

Filling the void – Boccherini and the Prussian Court

The famous praise of Boccherini by the French Violin Master, Jean Baptiste Cartier, says it all:

(Quote):

Si Dieu voulait parler à l'homme en musique, il le ferait avec les œuvres de Haydn, mais s'Il desirait Lui-même écouter de la musique, Il choisirait Boccherini."

"If God wanted to speak to men through music, He would do it with the oeuvres of Haydn, but if He himself wished to listen to music, He would choose Boccherini".

Elegance and lucidity, softness and sensibility are some of the outstanding qualities of Luigi Boccherini's music. In his time he was one of the most loved composers in Europe, one of a few. His music was held in high esteem in Spain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium as well as in Scandinavia, Austria and in Germany.

During the short period of 14 years, from 1783 to 1797, chamber music compositions by Boccherini were played frequently in Berlin and in Potsdam by the prince and heir Friedrich Wilhelm, who was a nephew of the late Friedrich II, "the Great" and a passionate cello player. He became King of Prussia after the death of his predecessor on August 17th 1786. Already at the beginning of this year, on the 21st of January, Friedrich Wilhelm had appointed Boccherini to be his "compositore della nuestra camera". From that time on Boccherini delivered about twelve new works of chamber music every year to the Prussian Court. Boccherini's service was rewarded by 1000 Prussian crowns (*Taler*) yearly. From now on Boccherini dedicated all his compositions to the King of Prussia and he always signed his letters with the words "compositor di camera di S. M. il Re di Prussia". This fruitful period ended with the unexpected early death of Friedrich Wilhelm II in the year 1797. His successor refused Boccherini's request for the continuation of his services. These are the simple facts of the relationship between music and the Prussian Court, a spiritual contribution, which remains an important period in the life of Boccherini and also a special and short interlude in the history of Prussia – in many ways.

Boccherini, who was born in 1743 in Lucca in Italy and who lived in Spain for the last 37 years of his life, spent some significant time in Rome, Vienna and in Paris and gained further experience visiting many other places in Europe, which he toured with his friend, the outstanding violin player, Filippo Manfredi. But one place, where Boccherini's music was held in high esteem was Potsdam and Berlin. In a way it may appear quite paradoxical, even presumptuous to talk about Boccherini and the Prussian Court, given the fact that - according to the latest results of research - the composer had never been personally in Berlin and Potsdam. Until today, no convincing evidence has been found, which would prove his physical presence in Berlin.

However, and this is more important, there was a strong spiritual link between this place and Boccherini. King Friedrich Wilhelm II was not only himself a genuine musician; he was also a patron for many composers, such as Josef Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart und Ludwig van Beethoven. They all benefited from him and dedicated compositions of chamber music to him. But above all – and I'm proud to say this today – the King loved the music of Luigi Boccherini. This is proven by several documents, one of which comes from Johann Friedrich Reichardt, Master of the Royal Chapel (Hofkapellmeister) for many years: Quote: "The King loved Boccherini's compositions more than any others and played them continuously"¹

There have been some unsolved and hotly disputed questions about Boccherini and his music in Prussia. Many of them have been cleared up by international scholars. I would like to give some insight into the latest findings on the subject. I should also like to show some pictures of the places in Potsdam where Boccherini's music was performed.

Boccherini's musical relationship with the Prussian Crown Prince dates back to 1783 when the Prussian ambassador was in Madrid and the six quartets of Boccherini op. 33 were performed in his honour. The ambassador, probably knowing the passion for cello of the future king and desiring to establish good relations with him, had the idea of sending him copies of the quartets. After receiving them the Prince immediately sent a reply to Boccherini: (from the family archives of Boccherini): Quote:

¹ „Der König liebte Boccherinis Kompositionen vor allen anderen und spielte sie beständig“ J. F. Reichardt,

