

JOSEP CERVERA-BRET
The Catalan Virtuoso

(1883-1969)

Meridian

Leon
Bosch
Double
Bass

Sung-Suk
Kang
Piano

Min-Jung
Kym
Piano



Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries we find very little by way of compositions for the double bass. The period of classicism in music was over, and the composers of the time who wrote for the double bass – Domenico Dragonetti of course, but also Johann Baptist Vanhal, Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf and others less known to the public – were long dead.

With the exception of Giovanni Bottesini, the ones who replaced them, such as Isaiah Billé in Italy, Edouard Nanny in France and Serge Koussevitsky in Russia, left a relatively small output of works for the concert double bass. It was mostly, as with Billé, pedagogical repertoire and not destined for the concert stage. So although a few composers took to championing this largest of stringed instruments, and even though they gave us some memorable works (and some not so memorable), most left nothing of a large enough corpus to be considered important enough for significant study. Still less for anyone to consider specialising in it and to dedicate an entire CD to it.

This is where Leon Bosch steps in. Bosch is a virtuoso. And virtuosos are always on the lookout for new opportunities to champion their instruments. These might come from repertoire by an unfamiliar or relatively unknown composer, particularly if it is large and undiscovered. Or perhaps repertoire from a particularly virtuosic player, able to transmit his or her superlative technique by putting it down on paper.

What Bosch is so excited about is that he has found all of these things in one composer: the Catalan Josep Cervera-Bret (1883-1969). Who, one might ask? Why haven't I heard of this man before?

Bosch has already recorded most of the works of Cervera's teacher, Pedro Valls, so the historic anomaly of Catalan culture is no stranger to him. Why anomaly? One could go way back to the Roman Empire and see where and how the Catalan language developed differently from the Castilian (i.e. Spanish) language, how one evolved and was adopted by the monarchy while the other was relegated to the serfs and common people. One could look at the way that Spanish monarchists, right up to the Franco dictatorship, imposed themselves through violent confrontation and force. The anomaly here is that their plans backfired. One can not simply erase another's identity through violence and that is what culture is: a person's identity.

The unique Catalan language has survived even though it has had to struggle and has to keep struggling against the Spanish language. Josep Cervera's music has also survived thanks in part to a similar mechanism of self-preservation. But also because it is unique. Bosch knows it and recognises it openly when he speaks about it and when he plays it. It is so because of the context in which it was created and the purpose it was supposed to serve. Its influences are unique as well. Notably the sardana dance and its music: a turn of the century folkloric tradition fed by Germanic, Italian and French musical traditions, mixed with the romanticism of the times, then cherished and nursed to become a national symbol for Catalonia.

Josep Cervera grew up in a unique environment. He was born into a musical family, giving him a large advantage over his peers, and schooled thanks to the altruism of the Counts of Peralada, where he was born. His musical development continued at



the Peralada music school where his father Jaume was teacher, and whose counts looked after every pedagogical detail, making sure that the best equipment was always available to the students. From here, Josep entered the seminary where he also received the best education one could hope for in those days, again paid for by his benefactors.



These experiences surely instilled a discipline and a work ethic that motivated him as an artist throughout his whole life. Despite the emaciated panorama left by the Spanish civil war, Cervera kept

composing and playing his instrument even if concert opportunities were few and far between, even though he was forced to leave his professional career behind in 1940, for reasons of pure existence and family obligations, to go to work in a small family shop. But as Cervera the musician moved out of the public eye, so did his music which lay forgotten at the family property until discovered in 1981 by his grandson Carles.

His output of compositions for the double bass is by any standard high. Even the celebrated Giovanni Bottesini does not come close: there are 62 catalogued works known to be in the family archive. There could have been more but some of these works were found to be impossible to salvage after the years that passed between his death and when they were rescued from his attic. The

manuscripts had been subjected to too much erosion for them to survive.

