is commonplace in love letters of the time. It is quite possible that he did wish to find a romantic partner eventually and, for whatever reason, never did. Regardless of what this reason may be, his fascination with material things and, of course, music, seemed to bring much joy to his life.

It is even possible that such fascination with material objects was a way to cope with his inability to find "true love," though I find this an unlikely theory,

at least in its most extreme sense. Rather, I believe it is possible that Dragonetti did not want to pursue any romantic relationship. Apart from the second letter mentioned, there is little to suggest he wished to pursue a romantic partner. With such close friends, most notably Vincent Novello, inheriting numerous items of Dragonetti's correspondence after his passing[26] it seems bizarre that we do not find any details about any romantic life.

So, what did bring fulfillment to Dragonetti during his lifetime? To start with, let's discuss the material objects mentioned above. Dragonetti was an avid collector of musical scores, artwork, snuffboxes, dolls, and musical instruments.[27] Dragonetti made a comfortable living in his many years of performance, which afforded him the ability to purchase these items. In addition, his popularity across Europe enabled him to receive numerous gifts to add to his collections.

No discussion of Dragonetti's collections would be complete without discussing his collection of dolls. As Palmer notes, some called Dragonetti's

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[26] While the exact contents of all the personal correspondence of Dragonetti are unknown to me, both the British Library and Northwestern collections consist of letters to and from Dragonetti. According to the researchers who had access to these collections, his correspondence contains but is not limited to: letters to and from close friends; letters from fans or acquaintances; letters concerning the purchasing of instruments, instrument parts, and strings; and letters concerning the purchasing of non-musical items that Dragonetti collected.

[27] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 37.

fascination with dolls quite eccentric. A written account by Henry Philips, an English vocalist, described the bizarre behavior Dragonetti exhibited in reference to his own dolls:

> Take him out of his profession. He was a mere child, given to the greatest frivolities. He led a single life, and occupied one lodging for years; which lodging consisted of a bedroom, sitting room, and a vacant apartment, which contained his collection of paintings, engravings and dolls. Dolls – do not start, reader – a strange weakness for a man of genius to indulge in, but so it was; white dolls, brown dolls, dark dolls, and black, large, small, middling and diminutive, formed an important feature in his establishment. The large black doll he would call his wife, and she used to travel with him to the festivals. He and Lindley[28] generally journeyed together inside the coach, and when changing horses in some little village, he would take this black doll and dance it at the window, to the infinite astonishment and amusement of the bystanders. Such was one of the strange eccentricities of this really great man.[29]

As Palmer correctly points out, the act of collecting dolls was not entirely uncommon for the time;[30] even Joseph Haydn was an avid collector of dolls.[31] What does seem bizarre is this apparent reference to his black doll as his "wife." The evidence of his reference to his one of his dolls as his "wife" is very thin.[32] Such references come from individuals who were less acquainted with

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[28] Robert Lindley (1776 – 1855), English cellist and composer and friend of Dragonetti.
[29] Henry Philips, *Musical and Personal Recollections During Half a Century*, vol. 2 (Charles J. Skeat, 1864), 129–30.
[30] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England,* 37.
[31] Geiringer, *Haydn: A Life in Music*, 127.
[32] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 38.

Dragonetti, such as Philips or Lindley Nunn, a London-based organist and professor of music, who claimed Dragonetti's doll "wife" was "life-sized."[33] There is no such reference to the doll being his "wife" by Dragonetti himself nor by any of his close associates like Novello or Robert Lindley. Such a declaration — that he actually thought of such a doll as his "wife" — would surely have produced some sort of documented evidence from Dragonetti himself or his close associates. Therefore, if he did, in fact, make such claims to certain individuals, as in the written account above, it seems likely that it was done to humor them.

Dragonetti's musical passions were not limited to the double bass. He was a gifted multi-instrumentalist, perhaps not surprising given his large instrument collection. In addition to performing, he also had a passion for composing. His compositions were, likewise, not limited to just double bass. He composed vocal works, piano sonatas, caprices for two violins, and some twenty string quintets.[34]

His collection of musical instruments, consisting of basses, cellos, violins, etc., surely provided him the opportunity to experiment with different sounds and deepened his understanding of instruments. As one might expect, his double

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[33] Lindley Nunn, *Musical Recollections of More Than Half a Century (1826–1899)* (W. E. Harrison, 1899), 41–2.
[34] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 77.

basses seemed to be the subject of most of his musical experiments. As mentioned in my introduction, the double bass was far from standardized at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Dragonetti, therefore, seemed to experiment with basses of a variety of sizes, number of strings, tuning of strings, string gauges, etc. Evidence for this comes from the instruments he owned as well from his correspondence with an Italian string manufacturer, in which he was very particular about the thickness of his strings.[35]

Dragonetti commissioned at least two double basses from contemporary luthier Vincenzo Panormo and ordered a variety of bass parts such as machine heads and double-bass backs,[36] suggesting he was interested in tinkering with repairs and setups. It seems that he was exploring all the possibilities of the instrument, seeking the ideal double bass for his liking.

Among the variety of basses Dragonetti owned throughout his lifetime, he did have one that seems to have been his favorite and that he owned for most of his lengthy career. This three-stringed instrument was made by the sixteenth-century luthier, Gasparo da Salò. Dragonetti had acquired this instrument from

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[35] Domenico Dragonetti, letter to Giovanni Batta Romanin, "The strings recently sent to me . . . ," Moldenhauer Collection, Northwestern University Libraries, translation by Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 76.
[36] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 89.

the nuns at La Pietà, a convent in Vicenza.[37] While leaving many of his instruments to his friends and colleagues in his will, he specified that this particular instrument be given back to the nuns at Vicenza upon his death.[38]

Dragonetti had an exceptional fondness and respect for this instrument and referred to it as his "wife." Compared to the accounts by Philips and Nun, who were not as close friends of Dragonetti, there are more examples of this, particularly from his close friends and correspondences with them, that he referred to this bass as his wife. One particular account was written by Mary Novello, his dear friend Vincent Novello's wife, that truly highlights his strong attachment to this particular instrument.

> Dragonetti passed the evening with us. . . . He came to seek his beloved wife, alias his double bass, which he had left in our care for these past two months. He has refused a sum, which few men would for their wives, and perhaps which few wives would value, namely [£]800. It has been in his possession for 40 years and upwards and belonged to the nuns of La Pietà at Vicenza. . . . An English nobleman had offered 100 guineas for this celebrated double bass, but Dragonetti, who coveted it also, won the father confessor to his side, who finally succeeded in persuading the nuns that it would be sacrilege to sell this valuable instrument to a heretic who could not give voice to it, and refused to hear their confessions until they acceded to his wishes, and the instrument became Dragonetti's who alone is worthy to possess it.[39]

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[37] Caffi, *Storia Della Musica Sacra*, 429.
[38] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England,* 67.
[39] Mary Novello, Nerina Medici di Marignano, and Rosemary Hughes, *A Mozart Pilgrimage* (Novello and Company Ltd., 1955), 337–38.

While this particular account is secondhand, it does highlight the immense passion he had for this instrument. The account suggests a romanticized desire of a man for a woman, rather than a material object. The competition between Dragonetti and the unknown English nobleman for the instrument in the convent suggests two suitors attempting to win a woman's heart. Dragonetti was, of course, successful, therefore winning the heart of his beautiful bride.

Such passion for music, particularly regarding his double bass, seems to surpass any such romantic or sexual passion he had for another person. So that brings up the question, can a double bass be a wife? Did he really feel as though this bass was his wife? Can the love for an instrument substitute for a romantic partner?

An instance of Dragonetti himself referring to his bass as his wife comes during a dinner in London where he was quoted as follows:

> "Gentlemen, me sorry no ladies; very fine *de* English *donne* ('Bravo! Bravo!'); *ma*, I tank you tousand time! I trink all de helths. I no speak fine, *mais*- my vife, de contra-basso, *he* take all *de* speak, and *she* speak Got shave the Queen '*besser als*' noting!"[40]

[40] 'Bacchus and Apollo,' *Musical Union* Vol. 3, no. 9 (1845), 19; quoted in Rodney Slatford, "Domenico Dragonetti," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 97, no. 1 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1970), 28. The italics are not mine and are included in Slatford's paper; however, it is not clear if the italics are Slatford's or from the original source.

This reference to his "vife" gives credence to Mary Novello's account. While this could be attributed to his eccentric character, couldn't it also be true? Socially, in a way, his bass was, in fact, his wife. For the time, a wife being socially viewed as "property" of her husband would be the obvious comparison. It is, of course, more than that. Dragonetti had a deep love for his bass; he traveled with it, he honored it, and through him, it spoke.

If asexuality and aromanticism are, in fact, ascribable to Dragonetti, the idea of a substitute may not be the right way to think about it. Let me elaborate: if such asexual and aromantic identities aptly represent Dragonetti, that doesn't necessarily mean there needs to be a "substitute" or something to fill in some void since there is no attraction to other individuals anyway, and thus no void to fill. However, a passion for music and double-bass playing can resemble a passion for another person in the absence of romantic interest. Surely, one can have both a strong passion for music and a strong passion for a romantic or sexual partner, but one can surely experience no sexual or romantic attraction to a person and yet have a passionate attachment to music.

Briefly, I would like to discuss another individual whose life resembles that of Dragonetti: George Frideric Handel. Like Dragonetti, Handel remained a bachelor his whole life but dedicated himself to music. In the chapter "Was

George Frideric Handel Gay?" in *Music and Identity Politics,* Gary C. Thomas highlights the sexual ambiguity of the great composer.[41] Much of the discourse surrounding Handel's possible homosexuality focused on a quote that I found fascinating. When asked about his "love for women" by King George II, he is supposed to have replied, "I have no time for anything but music."[42] While it is not certain that such an exchange actually took place, the discussion has since centered around a binary "gay or straight" identity for Handel. I was disappointed to see no consideration of an asexual or aromantic identity. A reply such as "I have no time for anything but music" could be interpreted as an excuse, not to hide a gay identity (though I don't completely dismiss this theory), but rather a way of communicating a lack of romantic and/or sexual attraction to a *person*. A strong passion for music clearly took priority in the lives of both Handel and Dragonetti. Could the preoccupation of a music career be the perfect excuse not to engage with unwanted societal norms of marriage, sex, and family? I am not suggesting that these individuals sought music in order to deliberately avoid these norms; rather, they are coincidental yet symbiotic by nature. The

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[41] Gary C. Thomas, "Was George Frideric Handel Gay?: On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics," *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. by Gary C. Thomas, Philip Brett, and Elizabeth Wood (Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 155-203.
[42] Gary C. Thomas, "Was George Frideric Handel Gay?" 157.

passion for music, therefore, exists regardless of sexuality and conveniently hides or distracts from their unwillingness to conform to social norms, which is actually based on a lack of any romantic or sexual interest.

To further understand this link between musical passion and sexual/romantic orientation, I will turn to Suzanne Cusick's chapter "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music" in her book *Music and Identity Politics*.[43] In this chapter, Cusick conflates sexual experiences with musical experiences. She puts forth an interesting definition of sex that excludes its connection to the reproductive process: "It is a way of expressing and/or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure shared, accepted, or given."[44]

With this definition, we can clearly see the similarities between musical experiences and sexual experiences, which leads Cusick to put forth the question: "Is music sex?" While in the very literal sense, this may seem like an unusual question, engaging with it can deepen our understanding of music and our relationship to it.

To better make sense of this relationship between "sexuality" and "musicianship," I propose we deepen our understanding of "musicianship" by

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[43] Suzanne G. Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Music and Identity Politics,* ed. Ian Biddle (Routledge, 2017), 67–80.
[44] Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship," 70.

utilizing our expanded knowledge of the sexual/asexual spectrum. As mentioned in the previous chapter, asexuality is the absence of sexual *attraction*; therefore, there is little to no interest in intimacy with another person. Yet, for some asexual individuals, sexual *desires* still exist.

Utilizing Cusick's ideas, I see a further similarity. If we view *attraction* as the attraction of a musician to their instrument (or, as Cusick puts it, having an intimate relationship expressed through "physical pleasure shared, accepted, or given"), and if we view *desire* as a desire to experience music (i.e., listen to it but not engage in the physical process of making it), then we can see these parallels: musical *attraction* is attraction to the physical act of producing music and musical *desire* is the desire to hear and enjoy music.

Regardless of whether an individual is asexual or allosexual,[45] sexual *desire* can still exist to an extent. Likewise, regardless of whether someone is a musician or an "a-musician," the *desire* for music would still exist. While these two separate concepts have interesting parallels, it is important not to infer one from the other. Of course, allosexual people are not all musicians, and asexual people are not all non-musicians. That's not to say, nor am I implying, that sexuality and

[45] This is the term for individuals who regularly experience sexual attraction to another person.

musicianship have no relation. To bring things back to the Dragonetti phenomenon, one cannot infer that Dragonetti experienced sexual attraction based solely on his clear attraction to music-making.

If we view the allosexual/asexual distinction as a spectrum rather than as a binary, with people on one end experiencing lots of sexual attraction and people on the other end experiencing no sexual attraction, we could then theorize a similar musician/"a-musician" spectrum with very dedicated (perhaps obsessive) musicians on one end and people who love music but have no interest in performing on the other end. On this spectrum, Dragonetti and most virtuosi would fall closer to the obsessive side. Paganini, for example, would also be in that position. But Paganini seems also to have been positioned towards the allosexual end of the allosexual/asexual spectrum, having known heterosexual attractions. Dragonetti's placement on the sexual spectrum was different from Paganini's. He seems to have been towards the asexual end.