Potsdam, October 1, 1783

Nothing could give me more pleasure, signor Boccherini, than to receive some of your compositions from your own hands and just at a time when I have begun to perform your instrumental work. It alone gives me full satisfaction and every day I enjoy that pleasure. So that I am willing to believe that the pleasure you find in composition will not shortly come to an end and that we may hope to see something new from your pen, in which case I shall be most grateful if you will communicate it to me. Meanwhile please accept, Signor Boccherini, this gold box, in memory of me and as a mark of the esteem in which I hold your talents in an art which I particularly value, and be persuaded of the consideration with which I remain,

your most affectionate,

Frederick William, Prince of Prussia²

Naturally, Boccherini was delighted by this success with a royal patron who was able to understand the originality of a piece of music and the innovations it contained. But he was not yet able to fulfill the wishes of Friedrich Wilhelm, because he was committed to Don Luis, who soon after the contact to Prussia had been established, raised his annual fee up to 12.000 reales - maybe to prevent Boccherini from resigning.

The year 1785 was a difficult one for Boccherini. For the past fifteen years he had held the position as "Violoncellist of his Chamber und Composer of Music" of Don Luis Antonio, Infant of Spain, and younger brother of the Spanish King Carlos III. Also, fifteen years previously Boccherini had married the soprano Clementina, who died unexpectedly and left the widower on his own with six children. In August of the same year, Don Luis, Boccherini's most important patron at that time, also died. Fortunately Boccherini's need for a regular income was soon solved. In a reply to his petition King Carlos III granted him not only the first vacant place of violoncellist in the Chapel Royal but also a financial assistance of 12.000 reales a year. Only when Don Luis died, was Boccherini free again to dedicate his works to any patron of his choice. The Prince of Prussia had been waiting for three years for his opportunity. Then, only a few months after the death of Boccherini's Spanish patron, he sent a letter to the composer with the following declaration: Quote:

² From the Boccherini family archives., see: Germaine de Rothschild: Luigi Boccherini, London 1967, p.48.

Berlin, January 21, 1786

“We, Frederick William, by the grace of God Hereditary Prince Royal of Prussia, heir presumptive to the crown, having recognized the eminent musical talents of Signor Luigi Boccherini, have been induced thereby to confer upon him the present Patent, with the title of Composer of Our Chamber, and in consequence we have signed these presents and caused the seal of our arms to be apposed thereto.

Berlin, the twenty-first of January, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-six.

Frederick William Pr. of Pr.”³

From now on, Boccherini sent about twelve new compositions regularly every year, mostly chamber music, from Madrid to Berlin. The exact number of the compositions held in the possession of the Prussian ruler was not clear until recently. The composer himself listed in his “catalogue of recent compositions for the King of Prussia” 56 pieces which had been given exclusively to him. They consisted of 1 symphony, 11 trios, 16 quartets and 25 quintets. The catalogue of musical scores from the Royal Library of Friedrich Wilhelm II, which was published by Georg Thouret (1895) lists 277 works by Boccherini, either in manuscript or printed form, located in Berlin. From many years, due to political situations, uncertainty has reigned as to the whereabouts of these musical scores. Today one may assume that 98% of King Friedrich Wilhelm’s collection of Boccherini-manuscripts as listed in Thouret’s catalogue still exists and that 83 % of the collection is located in the State Library of Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz. These figures are based on the research of Christian Speck, general editor of the new Boccherini Complete Edition, and are published in the second volume of Boccherini Studies, Bologna 2009.