The mixed instrument ensemble from Catalonia known as the *cobla* plays a large role in Cervera's music. Where he lived, it was the ensemble that musicians most aspired to enter in order to earn a living in the music trade. It was a split existence in that they played the *sardana*, so typical of a *cobla*, in the mornings or afternoons, most musicians able to double on more than one instrument. Then in the evening they became soloists for a while to perform concerts. At night the ensemble became a dance band, playing the most fashionable and popular 19th century dance repertoire of mazarukas, polkas and Scottish dance tunes. Because printed music from outside of the country was difficult to come by, not to mention expensive, a lot of it was adapted by the musicians in the ensembles from popular Italian, French and German operas, from local *zarzuelas* (a kind of folk music theatre), or symphonic repertoire.

The competition between the *coblas* in the area was fierce, Cervera's serving as a curiosity in that no other could boast a double bass virtuoso in its ranks. Being a composer and an instrumentalist went hand in hand in those days, and the *cobla* became the perfect vehicle for Cervera to experiment with his own compositions for the bass and present them in front of an audience. And so it was that his reputation as a virtuoso and a composer grew. But he was not the only exceptional musician in the *cobla*. His uncle Agustí, who was the ensemble's music director at one period, was a notoriously good violinist, able to play Sarasate's *Aires Bohemios* (better known internationally as *Zigeunerweisen*) or Tartini's *Devil's Trill* Sonata to



exacting standards. He also doubled on the tenora (a Catalan shawm), played the piano and was a composer and arranger.

But Josep was the anomaly. Many newspapers in the family archive speak of his prowess as a soloist and the astonishment of the crowd at hearing the sounds of flute-like harmonic passages or passionate, cello-like melodies emanating from this monstrous instrument. A search through the Figueres city hall newspaper archives and concert programmes in the family archives reveals details of concerts given by Josep as a soloist playing pieces such as his *Fantasia, El Carnaval de Venecia (Carnival of Venice)* and even his comical piece *El Bruixot del Contrabaix (The Wizard of the Double Bass)* to widespread acclaim in Spain but also in France. A 1928 issue of the Montpellier newspaper *Le petit méridional* carries the following review by one Edouard Perrin of *El Carnaval de Venecia*, one of his most difficult works and based on a popular folk tune:

“...and lastly, the variations on the *Carnival of Venice* where we listened to a double bassist of uncommon strength. He was able to coax from his deep instrument violin-like sounds from his highest string thanks to the various harmonics used which were extremely well in tune. We greatly applauded his extraordinary virtuosity”.

This CD gives a sample of Cervera's compositions, their style and of course the level of difficulty and artistry needed to deliver them with facility and aplomb. Choosing from the 62 works is no easy task. Here, Bosch has struck a balance between Cervera's first period of composition and his second, and between compositions with a strong,

technically brilliant leaning and others with a more melodic and melancholic character.

Being a studious musician, not wanting to leave things to chance, Cervera thought very carefully before choosing the titles of his pieces. Some, such as *Romanza, Reverie, Elegia and Berceuse* (the last one, with its up and down moving passages and sweetness of the music evoking the seesawing of a child's crib) are familiar. Others provoke more curiosity: why *Cielo Gris (Grey Sky)*, *Fascinación (Fascination)* or *Recuerdo de Londres (Souvenir of London)*, for instance? He composed the last – based on the tune of *God Save the King* – in 1914, a few years after the voyage to London he undertook with the cobla *Els Peps* in which he played until 1940. A postcard he sent from one of the ensemble's trips to the city, dated 1908, reads: “It has already been eight days since I find myself in London with the orchestra. We play every day and we're highly applauded”. It seems certain that Josep brought back some long-lasting memories from this great city. Enough memories, anyway, to write a homage to it.

In *Fascinación* we find a vehicle for the performer's virtuosity the subtitle calls it a Fantasy for double bass and piano. Cervera's book of reference in choosing his composition's names was his *Diccionario Técnico de la Música (Technical Dictionary of Music)* written by Felipe Pedrell at the turn of the 20th century. It tells us that the fantasy usually takes the form of a theme and variations and contains technically brilliant passages of great inspiration but often with capricious excesses.

The last piece Cervera wrote for the double bass is *Cielo Gris*. Described as a Romanza (Romance), its

simple but effective melody reminds us of a song without words. He also transcribed the melody for violin at the request of a violinist, casually strolling by Cervera's shop, who was so taken by hearing him play it that he immediately requested that a part for violin be made.