What, then, does it mean for Dragonetti to have been both a hyper-involved musician and an asexual/aromantic person? Dragonetti's obsessive musicianship more closely parallels his sexual *desires* rather than *attraction.* As mentioned above, the sexual *desires* of asexual people are often private, and since they do not directly involve another person, it may be impossible to know the

extent of such *desires*. With no direct evidence to suggest any specific sexual desires of Dragonetti, it might be helpful to look at his non-sexual passions. What seems to be the important factor in understanding Dragonetti better is his "wife," his Gasparo da Salò double bass. This bass represents both his passion for music and music-making as well as his lack of interest in pursuing a romantic or sexual relationship. Was his bass, in fact, his "wife?" Did he really think of his bass as his wife? Was this reference to his bass as his "wife" merely a way to avoid questions about why he was not married, much like Handel's supposed response to King George II? Or was his love for this instrument more fulfilling than any romantic or sexual relationship could have been?

If we take him at his word that he thought of his bass as his "wife," what does that tell us about his performances? And if musical performance can be likened to sex, then what kind of lover was Dragonetti?

By many accounts, the qualities of Dragonetti's playing were extreme agility, precise intonation, and a powerful sound. A further excerpt from the diary of Mary Novello refers to the power achieved by Dragonetti with his "wife":

> At a convent in Padua Dragonetti boasted that his bass was more powerful than the organ. [A] dispute arose, and a wager was settled between him and the organist [Turvini Bertoni]. Dragonetti purchased an extra large string, indeed one that had served as a sign of the man's trade,

> and having fastened it to his bass, in the dead of night alarmed the fraternity by imitating a sudden storm of wind and thunder on his instrument in the corridors.[46]

Another account of this event comes from Vincent Novello:

> . . . in the dead of a fine summer-night, when the inmates of the convent were all asleep, he stole into one of the corridors and commenced a "Solo Fulminato" – in common English, he imitated the noise of a tempest with such effect, that on the following morning every one [sic] was talking of the last night's thunder, and were not a little surprised to find that the weather had been unusually clear. On the succeeding night Dragonetti repeated his joke; one of the monks, however, running out of the dormitory, blundered over the double bass, and at once discovered the philosophy of the thunderstorm. Bertoni yielded the palm for power to the Amati bass.[47]

Dragonetti's powerful sound was not the only hallmark of his playing. He seemed to be capable of creating dramatic contrasts by means of his delicate, softer, sweeter passages as well, as seen in a review from the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* in 1815:

> [H]e contrives to extract, from this gigantic machine, tones which rival those of any instrument whatever in energetic and even in pathetic and tender effect, and sweeps over the cables which string it.[48]

This dramatic contrast between thunderous power and sweet delicacy

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[46] Mary Novello, *A Mozart Pilgrimage*, 337–38.
[47] Novello, "Orchestral Sketches," xiii. Dragonetti's bass was made not by Amati, but by Amati's teacher, Gasparo di Salò.
[48] "Edinburgh Music Festival," *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, no. 16290 (6 Nov. 1815), p. 3, col. 3.

leads me to suggest that Dragonetti was a versatile lover in a musical sense. Such a large and difficult-to-manage instrument requires great skill to bring out the instrument's full potential. Dragonetti seemed to take the capabilities of this previously misconceived instrument to every extreme, making the instrument thunder in loud passages and express delicacy in lighter passages.

This musical control that Dragonetti displayed was expressed not only in his solo playing but also in his ensemble work. As the principal bassist in the King's Theatre in London, at a time when there was no conductor, it was up to the continuo instruments to lead the rest of the ensemble. Dragonetti and the cellist and keyboard player were such leaders. Of the three, Dragonetti stood out to audiences and even to his employer, as he was one of the highest-paid musicians employed at the King's Theatre during his tenure.[49] Another account of Dragonetti's solo and ensemble playing is given by composer and pianist Cipriani Potter:

> The double-bass was never listened to as a solo instrument, until the celebrated Dragonetti made his appearance. This distinguished artist has created a great stimulus in this country, causing many to cultivate the double-bass; and it may be asserted with truth, that performers would never have been acquainted with its great resources, had it not been for that extraordinary player; the peculiar excellence of whose performance consists, first, in the fine tone he produces; his extraordinary delicacy; immense power when required; the neatness and rapidity of his

[49] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England,* 100.

> execution; perfect intonation; and lastly, his 'coup d'archet', or, to be less technical, his accent and point. The character he gives to a composition is uniformly gratifying to the author as well as the auditor. Although he has been accused of leading the orchestra, or, in the estimation of some leaders, of mis-leading, (for no man in that situation approves of a public correction,) yet it must be acknowledged that he has upon various occasions, by his promptitude and decision, brought back a whole band who, 'like sheep had gone astray'.[50]

It is qualities like these that point out not only his virtuosity but also the intimate relationship he had with his instrument. In the next chapter, I will focus on one of his last sets of compositions, the *Twelve Waltzes for Unaccompanied Bass*. I will explore not only elements of performance but also the music itself, in an effort to understand the last dances Dragonetti had with his wife.

[50] Cipriani Potter, "Companion to the Orchestra; or Hints on Instrumentation. No. IV," *The Musical World*, vol. 5, no. 61 (J. Alfred Novello, 1836), 129-33, at 131–32.

Chapter 3: The Enigmatic Twelve Waltzes

Dragonetti's *Twelve Waltzes for Unaccompanied Bass* stand as a testament to his unique approach to composition. These perplexing compositions, believed to be among his last before his death in 1846,[51] showcase the pinnacle of his skills and performance ability. In a manner reminiscent of Bach's cello suites or Paganini's caprices, Dragonetti sought to demonstrate the double bass's potential as a solo instrument. His pioneering spirit is evident in these waltzes, which may well be the first waltzes written for solo double bass.

These waltzes, held in high regard by Dragonetti himself, carry a sense of mystery and exclusivity. They were never performed in public, remaining a private treasure, only to be heard within the confines of his home. Since Dragonetti was an exceptionally social individual, it's fascinating that these pieces were only heard by one of his friends, Vincent Novello. Upon receiving the autographed score after Dragonetti's death, Novello briefly annotated the score, noting the time Dragonetti played the waltzes to him. However, the annotations are undated, so the precise date of this encounter is unknown.

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[51] The exact date of composition is not known. The autograph score was passed to Vincent Novello after Dragonetti's death.

Novello held the performance in such high regard, saying Dragonetti played in a "way such as I never expect to hear again accomplished as long as I may live; of which [sic] will probably, never again be heard by anyone, on the double bass, as long as the world lasts."[52]

It is, however, understandable that these compositions were not publicly performed; Dragonetti's career as a solo performer was relatively short-lived compared with his career as an ensemble musician.[53] Perhaps the novelty of hearing a double-bass virtuoso in London had worn off, or perhaps this was because of his ability to negotiate considerable wages in institutions performing ensemble music. In his later years, Dragonetti focused on ensemble playing with the King's Theatre, Philharmonic Society, and The Ancient Concerts.[54] Surely, Dragonetti could have done more solo performances later in his life, but it is unclear as to why he didn't.

Dragonetti was obviously not eager to have these waltzes shown off. Why did he only share the performance of these compositions with this one friend? Also, why did Dragonetti choose the waltz as the genre for his solo bass

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[52] Notes by Vincent Novello on Domenico Dragonetti's autograph manuscript of the Twelve Waltzes, British Library Department of Manuscripts, MS 17831, f. 2[r].
[53] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 85.
[54] Ibid.

masterpiece? Certainly, Bach's grand cello suites were in the style of dances, but they were old ones. At the time of composition, Bach's suites used such dancing styles that had evolved beyond the ballroom; they had become stylized. The waltz was still being danced to during this period, but there existed a clear difference between a ballroom waltz and a concert waltz. Pioneers in adapting the waltz style to concert venues included Carl Maria von Weber and later, Chopin and Liszt. These composers wrote stylized waltzes for solo piano. Concert waltzes differed from their ballroom counterparts in their flashy tempos and the instrumental virtuosity required to perform them, much like Dragonetti's waltzes.

Given the style of the Dragonetti's waltzes, it is safe to assume that he did not intend these to be danced to. What is surprising, as mentioned above, is the lack of any public performance, with the exception of Novello. If these waltzes are more akin to concert waltzes, then the fact that he never performed them in public might support the idea that he had an especially intimate connection with them. What, then, did these compositions mean to Dragonetti?

If we take Dragonetti at his word, that his double bass was his wife, these compositions become a little less enigmatic. And if indeed his bass was his love,

above any other person, the waltz (a couples dance, with the dancers touching) seems quite fitting, especially in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the waltz was exceedingly popular. Again, the deliberate choice for these waltzes to be unaccompanied and played in the privacy of his own home strongly suggests a deep, intimate relationship with his instrument and these compositions. What was the extent of this intimacy? And what, if anything, can these waltzes reveal about his connection to his wife and his music?

If musical performance is similar to sexual intercourse, then analysis of these waltzes should reveal valuable insight into the relationship Dragonetti had with his bass. Philip Brett's article "Piano Four-Hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire" provides an interesting analysis of Schubert's sexuality and the interplay between the two performers in his Grand Duo.[55] Can a similar interplay exist, not with two performers but with one performer and their instrument, as is the case with Dragonetti?

In order to understand this potential relationship, I wish to look closely at what we know about the quality of Dragonetti's performances, especially in

[55] Philip Brett, "Piano Four-Hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire," *19th Century Music*, vol. 21, no. 2 (University of California Press, 1997), 149–76.

contrast to his contemporaries, the physicality of his technique, and, of course, the music itself.

Understanding Dragonetti as a Performer

As we have seen from sources quoted in previous chapters, Dragonetti was an extraordinary performer, well known for his technical abilities and expressive range. Dragonetti seems to have used this variety of expression not just in his solo playing but also in his ensemble playing.[56] Such performance qualities are a hallmark of his performances and differ significantly from other contemporary bass players. Double bass players at this time were not great solo performers for several different reasons. The large, unwieldy instrument was difficult to manage; intonation issues arose due to the large spaces between semitones as well as the significant shifts that are required for more melodic playing; the right hand has to balance the weight of the bow to produce a clear sound while applying enough weight to allow the instrument to speak fully; and with all that, the player must balance the instrument on their own body to prevent it falling over. These immense challenges, to name a few, are still relevant today, but

[56] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 63–96.

players throughout the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century particularly struggled greatly to find solutions. Italian composer Bonifazio Asioli (1769–1832) lists the reasons for the lack of first-rate bass players during his time:

> [T]he absence of any instruction book, the lack of incentive to choose the double bass, neglected as it was by those believing themselves capable of a greater success with a less awkward instrument, the frustration of the bass players over their subordinate position in the orchestra and over the lack of recognition of their skill by the audience, the lack of foresight of the less competent music directors and teachers, public as well as private, who suggested that their least gifted students take up the double bass.[57]

Asioli was not alone in recognizing the challenges of bass playing. Nearly a century before, Johann Joachim Quantz (1697–1773) wrote about double bassists and how performers should approach their music in his book, *On Playing the Flute* (1752). In his treatise, he argues that bass players should reduce and simplify their parts when doubling the cello.[58] He also argues for the use of frets on the bass to help with intonation.[59] Interestingly, he also suggests that players avoid strings that are too thick, as they harm the instrument's tone, a quality of the double bass that Dragonetti particularly cultivated.

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[57] Asioli, quoted in Paul Brun, *A History of the Double Bass,* (self-published, 1989), 42.
[58] Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, trans. Edward R. Reilly (Faber and Faber, 1966), 247–50, at 249.
[59] Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, 249.

As previously mentioned, Dragonetti entered a world of bass playing that had no set standard, allowing him to carve out his own niche and therefore make it his own. Perhaps what made Dragonetti stand out so much, even in his ensemble playing, is that audiences typically expected the worst when it came to bass players. Dragonetti was, therefore, able to subvert the audience's expectations not just by his technical prowess, which was uncommon, but also by his dramatic musical expression — his ability to make the double bass a truly *musical* instrument.

To understand Dragonetti's unprecedented playing, we must explore how he achieved both his power and delicacy. His ability to play loud and thunderous sounds comes down to two factors: his strings and his bow. As mentioned above, Dragonetti played with thick strings, a feature that adds significantly more tension to the instrument, allowing it to be more responsive and speak quickly. However, this high tension comes with drawbacks. Thick and high-tension strings require the bowing arm to use more weight, otherwise a hollow, almost *ponticello*, sound would result. We should also note the fact that these strings would have been made entirely of gut, making them much thicker than even the highest tension metal strings we have nowadays. Such challenges can be overcome with consistent practice, but Dragonetti's choice of a bow made

this obstacle far less of a challenge. His preference in bow was of an Italian style with a large convex arch (much like bows in the Baroque style). Even during Dragonetti's day, this bow was nearly obsolete, with French-style overhand-grip bows becoming more of the standard. Dragonetti's Italian bow used an underhand grip. There was no tension screw to adjust the tightness of the hairs.[60] Instead, Dragonetti's underhand grip allowed the fingers of the right hand to come in contact with the hairs of the bow to adjust the hair tension as needed. This is not too dissimilar from the use of bows employed on the viol family, from which double basses evolved.

The underhand grip of this Italian bow was far more effective in applying weight to the string than the French-style bow. Of course, there are positives and negatives to each type of bow,[61] and there's no doubt that Dragonetti experimented with both before settling on his Italian bow.[62] The underhand grip contributes to power and clarity, especially on the lower strings, while the overhand French grip lends itself better to lyrical and smooth playing, especially

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[60] Brun, *A History of the Double Bass*, 151.

[61] Even today, double-bass players have their own preference for either the French bow (overhand grip) or the German bow (underhand grip). The latter was developed after Dragonetti's death but adopted the concave shape and tension screw seen in modern bows.

[62] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 82–83.

on the upper strings.

