

Editorial

«MON CHER ET ILLUSTRÉ AMI»: VIOTTI AND THE MATHEMATICIANS (A BAGATELLE)

AMONG THE INTELLECTUALS — writers, scientists, philosophers — of international repute with whom Frederick the Great surrounded himself after ascending the Prussian throne in 1740, Joseph Louis Lagrange was one of the most distinguished. Lagrange (1736–1813), a native of Turin, of French extraction, was probably the greatest living mathematician. His publications included studies in algebra, mechanics, geometry, astronomy, and differential calculus. In 1766 Frederick invited him to Berlin, where he remained until the death of the king in 1786, and where he continued to publish papers as a leading member of the Berlin Academy of Sciences.

Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824), the great Piedmontese violinist-composer, at the beginning of his international career, twice visited Berlin and the Potsdam court of Frederick the Great during a two-year-long concert tour undertaken with his teacher, Gaetano Pugnani. From Turin, where they both were employed in the court opera and chapel orchestras, the two musicians had traveled to Geneva, Berne, and Dresden, arriving in Berlin on 21 April 1780. They played for Frederick the Great, and, as Viotti himself later wrote in an autobiographical note, they ‘often made music’ with the King’s nephew and heir, the cello-playing Prince of Prussia, later Frederick Wilhelm II. They remained in Berlin for upward of four months, before continuing on to the courts of Warsaw and Saint Petersburg, then retraced their steps, arriving again in Berlin in early December, 1781. The two Italians stayed in the home of the Torinese ambassador to the Prussian court, Count Carlo Fontana, who was a keen music lover, and they often played in ‘the respectable houses of Berlin’, as Viotti reports. It was in Berlin that they parted ways: Pugnani returned to Turin, the twenty-six-year-old Viotti went on to Paris, where he probably arrived by the end of December, and where he soon established himself as the leading violinist of the day.

We do not know how or precisely when Lagrange and Viotti met. It may well have been Fontana who introduced the two musicians — Pugnani, the leading light of the musical establishment of Turin, and his brilliant pupil — to their illustrious compatriot. It is not impossible that Lagrange and Pugnani, who were almost the same age, had known each other in Turin. At any rate, Lagrange became well enough acquainted with Viotti and his playing to form a high opinion of his abilities. A letter (in French, of course) that he wrote to his old friend, the distinguished mathematician-philosopher-Encyclopedist, Jean-Baptiste Le Rond d’Alembert (1717–1783), recommending the young violinist, has come down to us:

Berlin, 7 December 1781

My dear and illustrious friend, you will receive this letter from the hands of Monsieur Viotti, my compatriot and an extremely skillful [*habile*] musician, who is going to Paris to be heard in the Concert spirituel and to try to merit the approbation of a nation that has become the dispenser of reputations in every field [*genre*]. Permit me to ask of you to be of service to him in the event that you can help him in attaining the object of his trip; I do not doubt but that he will respond to it with his gratitude and with his success.

EDITORIAL

I am taking advantage of this occasion to send to you our *Mémoires* of 1779, as well as the second Volume of the *Commentaires* of Goettingue¹. [Lagrange is referring to scientific memoirs or papers. The volume of 1779 was a collection of memoirs by various members of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, of which Lagrange was the director of the mathematics section.]

D'Alembert shared many of Lagrange's scientific interests, including calculus, astronomy, physics and fluid mechanics. In 1752 (three years before Viotti was born), as co-editor with Diderot of the *Encyclopédie*, he had written, in addition to the articles on mathematics, the celebrated *Discours préliminaire*, a magisterial *tour d'horizon* of the origins, the evolution and the taxonomy of knowledge, in which he had unreservedly admitted the debt owed by French culture to that of Italy. He was also vitally interested in music, both as an art and as a science. In 1747 he had written a study of the application of calculus to the problem of vibrating strings, and in 1752 his *Éléments de musique théorique et pratique*, essentially a guide to harmony and composition based on the system of J.-P. Rameau, was published in Paris. He and Lagrange, who was nineteen years his junior, had begun corresponding on scientific matters in 1759. Lagrange visited Paris, November 1763-June 1764, and met D'Alembert. They became fast friends, and there ensued a voluminous correspondence between the two men for twenty years. D'Alembert was instrumental in persuading Frederick the Great to invite Lagrange to Berlin.

D'Alembert replied on 1 March 1782:

My dear and illustrious friend,

Monsieur Viotti, whom you recommended to me, came to my house twice without finding me in. I was aware for a long time of his residence [in Paris] without being able to let him know, which greatly distressed me, because of the interest that you take in him. He returned at last to my house a third time; I saw him, I chatted with him at length, I put him in the picture regarding what he should know about the musical taste of this country. I gave him advice which may be useful to him in order to succeed as he desires. I have not seen him since, but he seemed well-pleased with our conversation and very inclined to profit from it; I know besides that he has been well received and highly recommended in this country, and I hope that he will be pleased by this². [Later in the letter D'Alembert mentions having received the two volumes from Viotti.]