Cervera was one of three known virtuosos in the Catalan school of double bass playing. The others, Pedro (Pere) Valls and Anton Torelló, were relatively widely recognised in the time they practised their art. Valls became the principal bassist with Pablo Casals's orchestra and a distinguished professor at the Liceu conservatory in Barcelona. Torelló became principal bass with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski and a distinguished professor at the then newly formed Curtis Institute of Music.

Cervera, however, remained very much a local musician. Esteemed as he was by his local fans and authorities, he never reached the level of musical fame of his two peers. It is only now that we realise that he wrote music with more refinement – comparing the piano accompaniments alone of the three composers confirms this – and more challenging technical characteristics when it comes to false harmonics, left hand technique and the various types of bowing styles and variations with the right hand.

Thanks to Leon Bosch, we can all be happy that he has finally come into the light and that, most importantly, we as musicians and you as listeners can all enjoy this unearthed treasure for years to come. Visca en Pepet! Hail to Josep!

James Testi Pibernat, April 2013

The South African-born virtuoso double bassist **Leon Bosch** is one of today's most versatile and imaginative artists. His wide-ranging interests have taken him in many directions, all of which have fed into a unique career and helped to establish his international reputation as an outstanding musician. In addition to a high-profile orchestral life – he is currently principal double bass of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields – he is sought after as a chamber musician, recitalist, concerto soloist, teacher and programmer. In addition he has built up a varied portfolio of commissions and world premieres and is developing a recording catalogue of an unusually diverse repertoire.

Born in Cape Town, though now a British citizen, he graduated from the University of Cape Town before continuing his studies at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, gaining distinction in the Professional Performance Diploma. The recipient of many prizes, he quickly found his vocation. Since 1984, when he made his London solo debut with the Philharmonia Orchestra, he has appeared as a concerto soloist with many distinguished musicians, including Pinchas Zukerman, Sir Charles Groves and Nicholas Kraemer, and as a guest principal and performer with leading orchestras and ensembles.

As an award-winning recitalist he has been invited to play at festivals and music clubs throughout the UK and in Germany, Bulgaria, Ireland and South Africa. Collaborations are a central part of Leon Bosch's work and highlights of his chamber music partnerships have included engagements with the Lindsay, Belcea and Brodsky String Quartets, I Musicanti, the Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble and the Moscow Virtuosi as



well as fruitful associations with such pianists as Maria João Pires, Mikhail Rudy, Vladimir Ovchinnikov, Peter Donohoe, Martin Roscoe and, most recently on CD, Sung-Suk Kang.

His innovative approach to music-making and his commitment to the double bass – his enthusiasm for his instrument communicated fluently both from the platform and through teaching, examining and adjudicating have done much to raise the profile of the instrument. His formidable technique and keen musicianship, combined with his artistic vision, have enabled him to carve a remarkable niche in the musical world.

On the borders of, and beyond, the classical arena Leon Bosch has contributed to recording tracks of such pop artists as Madonna, Robbie Williams, Michael Jackson and Björk while his constantly expanding horizons have led him to explore challenging and little-known music for double bass both in live performance and on disc. He has been responsible for a number of important first performances including Pueblo, a commission from John McCabe, several works by Allan Stephenson and music by the South African composers Paul Hanmer and Hendrik Hofmeyr.

Complementing his contribution to a clutch of chamber music recordings is a solo discography embracing virtuoso repertoire, albums of British, Russian and Hungarian repertoire and, on forthcoming releases, 20th century sonatas, and works by the brilliant Italian bassist Domenico Dragonetti.

As well as his deep immersion in all aspects of musical life in this country, Leon Bosch is a

graduate of the University of Salford in Intelligence and International Relations. He lives on the outskirts of London with his wife and two sons.

www.leonbosch.com

Lynne Walker

Sung-Suk Kang was born in Seoul, Korea. After winning prizes in the competitions in Korea she was given a scholarship to continue her studies at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester with Derrick Wyndham and later at the Vienna Musikhochschule with renowned pianist and scholar Paul Badura-Skoda to whom she acted as assistant. This rewarding experience was swiftly followed by another when she was hand-picked to attend the Performers' Course at Banff Center for the Arts in Canada. These invaluable experiences paid professional and artistic dividends when she returned to Europe and took first prize in the Schumann International Competition in Italy resulting in a string of engagements.