The thick strings that Dragonetti preferred, and his choice of bow lend credit to the testimonies of the mighty sound he produced during his concerts. What seems even more remarkable is how he achieved the delicate and lyrical sounds, for which he was also renowned, given the drawbacks of his choice of strings and bow. It seems almost superhuman for someone to accomplish this type of sound on such a large and awkward instrument, with large and awkward strings, and even a large and awkward bow! But, as mentioned before, the high-tension strings and their response time likely aided in his lyrical playing despite the challenges caused by those other factors. In addition, the underhand grip in which the right hand's fingers control the tension of the hairs surely added another variable in the right-hand technique. Such a technique could be taken advantage of and even overcome the drawbacks of his preferred bass setup.

Dragonetti's delicate and lyrical playing could also be explained by his left-hand technique. Unfortunately, Dragonetti's fingering methods have not survived. What we deduce from his fingering methods comes from written accounts of his performances. These sources don't provide us with a complete picture of his technique but do suggest an interesting contrast to the technique

used by his English contemporaries. As Palmer notes, the common fingering method for English bass players at the time was to use only the first and fourth fingers of the left hand, outlining only a semitone.[63]

This method helped with intonation and was more comfortable for players with small hands but, in turn, forced players to undertake constant shifting. Francesco Caffi described Dragonetti's method of fingering in a way that seems far too extraordinary to be believable. He describes Dragonetti using all five fingers, each spaced a semitone apart, in every position, including the lowest ones.[64] For example, Caffi describes a chromatic passage on the open G string as follows: Ab with thumb, A natural with first finger, Bb with second, B natural with third, and C with the fourth.[65] This type of fingering (with the exception of the fourth finger) is used today but only in higher positions, mainly in the thumb position when playing past the neck of the bass, where the intervals are much closer, and sometimes in "heel" position, that awkward space at the heel of the neck where it can be challenging to choose where to put the thumb when playing. Even for a player with exceptionally large hands, this thumb-

[63] Palmer, *Dragonetti in England*, 65.
[64] Caffi, *Storia Della Musica Sacra*, 430–31.
[65] Ibid.

position hand shape in half-position[66] does not seem realistic. As Kobayashi notes in his thesis on dissecting Dragonetti's technique, the quote by Caffi may have been an exaggeration; Dragonetti may have used this five-finger technique, just not in half-position.[67] Still, perhaps in slightly higher positions, which may not have required the thumb to come from the back of the neck, the extended range that such a fingering would offer could allow for smoother passages without excessive shifting.[68]

However, it is notable that the twelve waltzes can be played on the double bass using standard fingering techniques of today — that is, in standard neck positions, using the first, second, and fourth fingers, outlining a major second. This might suggest that the true fingering technique used by Dragonetti may have resembled something very similar to our modern methods, which were solidified later in the nineteenth century. The waltzes often use octave jumps and double stops, using perfect fifths and major and minor thirds, all of which are very comfortably achieved using modern fingering techniques. Whatever his exact fingering method might have been, it is clear that Dragonetti used an

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[66] Half-position is the lowest left-hand position on the instrument in which the first finger plays the first semitone above the open string.
[67] Kobayashi, "Dragonetti: A Case Study," 9.
[68] Ibid.

overall handshape that avoided unnecessary shifting, allowing him to play slurred passages more fluently than his contemporaries using the first-fourth finger method.

It seems likely that Dragonetti's preferred setup for his instrument, as well as his self-developed left-hand technique, allowed him to play in the dramatic extremes described by those who had the opportunity to hear him perform. If musical performance is similar to sexual intercourse, as suggested by Cusick's definition discussed in the previous chapter, then what does this say about Dragonetti and his double bass "wife"? Perhaps such a relationship could exist among all virtuosi, but it would seem that Dragonetti and his "wife" were extraordinary lovers, able to conjure a diverse and expressive range of emotions and pleasures through their own muse. Dragonetti seems unique in that there was no other "great' virtuoso before him on this particular instrument. He found love in an unusual place. And Dragonetti learned and developed special ways in which to show off the true depth of his love.

Why Waltzes?

A waltz is an intimate dance between two individuals. Starting from the origins of this dance in the eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth century, many commented on the social implications of the physical closeness of the dancers involved. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, some of the hesitation surrounding the dance had begun to fade as the waltz became a cultural staple across Europe. As we have seen, waltzes also became simply a style of concert music and were, therefore, not always composed with dancers in mind. Still, the style retains the dance-like feel associated with its origins. It is notable that Dragonetti chose this somewhat controversial style as the basis of his composition for the unaccompanied double bass.

If Dragonetti and his "wife" are the dancers in said waltzes, how does Dragonetti depict this? Is there an interplay between the dancers that can be heard? Might this be expressed in ways similar to Schubert's *Grand Duo* for piano four-hands?

One example of a musical dialogue between a performer and an instrument comes to mind: Weber's *An Invitation to the Dance*, composed in 1819,

is an early example of a concert waltz.[69] The work is programmatic and, although composed for solo piano, depicts a dialogue between a man and a woman and their subsequent dancing. This dialogue is explained in Weber's program notes. A man asks a woman to dance, and she gives a disinterested reply; he repeats his request in a more persuasive manner; she relents, and they converse; finally, they take up their positions, and the dance begins.[70]

The way Weber differentiates between the two individuals is important. Although he uses the low register for the man and the upper register for the woman, as one might expect, what really brings this piece to life are the stylistic differences between the two characters. These distinctions are achieved through differences in articulation, dynamics, tessitura, and overall style of the complementary phrases. Even without the program notes, the voices are clearly identifiable. In the opening sixteen bars we can see two distinct melodic voices, one in the left hand and the other in the right. The left hand contains more dynamic expression and arpeggiated leaps while the right-hand remains soft, dynamically consistent, and maintains stepwise motion.

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[69] John Warrack, *Carl Maria von Weber* (The Macmillan Company, 1968), 190.
[70] Warrack, *Carl Maria von Weber*, 191.

While the Dragonetti waltzes are not explicitly programmatic, there does seem to be a kind of dialogue that's present throughout all twelve of the waltzes. Similar to that in Weber's piece, the dialogue in Dragonetti's waltzes has, at times, a distinct upper and lower voice. These upper and lower voices are distinguished either by a call-and-response within or between phrases or through an implied polyphony. Although Weber's *An Invitation to the Dance* was composed during Dragonetti's lifetime, we don't know if he was familiar with it.

But it does seem clear that he was expressing a similar kind of interchange. In his autograph, Dragonetti provides very specific articulation and dynamic markings that highlight the responsive quality that Dragonetti seems to have desired.

The Waltzes: An Analysis

Each of the twelve waltzes is fairly short, taking only a few minutes each to perform, resulting in a total of around thirty minutes for the whole set. Removing repeats and repeated material, each waltz consists of only 32 to 62 measures of original material. Each waltz is constructed using compound ternary form. With the exception of Waltz 9, the A sections are rounded (aabbaa). (The A

section of Waltz 9, however, contains only two strains, both repeated [aabb]). The B sections are not rounded (ccdd). The A sections of every waltz are in major keys, with the B sections switching to either the relative or parallel minor keys, except in waltz 11, where the B section modulates to another major key.

Some of these waltzes resemble a dialogue or interplay between two distinct voices. Some distinctions are more apparent than others. They include the use of contrasting phrases as well as implied polyphonic textures. This is often achieved through two distinct alternating voices, each with register, dynamic, and articulation differences. The two voices are often distinct in their character. Both these voices represent the different affects and ranges in which Dragonetti performed: powerful/stormy and sweet/delicate. Oftentimes, the former would be in the lower range of the instrument while the latter is in the upper register. The character of each of these distinct voices coincides with the traditional perceptions of gender norms. While I don't condone these gender norms, I believe it is helpful to analyze these works through the conventions of the time. In the spirit of Weber's *An Invitation to the Dance*, I will refer to these distinct upper and lower voices as "masculine" and "feminine," respectively.

However, these individual voices are not present in all the waltzes. There

are instances where there is no clear voice. In these instances, passages present mostly scalar or arpeggio runs that seem to imply unity or motion as one unit.

All the waltzes, particularly the earlier ones in which these contrasting voices are most prominent, seem to resemble mini-dramas. There are also instances in which the "masculine" or "feminine" voices do not take on the characteristics of their associated norms. For this reason, I will only identify the voices as being "masculine" or "feminine" if both voices are present, each with their associated tessitura and displaying contrasting characteristics.

As with any drama, these waltzes contain tension and release. When both voices are present, there seems to be a struggle for control. This is where the "powerful" and "delicate "qualities in Dragonetti's playing add to the sense of drama. This tension that Dragonetti is conveying is perhaps most effective during dense polyphonic textures. In these passages, the "masculine" and "feminine" voices are distinct, and there exists a tension between the two. One voice (usually the "masculine") is in control, forcing the other voice to move in accordance with it. For this reason, I will refer to such passages as "bound," as one voice is "bound" to the will of the other. These "bound" phrases, due to their tense nature, occur during the climaxes of each waltz.

As mentioned, the waltzes also contain melodic figures that don't seem to imply any specific voice type. Most notable of these are raising or falling scalar or arpeggiated lines that usually last for the duration of a single measure. Figures of this kind appear in other concert waltzes, such as the above-mentioned *An Invitation to the Danc*e by Weber. The scalar descents used by Weber appear to depict the "whirling" motion of dancers.[71] Dragonetti uses similar motivic devices, suggesting that the two voices are dancing as one. These rising or falling lines are quite varied, however. Some of these lines resemble a "fluttering" motion, usually in a pattern in which the line moves upward (usually by step) and falls by a skip and is repeated sequentially.

A recurring triplet figure appears in about half the waltzes. This rhythmic figure seems to be exclusive to the "masculine" voice, as it's often placed in a lower register and is juxtaposed by some contrasting "feminine" motive. Its repeated placement on weak beats creates a rushing effect that forcibly drives the melodic phrases forward.

Before proceeding with the analysis, I would like to provide a quick note on the edition of the waltzes used. For this analysis, I created my own edition of

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[71] Kyung-Ae Kim, "Concert Waltzes for Solo Piano" (DMA dissertation, West Virginia University 1999), 12.

the waltzes from the autograph owned by Novello from Dragonetti's estate. In the early stages of analysis, I used the Henle edition;[72] however, I found it helpful in later stages to work with an edition without any editorial interventions. For my own editions, I tried to remain as true to the score as possible, with the mistakes and inconsistencies included. The only editorial decision I made was to add missing "*fine*" ("end") markings, which I have included in parentheses in several of the waltzes.

[72] Domenico Dragonetti, *Zwölf Walzer für Kontrabass solo*, ed. Tobias Glöckler (G. Henle Verlag, 2007).

Waltz 1

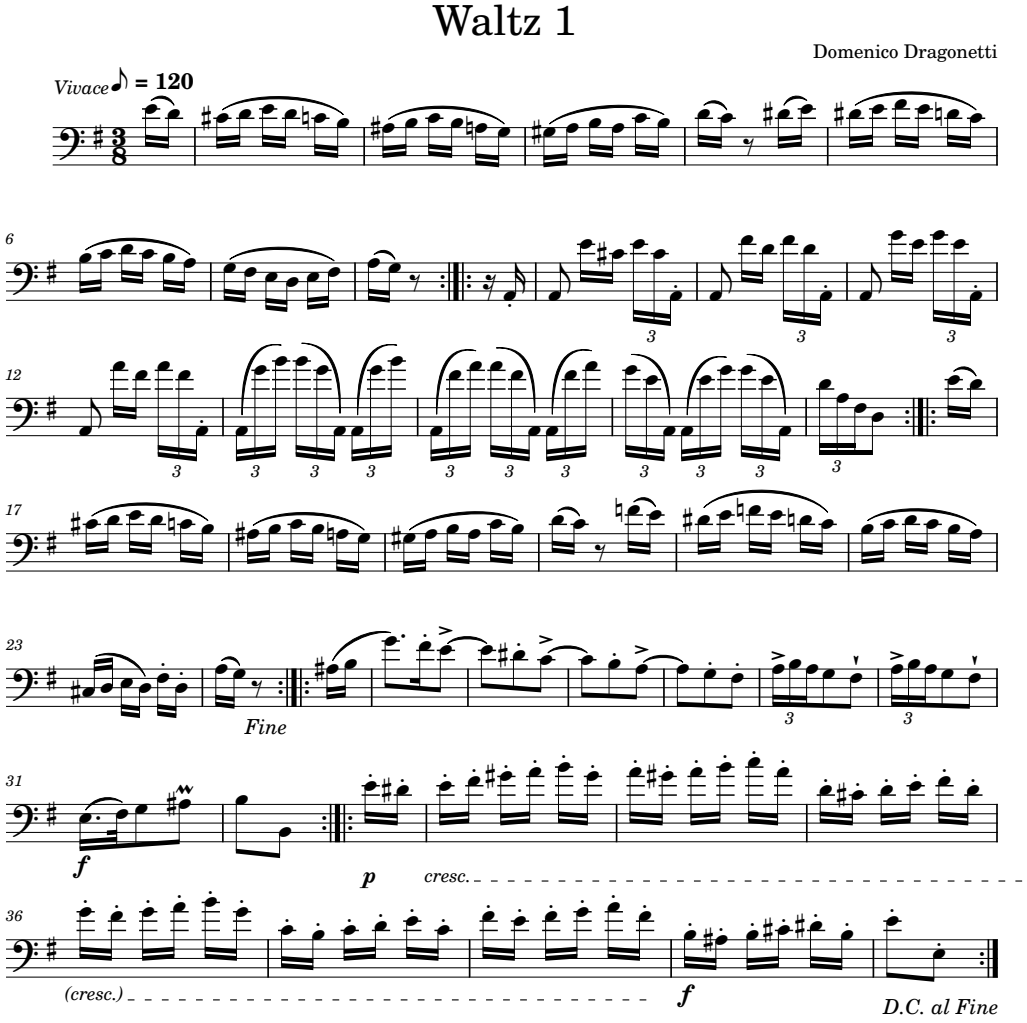

Figure 1: Waltz 1

This waltz's opening strain starts with a smooth melodic line. We then begin the second strain with an implied polyphonic texture with an intrusive lower pedal A2 (the lowest note on Dragonetti's bass). This repeated staccato low A2's indicates a clear character change from the melody in the previous strain.