Considering these percentages, which testify once again to the King’s preference for Boccherini’s music, one is amazed to realize that the composer allegedly never visited his royal patron in Berlin and / or Potsdam. It just seems natural, that the music-loving, cello playing king and his favorite composer would have met each other to make music together. The question, whether or not Boccherini had stayed in Berlin, has intrigued many scholars and produced some interesting investigations. Some biographers have even claimed, that Boccherini had spent time at the Prussian Court. Suggestions as to how long he may have

³ Ibid., p. 52.

spent in Berlin ranged from several months to years. Several factors appeared to support the claims of these biographers. After the death of his wife Clementina in 1785, Boccherini stopped composing for more than 1 ½ years until the last months of 1786, when he composed in November and December his first works for Friedrich Wilhelm II (Symphonies op. 37, No. 1 and No. 2). Central to the argument about Boccherini's stay in the capital of Prussia was and still is the famous "Letter of Breslau", a document, the authenticity of which has been questioned many times and is still disputed. The "Letter of Breslau" was first published in 1886 in the book *Musikerbriefe* (Letters of Musicians) in a German translation. It is addressed to Marchese Girolamo Lucchesini, Chamberlain of Friedrich II since 1780 and a former acquaintance of Boccherini from Lucca. This letter according to the latest findings dates from July 30th 1786. It begins as follows: Quote:

Most generous friend,

The departure of minister von Hoym (...) makes me despair of ever seeing the Great King again. I had such high hopes of this that I made a larger wager that he would come to this province again.; the recall of the Minister means that I have lost my wager.

The meaning of these lines is not quite clear. At that time, the 74-year-old Friedrich the Great, probably the Gran Re, was seriously ill staying in his castle Sanssouci, in Potsdam. Indeed, Karl Georg von Hoym, the King's governing minister in the province Silesia, had been called by express order to the king, where he arrived on August 4th, two weeks before the death of Friedrich II on August 17th 1786. In the following parts of the letter, the writer (Boccherini?) asks after the health conditions of the marchese's wife, who was pregnant. He also mentions his own state of health, which was very poor with, quote, "blood-spitting and total loss of strength". He comments too on political events and expresses his astonishment at the latest philosophical debate in Berlin: Quote:

What do you say about Biester and Nicolai? What (a spirit of) tolerance their writings breathe! May God preserve us catholics from patriots and friends of humanity of their kind!

The names Biester and Nicolai refer to two eminent figures, Johann Erich Biester and Otto Nicolai, who were the leaders of the so-called Berlin enlightenment debate, caused by Immanuel Kant's essay "Was ist Aufklärung" (1784).

In short, this letter reveals to us a lively portrait of Boccherini as an interested and open-minded person, reading newspapers, aware of the political and philosophical events of his time and a man of strong religious convictions as was common for the people of Lucca. When this letter was first published, it appeared with the date, 30 July of 1787, an ostensible mistake, which caused a lot of arguing among the Boccherini researchers, who cited the German translation of the letter as the original had disappeared. Only recently, in 2005 a letter was found in the archives of the Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna, which seems to be the original. This letter is signed with the date of July 30th 1786. One year before, which really make a difference. This new date helped to clarify some questions. The authenticity of the Letter of Breslau was proved by Gabriella Biagi Ravenna⁴ on the bases of many different pieces of evidence, including showing that the paper used was in use in Germany in that time. According to this author, Boccherini had travelled to Breslau, the capital of the province Silesia, which was a part of the Prussian Empire, with the aim of meeting there his royal patron. Biagi Ravenna's assertions have recently (2009) been challenged by another scholar from Lucca. Fulvia Morabito draws from the meticulous investigation of the handwriting of Boccherini the argument, that the "Letter of Breslau" is false and fictitious⁵. But if it is, the question remains: why and for what purpose would such a personal letter have been written? So at the moment we don't know how this dispute is working out.

Soon after this, Boccherini returned to Madrid where his only musical play, the zarzuela *La Clementina*, was premiered. He started composing again and in 1787 he married again, the young Maria de Pilar Joaquina Poretti, daughter of the former first cello player of the Royal Chapel (real capilla). This fact can also be taken as a proof that Boccherini's travels didn't take place in the year 1787, but might have taken place one year earlier. It has been proven recently, that all the compositions sent from Boccherini to Friedrich Wilhelm II were written

⁴ Cf. G. Biagi Ravenna: „La carta de Breslau”, in Luigi Boccherini, *Estudios sobre Fuentes, recepción e historiografía* by Marco Mangani, Elisabeth LeGuin, Jaime Tortella (eds.), Madrid 2006, p. 91 – 103.