Her activities in recitals, concertos and chamber music have taken her across Eastern and Western Europe, to North and South America, and the Far East. Her many broadcasts on radio and television around the globe, have showcased her varied repertoire which ranges from Bach to Berg. In more recent years, Sung-Suk was invited to record for Meridian and her discs of Chopin, Schumann and now Mozart are a valuable contribution to the company's catalogue. She still resides in Vienna where she successfully balances a life of professor at the Conservatoire, performing and recording artist, and mother.

Steinway Artist **Min-Jung Kym** has acquired an internationally recognised reputation performing with some of the leading orchestras and musicians throughout the UK and abroad.

A former Purcell School scholar, Min-Jung made her London solo concert debut at the age of twelve with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall. She went on to study as a scholar at the Royal Academy of Music, graduating with the Eric Brough and Elsie Horne Prizes. Further recognition was given in 2009 when Min-Jung was awarded the Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM), an honour bestowed to alumni of the Royal Academy of Music, who have distinguished themselves in the music profession and have made a significant contribution to it in their particular field.

Min-Jung's performances have been enjoyed throughout the USA, Europe, Middle East and the UK including the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Wigmore Hall, Cadogan Hall, Purcell Room, St John Smith's

Square, De Montfort Hall, Brighton Dome, and the Queen's Theatre. She has also appeared at the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, (Germany), Heifetz Society in Los Angeles, Cheltenham Festival, Holders Festival in Barbados, Broadwood International Piano Festival, as well as The Chichester Festivities. Min-Jung's other performance highlights include an invitation to play at the Emilie Bustani Hall in Al Bustan, Lebanon, the world premiere performance of Stuart MacRae's Poems for Angus, with the principals of the Royal Opera House and soprano Susan Bickely, performances at the Salerno Opera House (Italy), the Auditorio Alfredo Kraus in Gran Canaria, the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, the Palais de Chaillot and UNESCO in Paris, and the Opera House in Alexandria, Egypt.

In 2008, Min-Jung was invited to perform with the world renowned Philharmonia Orchestra, which was received with such acclaim that she was invited immediately to perform with them again the following Season.

Min-Jung was the 'pianist of choice' for the masterclasses of the legendary violinist Ruggiero Ricci. She has also enjoyed successful collaborations with (amongst others) the Haffner



Ensemble, Pierre Amoyal, Zsolt-Tihamer Visontay, Sergey Levitin, Joy Farrall and Adrian Brendel.

Min-Jung's performances have led to symbiotic collaborations with international designers, notably Zuhair Murad, Lie Sang Bong and Gustavo Lins, all of whom have sponsored dresses for her.
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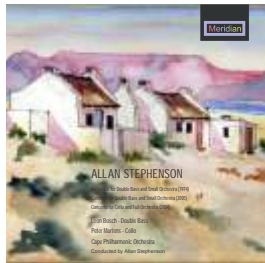
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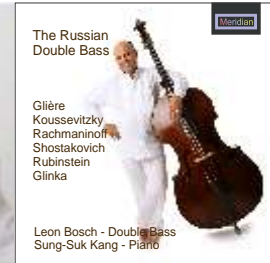
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JOSEP CERVERA-BRET

The Catalan Virtuoso (1883-1969)

1. *Elegia* 5:40
2. *Romanza* 2:50
3. *Nocturno* 2:28
4. *Reverie* 2:01
5. *Berceuse* 2:48
6. *Recuerdo de Londres* 8:45
7. *Cielo Gris* 3:03
8. *Introducción y Tarantel-la* 7:14
9. *Fascinación* 11:13
10. *El Carnaval de Venecia* 19:55

Leon Bosch - Double bass

Sung-Suk Kang - Piano

Min-Jung Kym - Piano

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Leon Bosch - Double bass, Sung-Suk Kang & Min-Jung Kym - Piano

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