This character change, as well as the upper line in the implied polyphonic texture maintaining the same tessitura as the previous strain, leads me to perceive the first strain as a "feminine" voice, with the second strain introducing the intrusive "masculine" voice that "binds" the "feminine" voice, building to a climax and cadence in measure 16.

This "masculine" voice pedal seems quite forceful, not allowing the "feminine" voice to move as freely as it had before. The harmonic tension culminates in the slurs in measure 13. The use of triplets in this strain also suggests growing "masculine" influence and control.

The physicality of this passage should also be considered. To execute this passage, the upper line must be played on the string adjacent to the open A string, the D string. Playing the upper line on the D string requires the player to play well into thumb-position. The tone color of the thicker string played in this register combined with the open A2 pedal makes the instrument cry out as if both voices are fighting for control.

As we will see with similar passages later on, the shifts between the thumb position and neck position require a change in how the player must hold the instrument, especially while standing. When in standard neck positions, the

bass's upper bout rests along the stomach of the performer. When in thumb-position, the player must lean into the instrument, thus shifting the weight of the bass from the upper bout resting on the player's stomach to the instrument's neck resting on the player's shoulder.[73] This change in position resembles the close and intimate movements experienced by dancers of waltzes. There are many such passages, which require the left hand to shift in and out of thumb position, creating a rocking motion.

The first strain of the B section begins with what seems to be the "feminine" voice but in a more forceful manner, utilizing accents and staccato while also maintaining the slurred character of the first strain. After a leap to the high G4, the melody moves in a simple descending line, this time in the minor and with accents placed on weak beats. The last four bars change character, introducing a triplet figure with accents and staccatissimo marks. In addition, this consequent phrase has a far narrower range, a lower register, and is static in much the same way as the "masculine" pedal A2 in strain b. Strain c, therefore, seems to be divided, with the "feminine" voice starting until the "masculine" voice takes over in measure 29 to finish off the strain. While the A section

[73] Kobayashi, "Dragonetti: A Case Study," 27.

displays a free "feminine" voice followed by the "masculine" voice taking control in strain b, strain c of the B section shows a forceful response by the "feminine" voice as if to assert its independence. This independence doesn't last long, though. The "masculine" response this time does not result in the same harmonic tension as before; instead, the "masculine" voice nearly seamlessly takes over the melody without disturbing the contour of the strain.

Strain d is an outlier among the rest of the strains in this waltz as it is far more ambiguous as to what particular voice, if any, is present. The higher register, piano dynamic, and staccato markings seem to imply a delicate execution of the beginning of this strain, perhaps suggesting the presence of the "feminine" voice. The range in which this strain begins is also similar to the range present in the "feminine" line of the previous strains. By measure 39, however, the crescendo has reached its climax with a *forte* marking. While the articulations remain consistent throughout the strain, the dynamic change and the gradual descending contour of the melodic line show a kind of blending of "feminine" and "masculine."

Waltz 2

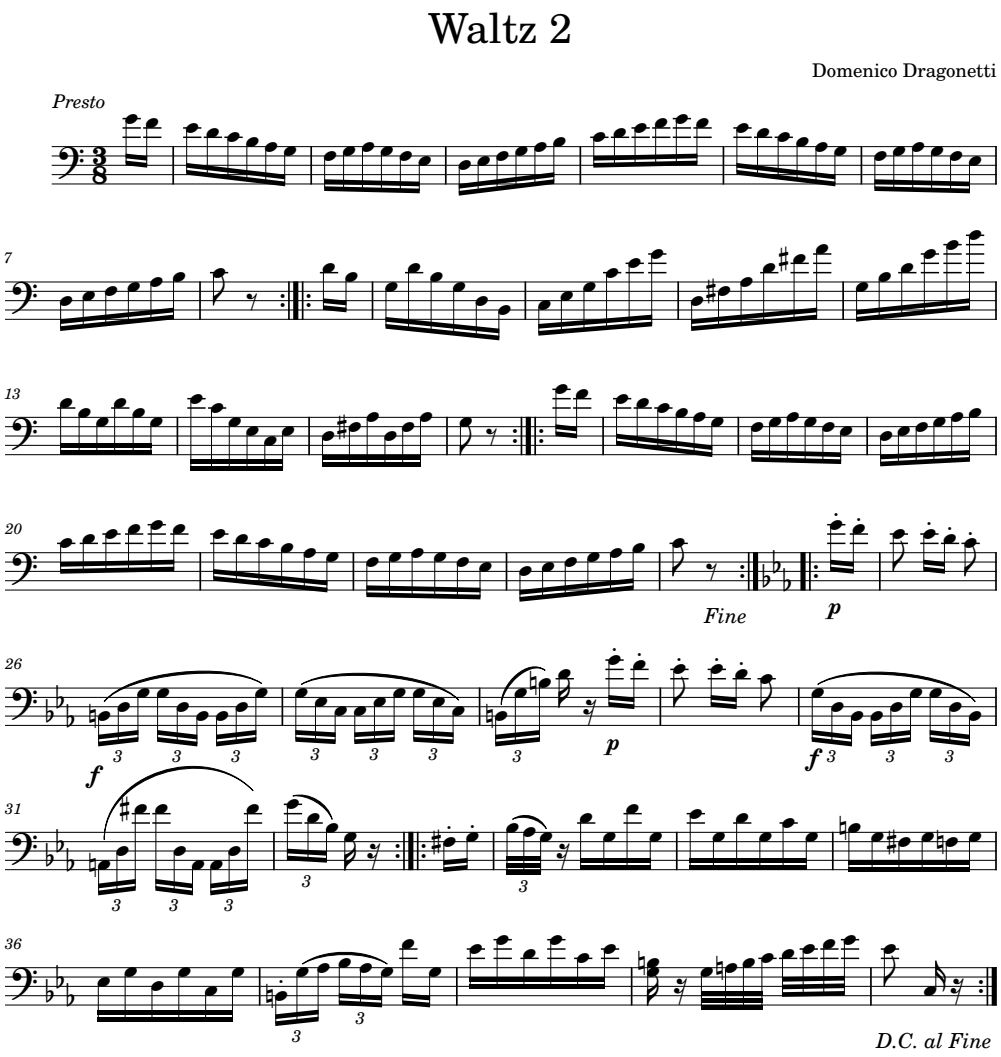

Figure 2: Waltz 2

Distinguishing voices in the A section of Waltz 2 is quite tricky. There are no dynamic or articulation markings, and the cohesiveness of the melodic lines, as well as its wide range, makes me suggest a unity between the two voices. The two voices are not clashing but in agreement.

The B section of this waltz contains far more explicit dialogue. Strain c begins with the same downward motion as the first strain of the A section but now with explicit articulation and dynamics, varied rhythm, and a key change. This delicate line, with staccatos and marked *piano*, is interrupted by a forceful, bariolage-style gesture, marked *forte* in measure 26 and again in measure 30. This slurred triplet passage dramatically contrasts with the returning delicate upper line. It seems clear here that the delicate falling motive from G4 to C4 is a "feminine" voice taking on a delicate character while the "masculine" voice interrupts with forceful stormy passages.

Strain d in the B section again doesn't provide much information about dynamics and articulation. However, the texture has become polyphonic. The blending of the two voices creates another "bound" figure. In measure 33, we get a pedal G3, which, based on its range relative to the other voice, seems to suggest the presence of the "masculine" voice acting as an anchor around which the "feminine" voice must revolve. If we view the presence of the "masculine" voice as only the G3's from measures 33 through 38, this shows an interesting example of voices crossing in measures 35 and 36. The absence of any G3 in measure 38 suggests a break from the "masculine" "bound" pedal in measure 38 with a descending "fluttering" figure. They eventually come together with the double

stop in the following measure, bringing a brief halt to the music and suggesting uncertainty as to which voice is leading.

Waltz 3

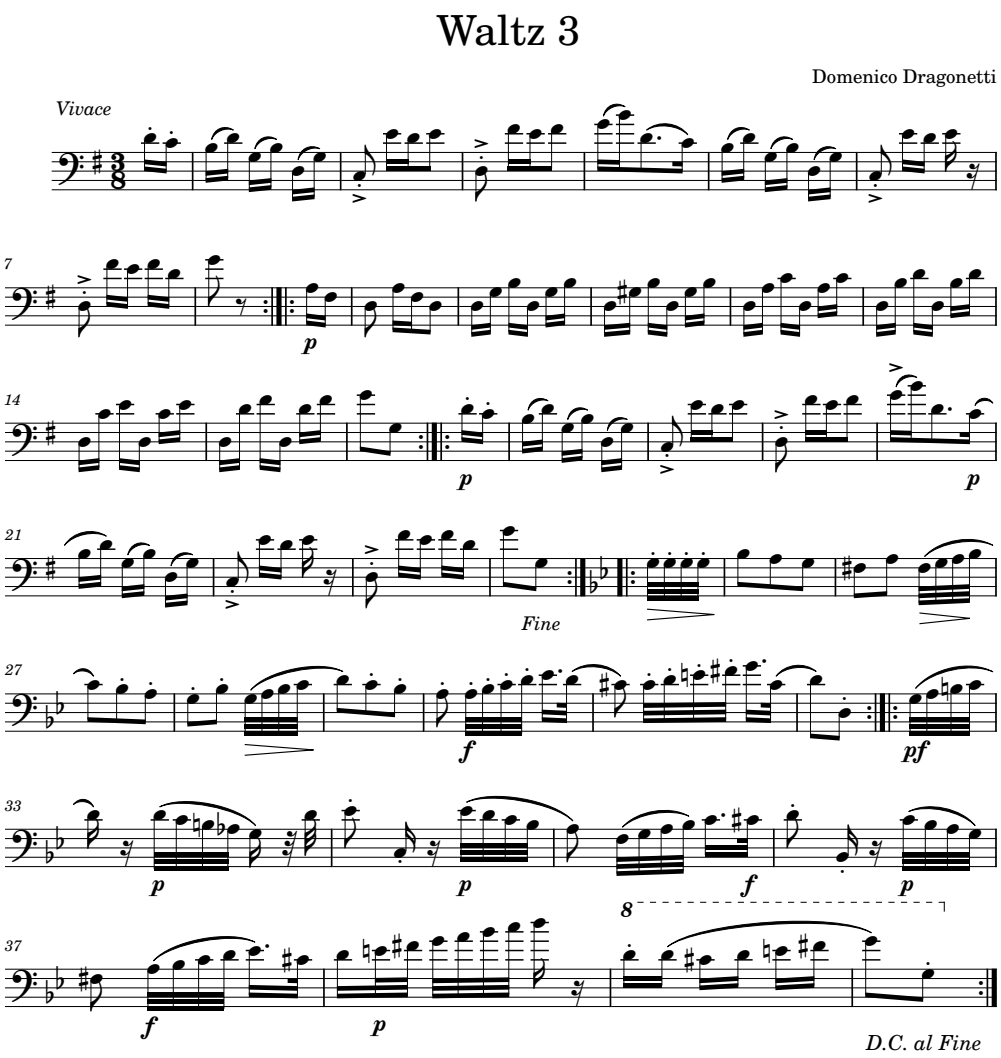

Figure 3: Waltz 3

The whole of the B section of the third waltz is perhaps the most obvious demonstration of the contrasting voices. The first strain is undoubtedly forceful and striking with its minor key, spiccato pickups, and *forte* ending. The march-like feel of this strain and its growing intensity without any shift in character leads me to believe this strain is all one voice, the "masculine." The spiccato pickups, which change into slurred thirty-second note runs, seem to mirror the "whirling" motions we see throughout the waltzes, but relatively static and low range of the passage might indicate the presence of the "masculine" voice.

In the following strain, we see the emergence of the contrasting voice. Unlike other instances of contrasting voices, this example does not show a clear register difference at first. Instead, the voice marked *forte* and the voice marked *piano* engage in a type of call-and-response. Here, the range is not a factor in identifying the voices; rather, it is the very specific dynamic contrasts that Dragonetti provides. It is only in measure 38 that the voice, marked *piano,* moves to an extreme register, reaching a G4. The *piano* voice reaching up to this range leads me to suggest that this is, in fact, the "feminine" voice. The feminine voice, therefore, is emphasized by the *piano* markings and starkly contrasts with the *forte* "masculine" voice. In such instances, Dragonetti's expressive playing would surely have brought out the dialogue between these two voices.