⁵ Fulvia Morabito „La 'lettera di Breslau' di Luigi Boccherini: evidenze peritali sulla 'non identità di mano'”, in: *Boccherini Studies*, Vol 2, Bologna 2009, p. 113-175.

on paper, which was produced and widely used in Spain. This evidence also supports the theory that the prolific composer stayed in Madrid for the rest of his time.

Boccherini's chamber music works for King Friedrich Wilhelm II have recently been revised by the American scholar Mara Parker⁶. I follow here largely her descriptions. She lists 19 Quintets, 6 Quintettinos, 6 Quartets, 11 Quartettinos, 3 Terzettinos, which are still stored in the State Library of Berlin as well as 7 other works of chamber music (divertimentos, nocturnos, 2 sestettos) which apparently are lost. The first score is dated *January 1787* and the last one is dated *October 1797*. These manuscripts are signed in different ways. The first from January – March 1787 are signed with a threefold title of employment: *Professor di Musica all'attual servizio de S. M. C.; Compositor di camera de S. M. Prusiana, e Direttore dell' Accademia della Eccellentissima Signora Contessa di Benavente, Duchessa di Gandia*. This last patron, the count-duchess of Benavente Ossuna maintained a famous salon and also an orchestra of 16 musicians at her palace in Madrid. Boccherini was named *director de orquesta y compositor* in March 1786. According to the title list of Berlin this association ended after one year, as in March 1787 this title is mentioned for the last time. From October 1788 on we only find the title: *Compositor di camera di S. M. Prusiana*.

The titles also tell us about the compositions, which are divided into *opera grande* and *opera piccola*. The *opera grande* are full-scale, four-movement works and include the traditional movement types and sequence. The *opera piccola*, all the *quintettinos*, *quartettinos* and *terzettinos*, are two-movement miniatures. The manuscripts offer some insight as to how Boccherini's compositions were received by the Prussian King. Many of them have comments, emendations and additions. Several manuscripts show the words *bene* or *bon* on the title page, written in a reddish-brown pencil. In each case Mr. Thouret, the author of the catalogue of the Royal Musical Library (1895), speculates that these positive comments were written by the hand of Friedrich Wilhelm II himself. This would correspond with the royal practice of notating personal comments on various other manuscripts. Some works bear comments as to when these compositions were played, i.e. in the Quintettos B major and C major we can read *Im 9. Decembri gespielt 93*. These manuscripts provide further evidence

⁶ Mara Parker „Boccherini's Chamber Works for Friedrich Wilhelm II”, in: Boccherini Studies, Vol. 1, Bologna 2007, p. 33-62.

that they were studied and played, not merely stored for future use. Markings, not made by Boccherini, such as fingering, comments and corrections consistently appear in red-brown pencil and only in the cello part. All these pieces of evidence confirm that these works were used during the King's life time. As Mrs. Parker states: Quote:

*Boccherini's association with Friedrich Wilhelm II was a mutually fruitful one as it provided the composer with a positive opportunity – both financial and musical – to write for a patron who truly valued his works, and it allowed the King to indulge two of his greatest passions: chamber music and cello playing.*⁷

As I have mentioned before, this prolific relation should not last very long, only for ten years and a bit. But it is remarkable that it lasted during the whole time of the government of Friedrich Wilhelm II, who differed in so many ways from his predecessor, Frederick II, named the Great. A description of Friedrich Wilhelm II might not only give us some insight into a different type of Prussian ruler, but might also reveal some interdependences and congruencies – even concerning morphological aspects - between character and music. Friedrich the Great wouldn't have loved the music of either Boccherini, or Mozart or even Haydn. Since this rigid king, who was misogynistic *avant la lettre* and had banned all female persons from his court, didn't have descendants of his own, he appointed the eldest son of his eldest brother to be his successor.