Waltz 4

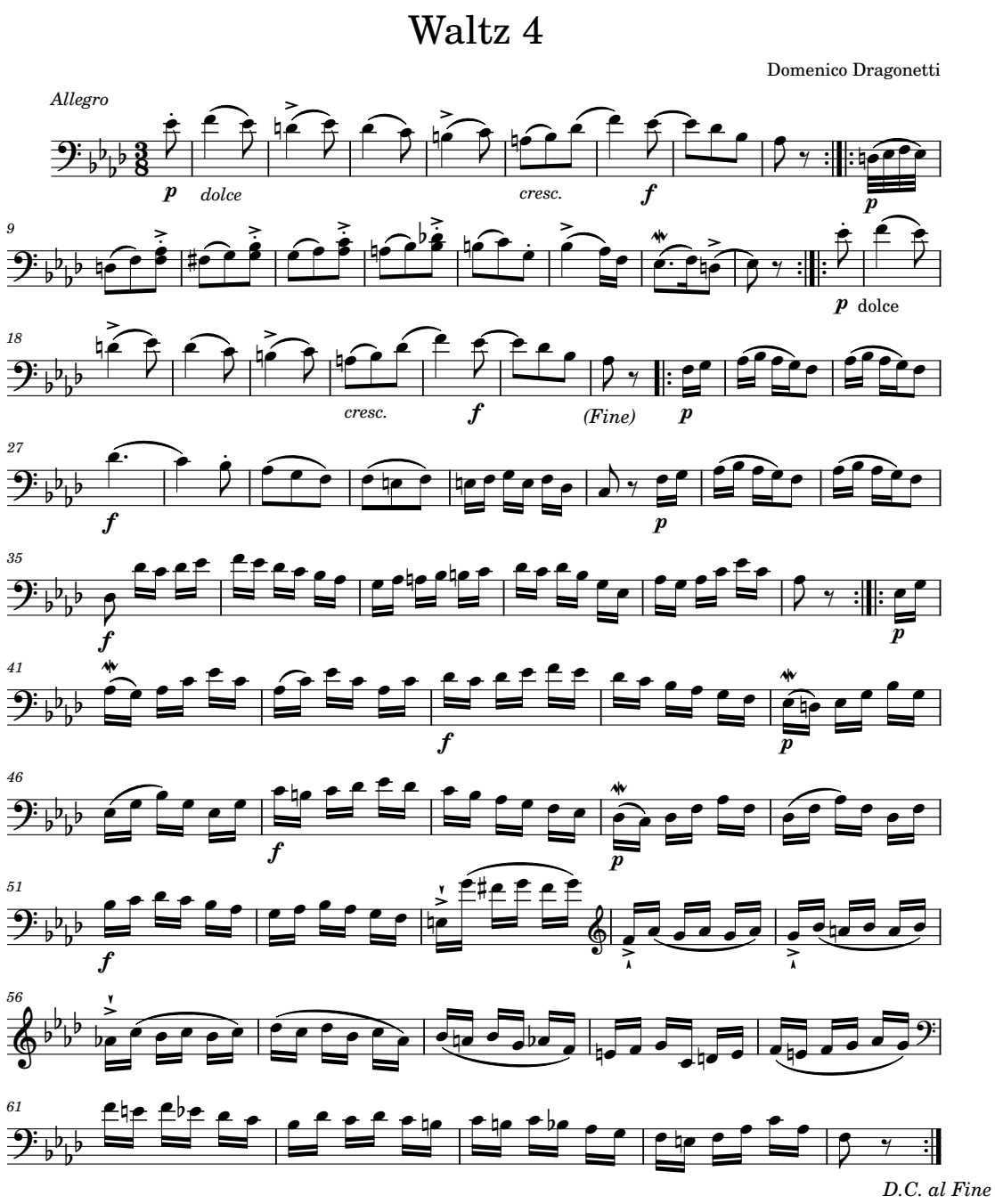

Figure 4: Waltz 4.

The A section of Waltz 4 contains another example of contrasting voices. It begins in the upper register, with a *piano dolce* marking, perhaps suggesting a sweet "feminine" line. Furthermore, the addition of accented downbeats and harmonic ambiguity indicates a bit of passion or even forcefulness as the voice is leading the dance by itself. The second strain begins in a lower register with a difference in style, perhaps suggesting the presence of the "masculine" voice. It is only when in measure 9 at the introduction of the double-stopped thirds that the voices seem distinct and, therefore, identifiable. Here the "masculine" voice seems to take on a sweet and tender character with the *piano* markings that contrast with the accents in the "feminine" voice.

Strain b's rising motion somewhat mirrors an ascending "whirling" figure but is prolonged over several measures. The accented off-beats suggest an instability and motion as the two voices move sequentially upward. It seems as though this instability comes from the intrusive "feminine" voice coming in during the "masculine" voice's rising line. The "feminine" voice's control, seen by the accented downbeats of the previous strain, is disrupted and now "bound" by the "masculine" voice. This creates tension that is not resolved until the cadence at measure 16.

Waltz 5

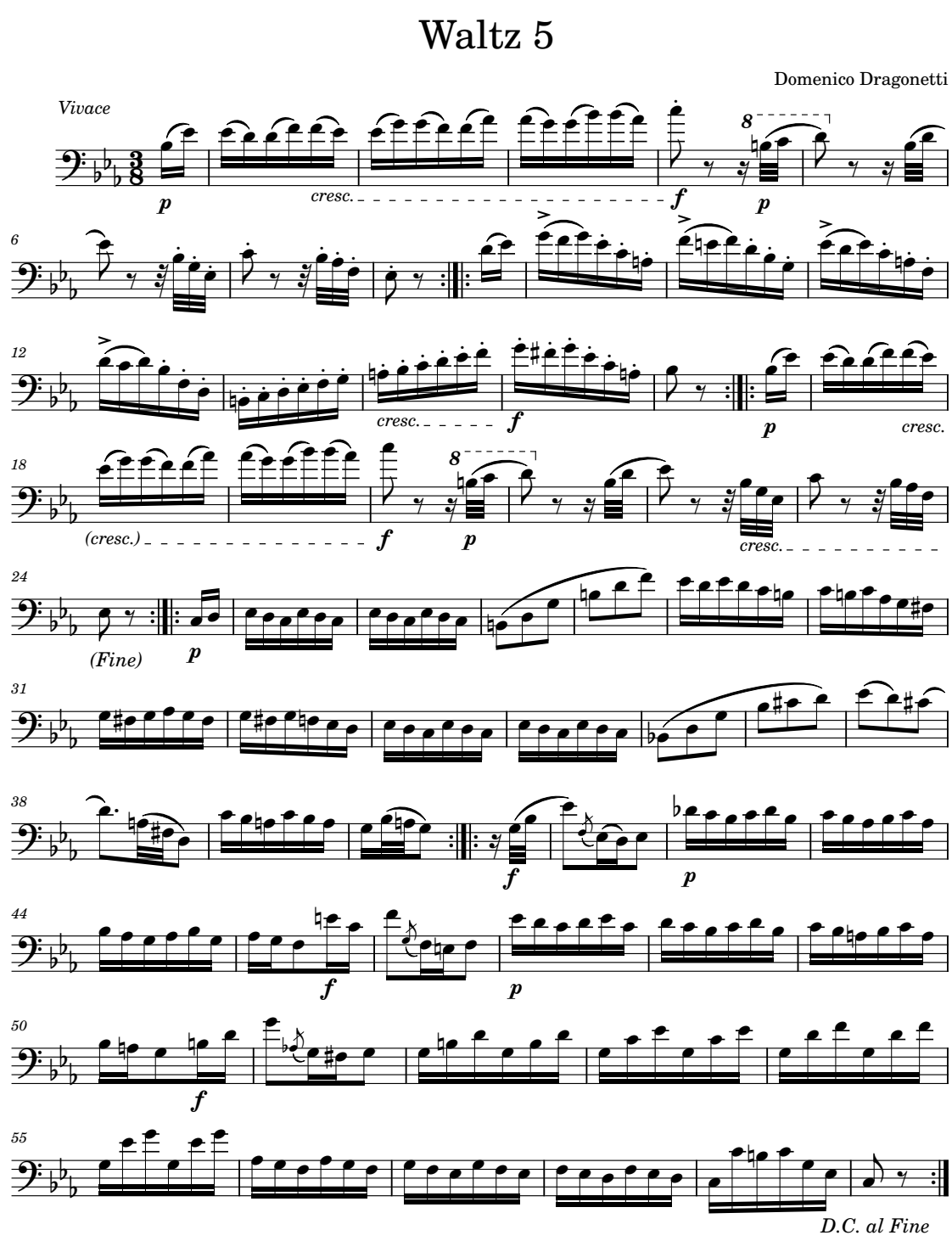

Figure 5: Waltz 5

Waltz 5, unlike the fourth, doesn't appear to resemble a struggle for control. The first strain of the A section starts with a line in a low register with a limited range of a minor third. This motive lacks direction and is assisted by the lyrical motive entering in measure 27 with contrasting slurred arpeggios and a rising motion. The lyrical nature of this motive seems "feminine," while the stagnated lower line sounds "masculine." The gradually descending line in measures 29–32 seems ambiguous; nonetheless, it clearly leads back to the same "masculine" material from the beginning of the strain at measure 33. This gradual descending motion seems, again, to be a prolonged "whirling" in which the "dancers" are moving as one, leading back to where they were before. Here, the "masculine" voice does not appear to be establishing any control. The melodic line does come back down to its initial range, but the "feminine" voice seems eager to move. Perhaps this passage resembles an unenthusiastic male lead whose partner is struggling to get it moving. The "feminine" voice's second entrance at measure 35 is more developed than the first. The higher register for the rest of the strain seems to indicate that the "feminine" voice is in charge of ending the strain. The motive at measure 39, however, also outlining a minor third, seems to be an echo of the recurring "masculine" motive.

Waltz 6

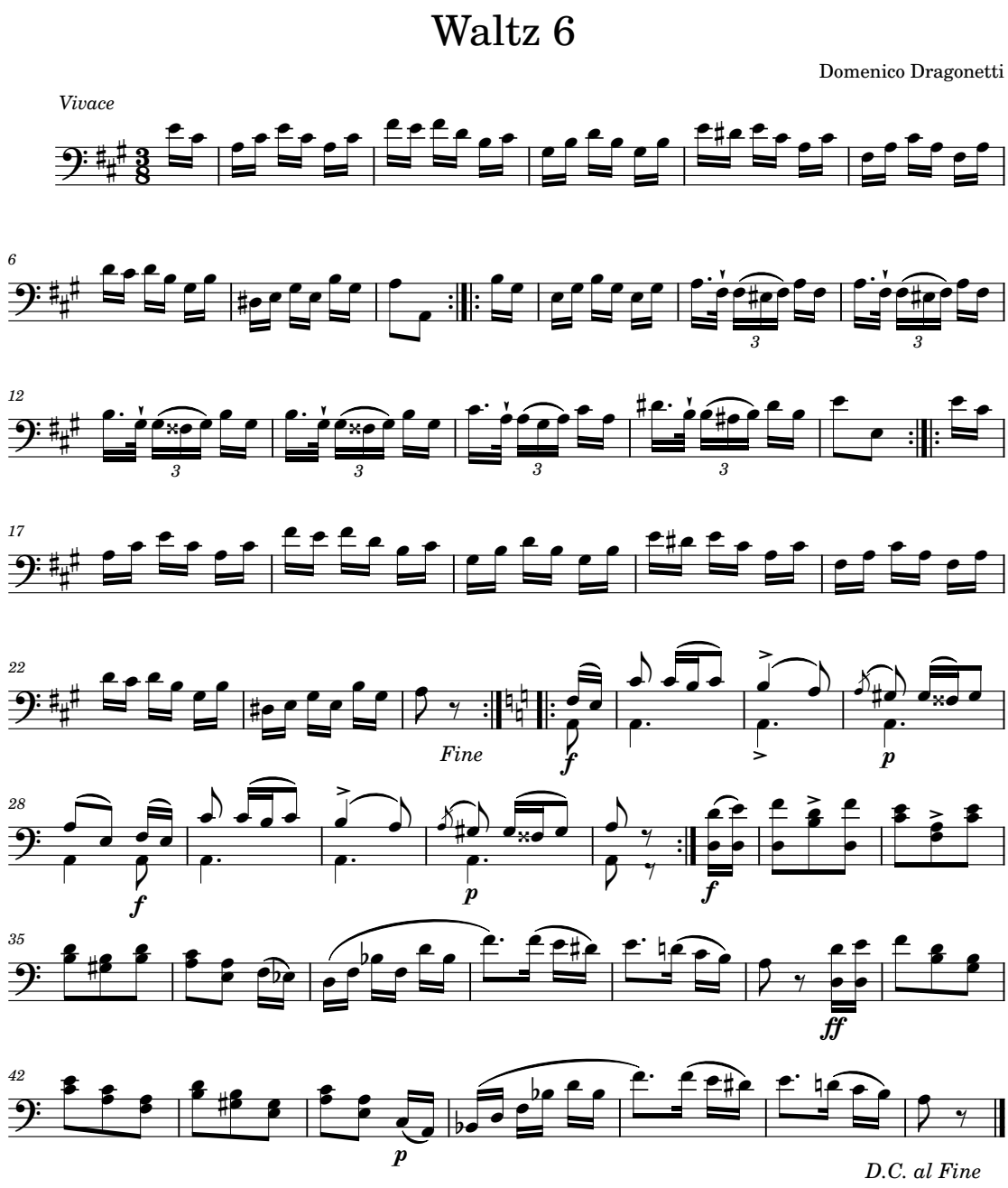

Figure 6: Waltz 6.

The B section of Waltz 6 is genuinely striking. While the A section is in A major, the B section starts immediately in the parallel minor. The voices in both strains of this section are played simultaneously, in probably the most extreme instance of a "bound" figure. Voice determination is self-explanatory here, with the pedal-note A2 below the upper melodic line. Yet again, the “masculine” voice’s pedal forces the “feminine” voice to bend to its will. Because the pedal A2 must use the open string, the upper line must be played entirely on the adjacent D string, making the “feminine” voice sound dark, mysterious, and even strained. While such a passage does not necessarily require the performer to be in thumb-position to reach the C4 (as this could be reached in ‘heel’ position), Dragonetti may have used thumb-position here to avoid some of the awkward shifts that occur while playing the melody on one string. Regardless of exactly how he executed the high C4-B3 pattern, the passage requires large shifts back and forth. It is precisely this back and forth that would have required some amount of adjustment in how the instrument is held: leaning into the higher, strained notes, and leaning back in the lower positions — a motion that undoubtedly feels dance-like.