At the age of three Friedrich Wilhelm, born in 1744, was taken away from his family and kept under the care and custody of several educators and private tutors, who received orders from Friedrich II. When the prince was six years old, the King wrote a long list of instructions about the aims to be reached and the values to be reinforced in the education of Friedrich Wilhelm. The little prince was also a frequent guest in the famous men's circle of Friedrich II in his castle, Sanssouci, in Potsdam. Later the king took his nephew to his several military camps so that he should become an eminent warrior like himself. However much effort he made, he didn't succeed as he had wanted. Friedrich the Great realized soon that there would be some changes in the state under the upcoming ruler. He said to the state- minister von Hoym in Breslau: Quote:

⁷ Cf. note 6, p. 57.

Farewell. I'll tell him what will happen, when I won't be here anymore. There will be merry life at the court. My nephew will waste the treasures, the army will degenerate. Women will take over the government and the state will be ruined. Then he must come and tell the King: this is not alright. The treasure belongs to the country, not to you. ... But my nephew doesn't have a cruel heart.

Looking at the history of Prussia, one has to say that this rather pessimistic prognosis was not completely wrong. When Friedrich Wilhelm II died in 1797 at the age of 53 years, the Prussian State was 48 Million Crowns in debt. The state had become bigger than ever due to the divisions of Poland, and the king, who was shocked by the events of the French Revolution, had signed a declaration of the neutrality of Prussia in the face of the threat of France and the lack of funds in the Prussian cash box. He left a remarkable legacy in the fields of architecture, arts and music. The Scottish writer, James Boswell, reported in his travel journals that the Prussians had trembled before Frederick the Great, but Frederick William wanted to be loved by his subjects. He was a far more likeable man than his uncle and some of his initial reforms—tax cuts and support for secondary and higher education—made him hugely popular with the Prussian people. The difference between him and his predecessor could even be seen on the outside.

Friedrich II was of thin stature, had piercing light blue eyes and a piercing gaze, strong facial features, and used to wear all year round the same old and rather dirty military coat. Friedrich Wilhelm was very tall, rather big, had soft and round features and preferred to appear in a white gala-uniform. The people of Berlin, who are always good for nicknames, called him *der dicke Wilhelm* or *der dicke Lüderjan*, which means the *big loose guy*. Indeed, contrary to his uncle, this king was fond of the female element. He had many love affairs, from an early age on until his last days, with girls from all levels of society. He was married twice officially and he contracted two more morganatic marriages. At the same time, during his whole life time, he remained loyal to his mistress Wilhelmine Enke, Mm. Ritz, appointed Countess Lichtenau, his “only real friend”, as he used to say. They had met when Wilhelmine, who was the daughter of a royal horn-player, was only 12 years old. Friedrich Wilhelm cared for her education and sent her to Paris. In the year 1770 he changed rings with Wilhelmine and wrote on paper with his own blood: Quote:

On my noble word of honour: I will never leave you!

And he keeps this promise. They had five children together, and she stayed close to the King until he died. The impact of this heartfelt relationship may also be seen in some buildings, which belong to the most outstanding within the cultural heritage of Prussia: the Marmor Palais, marble palace, and the little castle on the Pfaueninsel, Peacock Island, which was built for the King's mistress, countess Lichtenau. They are both situated on the water front, they are linked visually, so that one could have a look from one to the other. They can be reached by boat, the distance is about 5 km.

As a builder Friedrich Wilhelm II preferred an early classical style, sometimes with exotic interiors and decorations. Berlin's most well-known building, the famous Brandenburger Tor, the *Brandenburg Gate*, was also erected during his government. One more thing is always mentioned in relation to Friedrich Wilhelm, which didn't enhance his reputation. He was heavily under the influence of a spiritual circle, the Rosenkreuzer or rosicrucians. He assisted at spiritual sessions, organized by them, where he talked to deceased persons. Even though the tricks which were used to let the voices appear were widely known, the king himself believed strongly in the reality of the phenomena which he experienced during the sessions.

As a musician and even more as a patron of the greatest composers of his time, one might wonder why Friedrich Wilhelm II goes nearly unrecorded in the dictionaries of music. He supported and commissioned compositions from the leading composers – i.e. Haydn and Boccherini —and he was the dedicatee of over a hundred works, including six string quartets by Josef Haydn (1787; op. 50), Mozart's last three string quartets and Beethoven's cello sonatas op. 5. Immediately after his royal inauguration, Friedrich Wilhelm joined his private chamber orchestra with the royal orchestra. The result was an orchestra of 70 musicians, one of the biggest in Europe at that time. When the King asked Mozart for his opinion of the orchestra, the composer replied politely: Quote:

Your majesty possesses the biggest collection of virtuosi in the world, also quartett-playing I haven't heard in any other place like here, but if the gentlemen would play all together it would sound even better than now.

As Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm had first learned to play the viola, but very soon he changed to the cello, which was at that time, a very modern instrument, brought to Berlin

from France. There were two eminent cello players in the royal orchestra of Friedrich II, the famous brothers Jean-Pierre Duport (1741-1818) and Jean-Louis Duport (1749-1819). The great king had engaged Jean-Pierre Duport in 1773 as first cellist of the Royal Opera, chamber musician of the Royal Chapel, and as instructor for the prince. The elder Duport's playing was rivalled, or even surpassed, by that of his brother Jean-Louis, some eight years his junior, who arrived in 1789 in Berlin. The sweetness and beauty of the tone he caused to emerge from his instrument is said to have surprised many people, amongst them Voltaire, who allegedly commented: "*Monsieur Duport, you will make me believe in miracles, for I see that you can turn an ox into a nightingale.*" So, when Beethoven arrived in 1796 in Potsdam, he found a virtual hotbed of cellistic activity.

But these activities remained affiliated to the Royal Court. King Friedrich Wilhelm II had changed the former Royal Opera House of Friedrich II, where the opera seria and the castrato singing were still cultivated, into the Royal National Theatre. According to the new name, operas and Singspiele in the German language were performed, also the first operas by Mozart, even though some five years after their first performances. However, as far as the field of concert music is concerned, the city of Berlin was still a "musical village" as Adolf Weissmann wrote in his monographie "Berlin as Musical city" (1910). This period of flattering gallantry and flowering arts remained a short interlude in Prussian history. Friedrich Wilhelm II probably was the last typical Rococo-Monarch of Europe. Also, the music of Boccherini wasn't appreciated any longer. While Felix Mendelssohn called one of his quintets "a wig, but with a charming old man underneath", some other influential musicians, like Louis Spohr, rejected his music completely. (So it is really time for a Boccherini Renaissance!)

We still find some beautiful concert rooms in Potsdam, which were built for the King's passion for chamber music. The one the king loved most, was the Palmensaal in the New Garden Park, close to the Marble Palace. It is a long room with four big windows to the garden and glass doors to the adjacent orangerie rooms. The floor and the wall decorations are made out of wood from taxus (yew), plumtree and elm tree. The name is derived from 16 huge palmtrees, carved out of wood and painted in silver, gold and green. The flower pots on the consoles used to be filled with plants. In the months from early Summer until

November the king held musical concerts here very often, sometimes every night. This room provides very good acoustic conditions and is still used today for chamber music performances, mainly during the Potsdam Music Festival in June every year.

There are still some unresolved questions about Boccherini's life. But if we cannot fill the void with rude facts, arguments and fleeting information we have got a much better device: We can fill the void with music and listen to the celestial sounds of Boccherini.

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