The following strain consists of both voices sounding at the same time through a series of double-stops in thirds, octaves, and fourths. The accented

offbeats suggest tension and motion as the two voices gradually move downwards. Perhaps the “feminine” voice is attempting to break free from the “masculine” voice in this strain, as it was "bound" for the whole previous strain. At measures 37 and 45, a slurred line marked *piano* enters with lyrical arpeggios in an ascending motion. This relatively delicate line seems to take on the “feminine” character, able to break free of the forceful double-stops.

Waltz 7

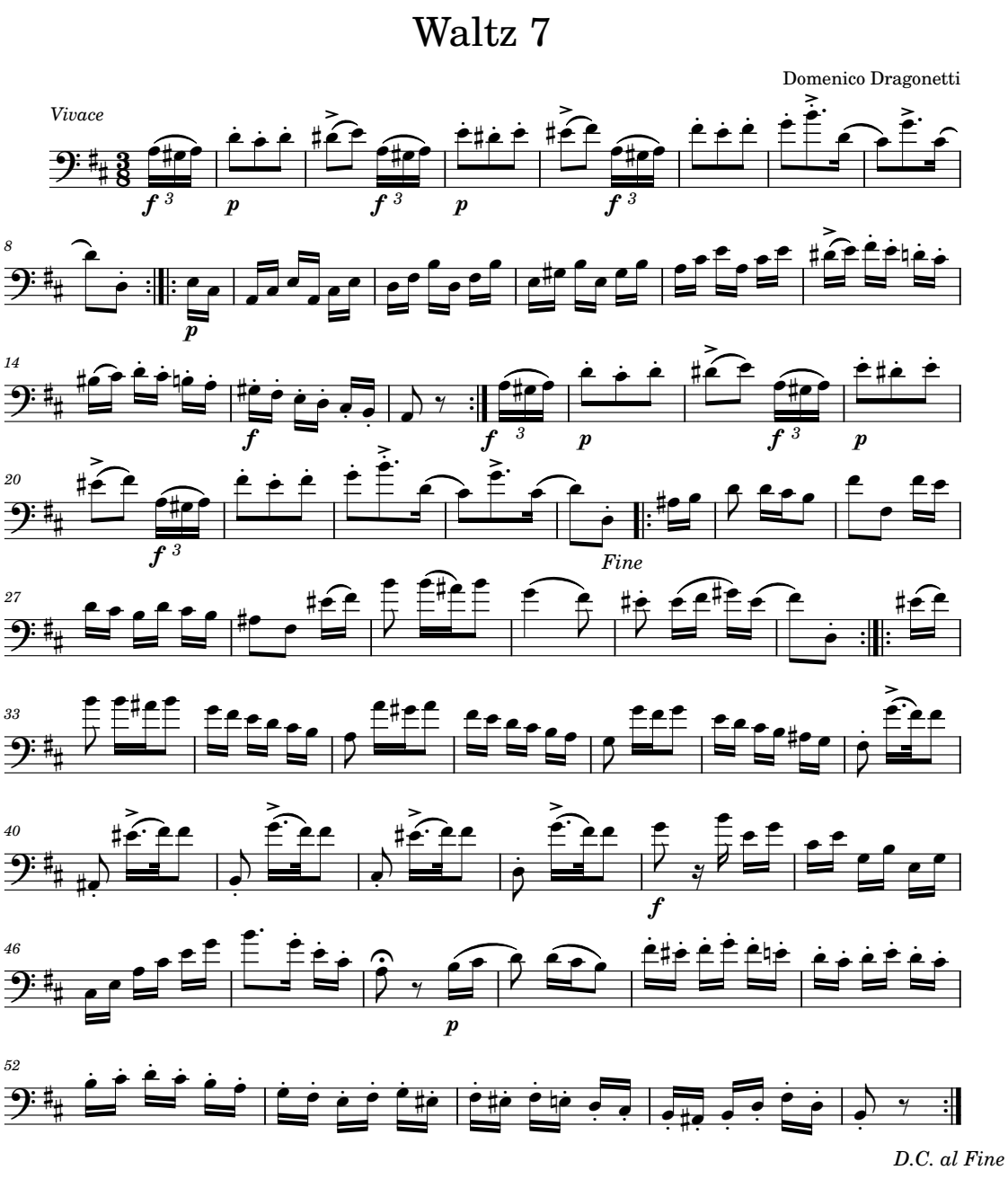

Figure 7: Waltz 7.

Right from the beginning of Waltz 7, we see a clear separation of voices, with the upper voice marked *piano* and the lower voice *forte*. Although the upper voice does contain staccatos and accents, the register, dynamics, and pedal-like motive in the lower voice make it clear that this lower one is the "masculine" voice. The lower voice starts the waltz off with a pickup triplet figure marked *forte*. The downbeat of the first measure starts the "feminine" voice with its higher register and *piano* marking. Again, the "masculine" voice acts as an anchor, not moving in its lower-neighbor figure that acts as a pedal for the first half of the strain, thereby binding the "feminine" voice to the "masculine" voice's will. The contrasting dynamics create an accented off-beat, which creates unease and tension. After the "feminine" voice's third entrance in measure 5, it can cadence without the help of the partner voice.

The second strain of the B section begins with an upper line followed by "whirling" descents. At this point, it is unclear which voice is present. After the descents, there is a consistent jump back to a lower-neighbor figure, only to whirl back down again. In measure 39, we get our first articulation marking as well as a clear change in character. The "whirling" in measure 38 leads right to the lower voice of a two-voice texture. Again, we have a "bound" phrase with the seemingly "masculine" voice as the staccato notes on the downbeats. The now

distinct “feminine” voice enters with accents in the same range in which the lower neighbor appeared previously. As the “masculine” voice moves, the “feminine” voice changes the direction of its motive as if it’s not sure where the “masculine” voice wishes to go. Only at measure 44 is it able to complete the neighboring figure, which creates a dramatic pause in the music. What follows is a “fluttering” descent and subsequent arpeggiated rise and fall to cadence on A3. This strain, starting on measure 39 until the fermata on measure 48, requires large shifts in and out of thumb-position. The rocking motion that occurs here is very reminiscent of the sixth waltz’s B section.

Waltz 8

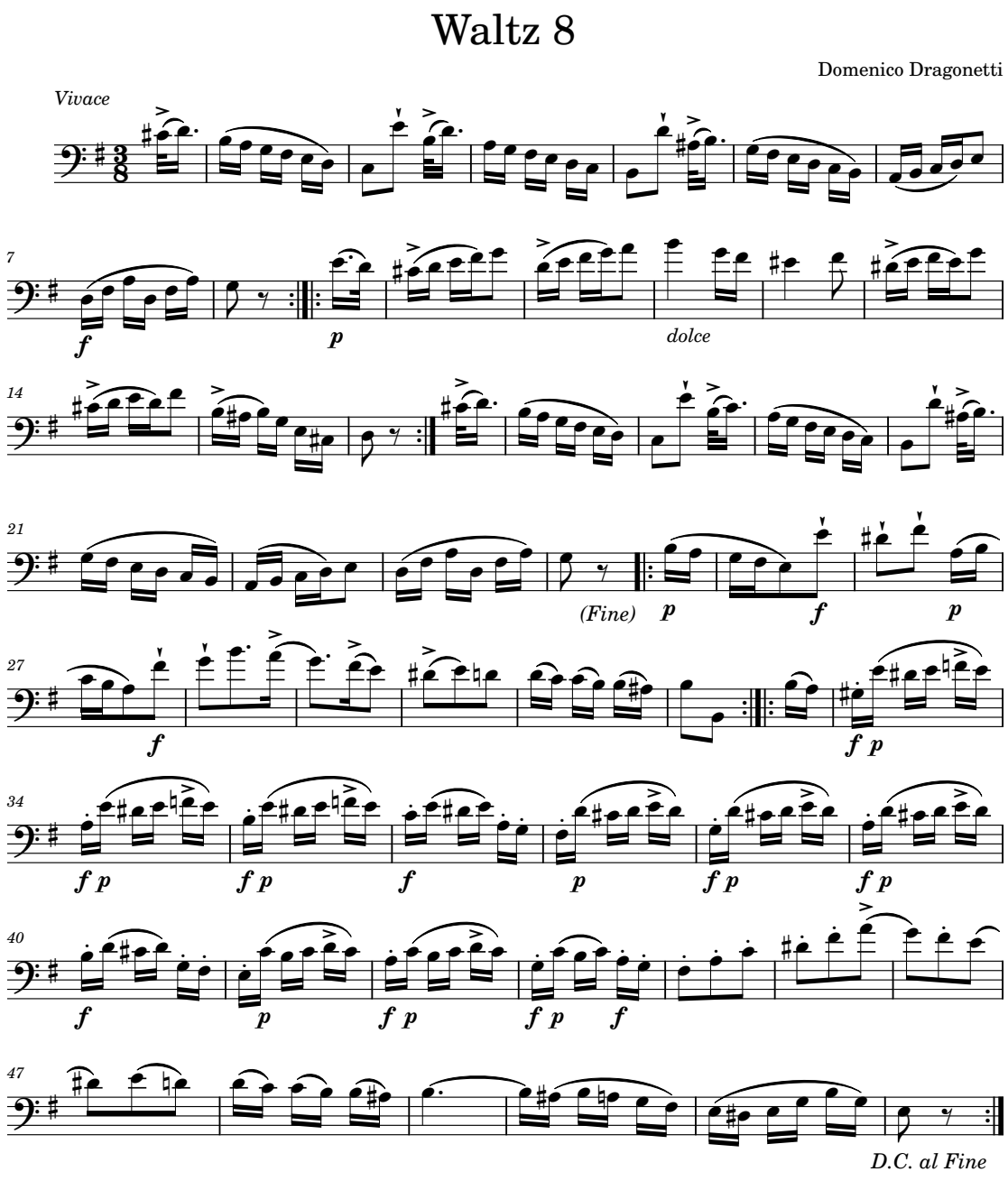

Figure 8: Waltz 8.

The opening of the B section of Waltz 8 contains an interesting example of distinct voices that don't conform to the typical characteristics that we associate with them. Here, the lower voice is slurred and marked piano, while the upper voice is marked *forte* with staccatissimi markings. One could interpret this as suggesting that the "feminine" voice is forceful, while the "masculine" one is more tender. The texture between the two voices doesn't seem dense enough to label this strain as a "bound," but nonetheless, the "feminine" voice is clearly the dominant one.

This control expressed by the "feminine" voice does not last long, however. In the second strain, the "masculine" *forte* staccato downbeats put the "feminine" voice's turn-like motive under a trance. Despite the motion of the "masculine" voice, the "feminine" voice is unwavering and unmoving for three measures. The "masculine" voice is forced to move upward, closer to its partner. The "masculine" voice succeeds in bringing the "feminine" downward in measure 37 and again in measure 41.

Waltz 9

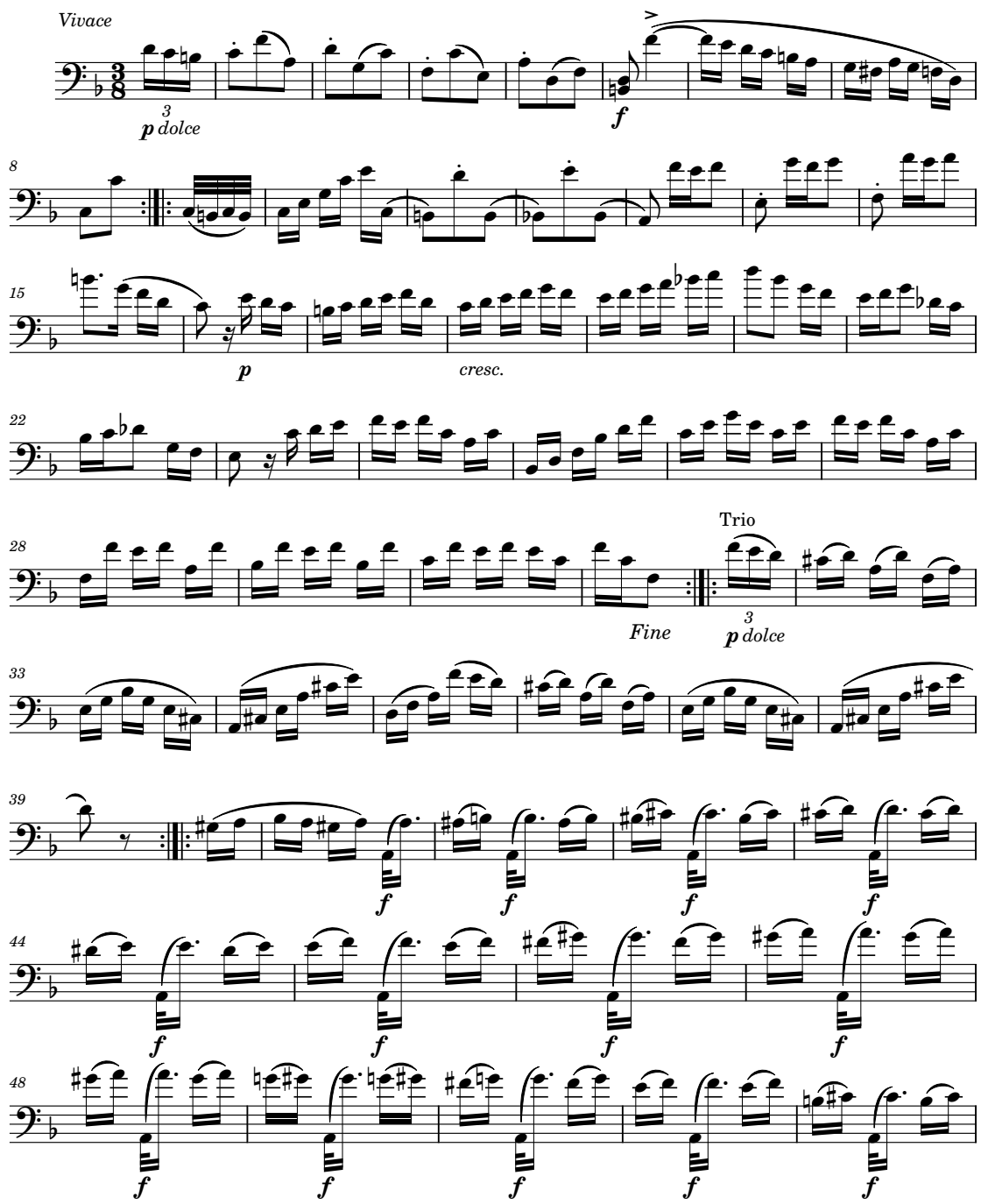

Figure 9: Waltz 9.

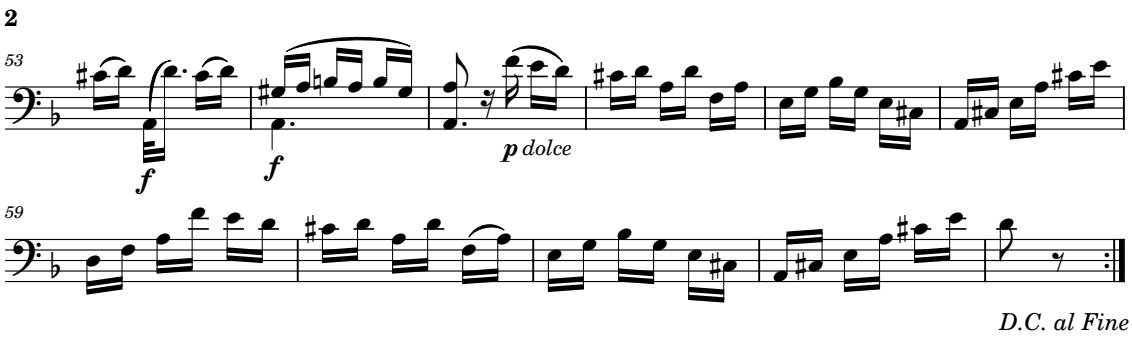

Figure 9.1: Waltz 9 (Continued).

The ninth waltz has quite an unusual form. The A section only has two strains. The strain a, therefore, does not repeat again after strain b. This waltz also contains the most original material, with 63 measures. The beginning of this waltz is very unusual compared to the other waltzes. The first strain seems ambiguous as to what is going on and which voice is present. The first four measures contain a "fluttering" descent, but the staccatos and changing direction of the slurs seem to suggest some missteps in the dance. It is as if the hypothetical dancers are not sure who is leading. The fifth-measure double stop, followed by the large leap to the high F4, indicates a subsequent synchronization between the two.

The second strain, in contrast, begins with the lower voice and slurred pickup thirty-second notes. This chromatic motive in a muddy range implies the "masculine" voice. After the ascending, "whirling" arpeggios, the "masculine"

voice returns with more descending chromatic motion, grounding and preventing the “feminine” voice from straying too far. At measure 13, the “feminine” voice makes itself more present. The “masculine” voice is forced to rise with its partner. The “feminine” voice again breaks free at measure 15 and moves freely until measure 22, when the “masculine” voice takes over the sequential motive started by the “feminine” voice on the third beat of measure 20. This “masculine” interruption, G3-F3-E3 decent in measure 22, is incomplete and results in an unusual silence. The “feminine” voice then continues, with the “masculine” voice coming in again at measure 25 but in a more reinforcing rather than intrusive manner. The “feminine” voice continues the motivic material with now only slight interruptions from the “masculine” voice. The inclusion of the “masculine” voice’s F4 in measure 28 offsets the slurred F4-E4-F4 motive of the “feminine” voice. This intrusion is short-lived, as the “masculine” voice only gets a buried ascending line on the first and third beats until the downbeat of measure 30, after which the “feminine” voice is able to close off the strain.

The first strain of the B section ("Trio") consists of consistent slurred rising and falling arpeggios. The addition of the descending “fluttering” figures in measures 32 and 36 seems to suggest both voices are one, both tender and sweet, as the *piano dolce* marking suggests.

The second strain of the trio begins with more distinct voices: a chromatic motive in the upper register and the reoccurring pedal A2 reinforced with *forte* indications. As with many strains of this type, voices are easily determined. While the "feminine" voice has its chromatic motive, the "masculine" pedal A2 enters and holds its partner under its spell. The pedal is unwavering, giving the feminine voice little room to move. Tension rises, and the feminine voice is forced to move chromatically upwards and then back down. Finally, reprieve is granted as the two voices together create a half cadence in measure 55. This is followed by an additional statement of the first strain of the Trio, again arriving back in d minor.

Once more, the physicality of this passage cannot be ignored. Much like the other "bound" passages that use the open A2 as a pedal, the upper line must be played on the adjacent string well into the thumb-position. The performance result would resemble a gradual leaning into, then back out from, the bass. This particular motion would correlate with the building and falling tension that results from the harmonies.

Waltz 10

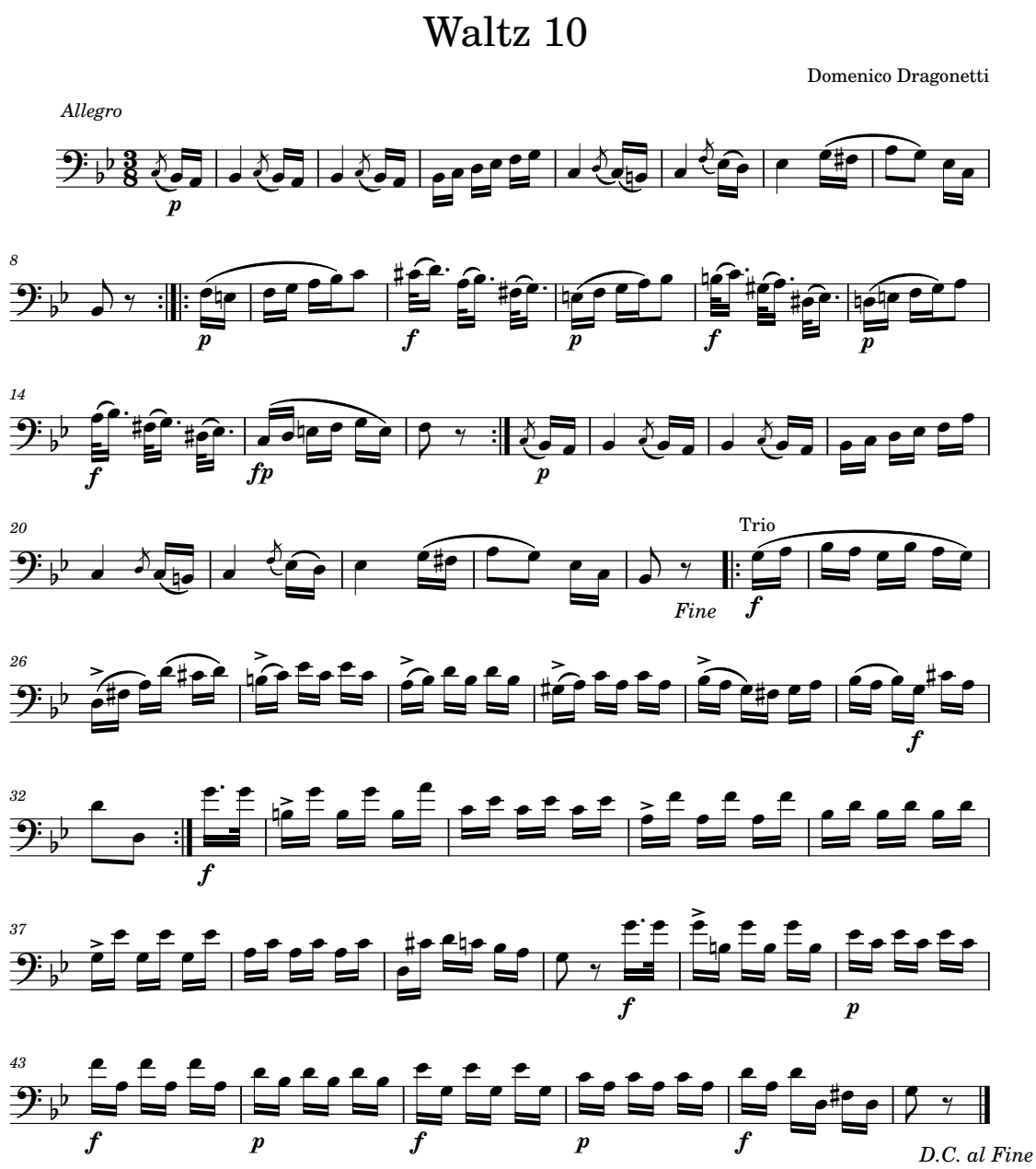

Figure 10: Waltz 10.

Each of the strains in the A section of the tenth Waltz seems to highlight a particular voice. The first strain contains a cohesive melodic line, free from any

contrasting characteristics or register changes. The low range of this melody leads me to believe this melody is our "masculine" voice with a soft and lyrical character. The second strain starts with a similar character but in a higher range, perhaps suggesting the presence of the "feminine" voice. Despite this voice's tendency to rise (measures 9, 11, and 13), the "fluttering" motives (measures 10, 12, and 14), marked *forte*, bring the "feminine" voice down to the "masculine" voice's range. While this strain highlights the "feminine" voice, it still seems guided or influenced by the "masculine" voice.

The second strain of the B section ("Trio") is interesting in that the implied polyphony mimics a dance between the two voices. At measure 33, there is a constant back and forth between sixths and thirds. The accented first notes of the measures with sixths might imply an instability. Not just a relative instability of the inverted chord, but perhaps there is a discomfort in the "feminine" and "masculine" lines being too far apart. At Measure 41, the same material is repeated, but the added dynamic indications only further highlight this tension and release.

Waltz 11

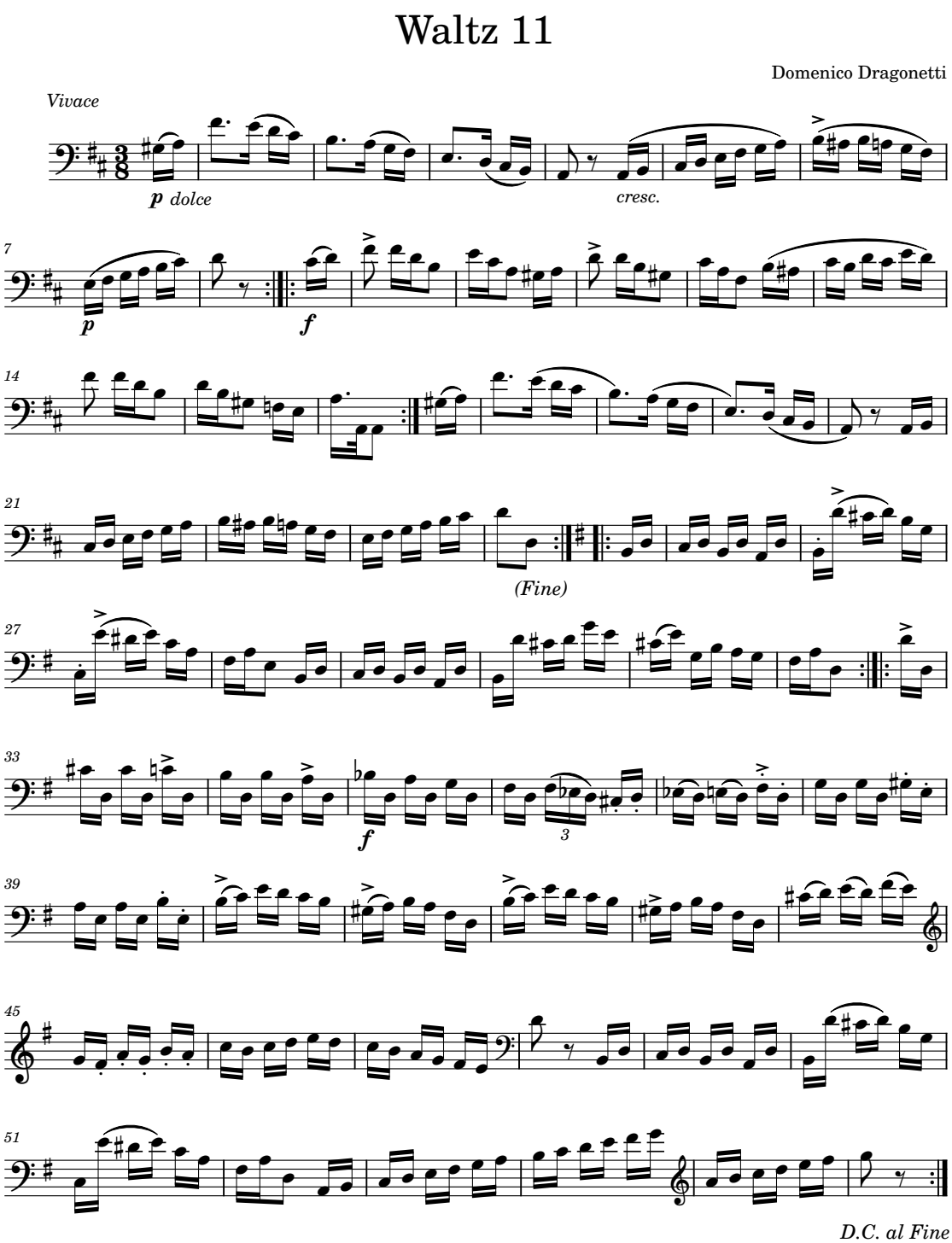

Figure 11: Waltz 11.

As in the tenth Waltz, the A section of Waltz 11 contains a strain that is free and uniform in character, followed by a strain of growing tension and influence. The first strain, with its upper register and *piano dolce* marking, suggests a "feminine" voice presence. While the melody does seem quite cohesive, the rest at measure 4, as well as the relatively lower range and character change, might indicate that the "masculine" voice might finish off the strain. The following strain begins much like the first, with its leap to the F4. Rather than continuing with the same character, with its stepwise slurred descents, there are detached arpeggiated descents. This resembles the tenth Waltz in that the upper register implies a "feminine" presence, yet the melodic line undergoes descending motion in characteristics usually associated with the "masculine" voice. The descending arpeggiated sequence in measures 9–12 suggests a "masculine" influence without even being present. The pickup to measure 13 shows a "fluttering" motive back to the F4 as if the "feminine" voice is bringing attention back to itself.

The B section of this Waltz, much like the A section, has interesting similarities to the tenth Waltz. The implied polyphony here is achieved through the frequent pedal D3s. Beginning in measure 25, the pedal is uncharacteristically in the upper voice. This would suggest an instance in which the "feminine" voice

has the “masculine voice" “bound.” The “masculine’ voice moves away, then back towards its partner when the “feminine” voice leaps to the neighboring figure, D4-C#4-D4, in measure 25. The following measure raising sequentially suggests the “feminine” voice is in control here. In the following strain, the pedal D3 switches roles. The “masculine” voice has the pedal, and the upper “feminine” voice is “bound” towards its partner. The voices get closer and eventually cross in measure 36. The “feminine” voice then pulls away in a dramatic manner. The inclusion of slurs, staccatos, and accents starting in measure 37 adds significant tension and drive. In measure 38, the pedal is broken. The “feminine” voice is free from the bind and brings its partner upwards and into a single melodic line at measure 40. The line in measures 41 and 43 descends with arpeggiation to the D3; however, it does not remain there or go below that D3 until the repeated material of the previous strain at measure 48. The “whirling” motion all the way up to the E5 in measure 46 seems to suggest the “feminine” voice’s control.

Waltz 12

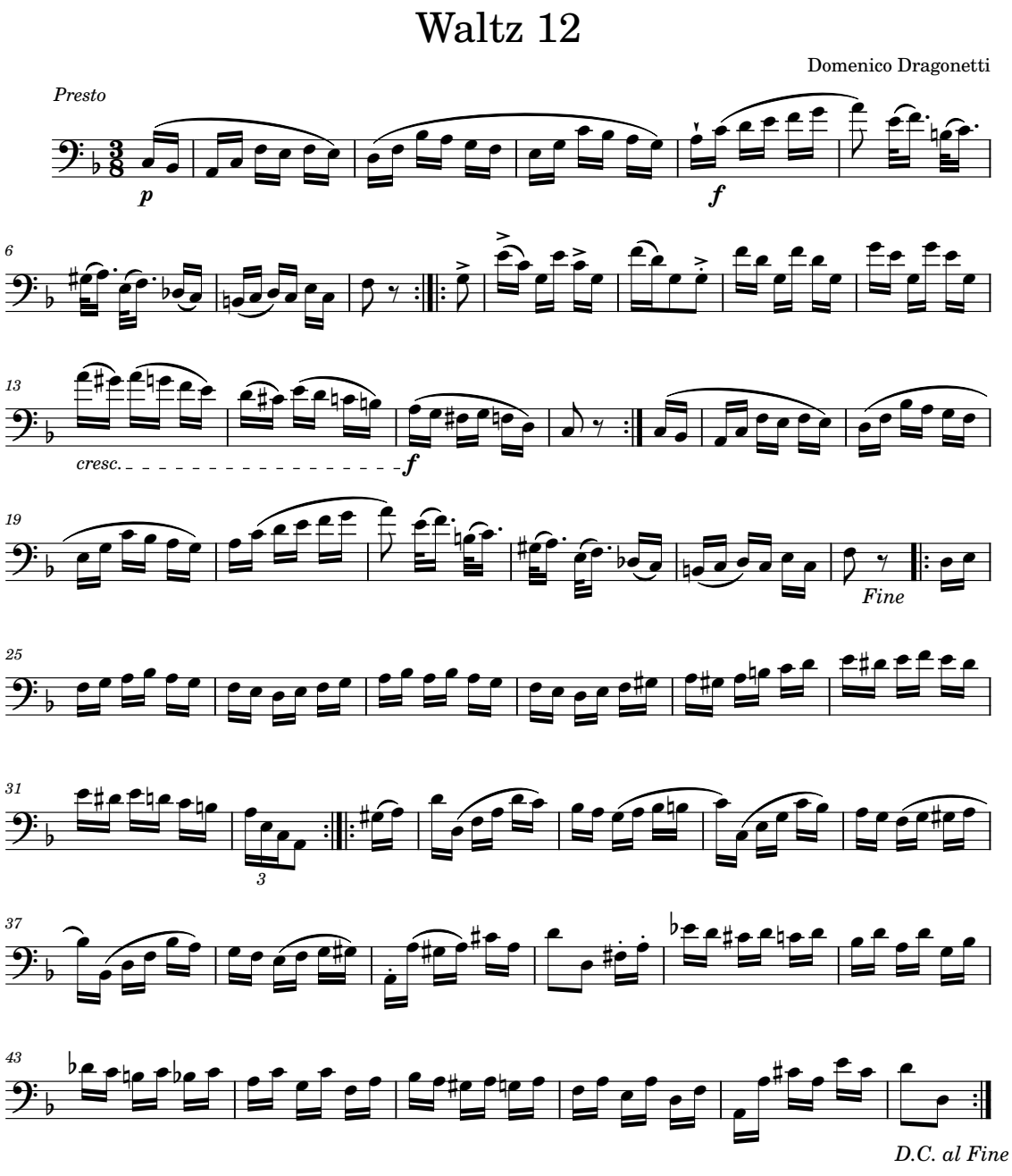

Figure 12: Waltz 12.

The twelfth and final Waltz seems the most free of the distinct "masculine" and "feminine" voices. The first and third strains, for example, have a line that is free and flowing with a large range. This, combined with the "fluttering" descents at measures 5–6 and 21–22, leads me to see these voices as unified and without tension. The second strain of the A section, however, contains some distinct voices. The pedal G3 in the lower voice shows again a "bound" figure, but rather than being drawn in, the "feminine" voice, with its descending third motion, sequences upwards and breaks free from the pedal in measure 13 but draws back down to finish the strain.

The B section of this Waltz, much like the a strain, exudes unity. Despite there being only two strains to this section, it is made up of three district phrases. The first strain is the first phrase, consistent in character in a middle range and with no clear influencing voice. The first half of the second strain (measures 33–40) comprises the second phrase. It contains flourishing lines and a large range with no clear leader. In the remainder of the second strain (measure 41–48), the third phrase, like both the previous phrases, has a definite character but no clear voice distinction. This particular phrase, however, has a descending "whirling" sequence as measures 42, 44, and 46.

Chapter 4: Why Does All This Matter?

While it is difficult and controversial to apply a contemporary understanding of sexuality (and even gender) to historical figures, when treated with care, it can provide some insight that would otherwise be lacking. Our modern understanding of sexuality has recently become extremely broad and inclusive. Expansion of terminology and the understanding of arrays of sexual and romantic spectrums allow for the inclusion of the fine nuances that undoubtedly exist in the human experience.

As discussed before, the concepts and terminology that have only recently been adopted did not exist in the past, but individuals could still have exemplified them. Of course, such an individual's life experiences that did not align with conventional heteronormativity can be difficult to understand, especially regarding historical figures for whom cultural or religious pressures did not allow them to deviate from the established norm. Furthermore, forced conformity to these societal norms can lead (and has led) to incorrect heterosexual identities being placed on certain individuals. For this reason, it is important for those who study the personal lives of historical figures not to assume normativity but rather study the nuances for any ambiguities, not just for

queer representation (though this is important) but to gain insight into these individuals' relationship to the world they lived in and, most importantly for musicologists, the music they created and/or performed.

I do believe, however, that we should be wary of ascribing any sexual identity to a historical figure who exemplified sexual ambiguities and did not (or was not able to) express their true sexual identity. For this reason, I have been hesitant to label Dragonetti with a specific identity. However, I don't believe this should prevent us from exploring the possibilities. If I were to apply any term to Dragonetti, it would be "sexually ambiguous." There is simply not enough available information to say anything else. However, ambiguity implies uncertainty, a blurring of lines. It is exactly this ambiguity that leads me to feel certain that Dragonetti was queer to some extent. I suggest the possibility of an asexual and aromantic identity, not just for his behavior and actions but also for how he *didn't* behave and what he *didn't* do. His seeming lack of sexual attraction or long-term romantic attraction towards any person suggests the attributes of our contemporary understanding of asexuality and aromanticism.

Why does it matter if he was asexual, aromantic, or queer? What does this tell us about Dragonetti as a person and as a musician? As mentioned before, I do believe that identification is important even when a precise queer identity

cannot be determined. It is meaningful for queer individuals to feel a connection with historical musicians/composers, as it validates our own lived experiences and militates against social and societal pressure that, unfortunately, still affects people today. I suspect that Dragonetti experienced similar social, societal, and/or religious pressures due to his unconformity with expected norms; however, there's no direct evidence of this.

Regardless of how he would truly identify sexually, his immense passion for music is undeniable. This passion mirrors that of many virtuosi, not just among his contemporaries but throughout history. Dragonetti, however, seems unusual in romanticizing the very instrument he played— even personifying it by calling it his "wife." While this could be dismissed as simply an eccentricity, of which Dragonetti had many, this consistent reference is echoed in his words and the writings of his close friends. This contrasts with his other strange behavior in that it seems to point to a part of Dragonetti's identity rather than the humorous characterizations that are seen in accounts by more distant acquaintances.

It seems likely to me that his highly successful career as a double bassist allowed him to avoid or minimize some of the criticism he might have encountered as a result of his not marrying or starting a family. I don't want to

imply that a musical career was just a way to minimize such pressures or that his potential asexual/aromantic identity left a sort of void that had to be filled with music. Dragonetti's immense passion for music seems far too extreme to simply be used as compensation for his queerness, and our modern understanding of the asexual experience does not require some other passion to compensate for a lack of sexual attraction. Still, Dragonetti seems to have developed a relationship with his instrument that was similar to a romantic one. He found love playing an instrument that not many other people played.

I believe that Dragonetti wished to showcase the true beauty of the instrument he loved so dearly. Through decades of performing, composing, and instrument tinkering, he seemed dedicated to showing off the double bass's previously unknown capabilities.

Perhaps the best example of this was his *Twelve Waltzes*, the grand culmination of his technical prowess, knowledge of the instrument, and compositional skills. The expressiveness that we hear of in contemporary accounts of his playing and the dramatic elements in the compositions themselves represent a dynamic passion that strongly resembles love for another person.

As we have seen, the waltzes themselves seem to follow a sort of dialogue

or dramatic interplay. Each waltz seems to resemble a short drama. They seem almost operatic. Their A-B-A form creates a sonata-like story arc. These beautiful contrasting sections, with A sections always being in a major key and B sections almost always in the minor, as well as the contrasting feminine and masculine voices, seem to represent the passionate feelings he had for his instrument.

What makes this so important in the study of Dragonetti and these waltzes? What can all of this teach us about performing these waltzes as a modern double bassist? I believe that recognizing the intimacy Dragonetti felt for his double bass can help us, as performers, evaluate our relationship with our own bass instruments. The role of double-bass playing in our time, as in Dragonetti's time, is not a glamorous one. Minimal repertoire (especially solo repertoire), underappreciated ensemble roles, and the many physical challenges due to the sheer size and awkwardness of the instrument make many musicians reluctant to pursue double-bass performance. Dragonetti showed future generations of bassists that such an instrument can be glamorous.

Further challenges come from the solo repertoire that has been adapted for the double bass. Repertoire from before Dragonetti's time is oftentimes used as standard material for auditions — repertoire such as Bach's Cello Suites (either transposed or sometimes at pitch!), or concertos from the Viennese

composers such as Vanhal and Dittersdorf. The issue here is that this repertoire is not idiomatic for our modern instruments. The Bach Suites are especially suited for the cello, with its small size and tuning in fifths, and are therefore extremely challenging on bass, requiring frequent shifting and awkward hand shapes. And the concertos by Vanhal and Dittersdorf are not much better. These works were written for the Viennese violone, as mentioned before. This instrument, with its fourth-third tuning, is very different from the double bass that would become standard after Dragonetti's time. For this reason, these concertos are also not very idiomatic. Dragonetti's waltzes, on the other hand, though undoubtedly challenging, fall comfortably under the fingers and feel very natural to the modern instrument.

For this very reason, I was drawn to the waltzes during my undergraduate studies. When playing them, I no longer felt as if I was trying to recreate the expressions of another instrument. The challenges in technique felt trivial compared to attempting the triple or quadruple stops in the Cello Suites, for example. I didn't feel like I was working against the challenges of my instrument; rather, I was highlighting its natural beauty through its manageable capabilities. I felt a renewed bond with my instrument thanks to these waltzes.

After an analysis of Dragonetti's life, his relationship with music — and his dear wife — these waltzes seem far less enigmatic. They are the manifestation of his love and passion for his instrument. I can only hope that these compositions become more integrated into the standard double-bass repertoire in the future.

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