What would we not give to have heard D'Alembert holding forth on French musical taste! In one of his articles on music in the *Encyclopédie* he had asserted that the French were traditional in their artistic tastes and that they liked only the sort of music they already knew³. D'Alembert, along with Rousseau (who contributed most of the articles on music in the *Encyclopédie*, and whose writings Viotti is reported to have admired) had been one of the partisans of Italian music in the *Guerre des Bouffons* over the relative merits of French and Italian opera. Though he did not express an opinion in print, we may infer that, in the mid and late-1770s, D'Alembert shared the Encyclopedists' approval of the reforms Gluck brought to French opera — Gluck, whose bust Viotti is reported to have given a place of honour in his rooms, and whose *Iphigénie en Aulide* (as well as its overture in concerts) Viotti, as an opera theatre director and concert impresario, was to champion in Paris and London.

¹. LAGRANGE, Joseph Louis de. *Œuvres de Lagrange*, edited by Joseph Alfred Serret and Gaston Darboux, 14 vols., Paris, Gauthier-Villars, 1867-1892, vol. XIII, pp. 371-372.

². *Ibidem*, pp. 373-374.

³. Article 'Echo', vol. v, p. 265, as cited in OLIVER, Alfred Richard. *The Encyclopedists as Critics of Music*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1947, p. 33.

By the 1760s D'Alembert had fallen out with both Rameau and Rousseau, and, wearied by the controversy surrounding the *Encyclopédie*, had resigned as co-editor. Buffeted by literary feuds, rivalries, calumnies, he might be forgiven for having a jaundiced view of French culture. But by 1782, surely D'Alembert, in the wisdom of his years, had put such ancient animosities behind him — *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. And surely Viotti was not, at least not yet, especially interested in them. Moreover, D'Alembert may well have heard Pugnani's performance of one of his own concertos at the Concert spirituel on 2 February 1754, or at the very least, knew of Pugnani from his several compositions published in Paris. Perhaps, then, there was common ground between the pugnacious old veteran of skirmishes in the pamphlets and *feuilletons* of Paris, and the young virtuoso, 'pupil of the celebrated Pugnani', soon to be the lion of the Concert spirituel and the musical salons of Paris.

As for D'Alembert's advice «which may be useful to him in order to succeed as he desires», was it advice on how to navigate the treacherous waters of Parisian cultural politics (in which Mozart, four years earlier, had notoriously come to grief) — advice which Viotti, seven years later, in 1789, was to be very much in need of? Or was it more specific musical advice about what the Parisian public liked to hear from its violinists? If the latter, would Viotti have modified his repertoire (at his debut he played his Concerto No. 1 in C major) or his playing style accordingly? I think not. It was the French public that responded to, and whose taste was forever changed by the broad, powerful bowing style, varied tone production, and the new standard of expressivity and emotional depth of Viotti's music and his playing.

D'Alembert wrote his reply to Lagrange more than two weeks before Viotti's spectacularly successful debut at the Concert spirituel on Easter Sunday, 17 March, and probably a week before the violinist's appearance at a private concert, which was sufficiently noteworthy to have been mentioned in the *Mémoires secrets*, in an entry dated 13 March⁴. Taking D'Alembert at his word, it would appear that Viotti had already made an impression with his playing in Paris, though the notice in the *Mémoires secrets* specifies that the private performance to which it refers was the one in which Viotti «made himself known by chance for the first time». However, if Viotti arrived in Paris sometime in the second half of December 1781, which seems likely since he appears to have been on the point of setting out from Berlin when Lagrange wrote his letter on the 7th, then it is entirely possible that he played in one or more Parisian *salons* before the one mentioned in the *Mémoires secrets*.

It has been plausibly surmised that this private concert took place at one of the regular musical soirées of the baron de Bagge, an eccentric music lover and amateur violinist who dedicated one of his violin concertos to the Prince of Prussia in the early 1780s, and who later became Chamberlain of the Prussian court. Lagrange was acquainted with Bagge, for he had sent a letter dated 21 September 1781 to D'Alembert in the care of Bagge. It is possible that Viotti had met Bagge on his first visit to Berlin (it is not known if Bagge was in Berlin at that time). Otherwise Lagrange would certainly have told Viotti about Bagge and indeed, told Bagge about Viotti, which lends credence to the hypothesis that it was in Bagge's home in the Rue de la Feuillade that Viotti gave the performance that 'caused all our grand masters to drop their bows' in astonishment, as the *Mémoires secrets* informs us.

D'Alembert died on 29 October 1783. It is pleasant to imagine that, though in ailing health, he had managed to attend at least one of Viotti's numerous performances at the Concert

⁴. In March–May 1789 he attempted unsuccessfully to gain control of the Paris Opéra.

⁵. BACHAUMONT, Louis Petit de – PIDANSAT DE MAIROBERT, Mathieu-François – MOUFFLE D'ANGERVILLE, Barthélemy-François-Joseph. *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des Lettres en France, depuis MDCCCLII jusqu'à nos jours; ou Journal d'un observateur* [...] 36 vols., London, John Adamson, 1783–1789, vol. xx, p. 122.

spirituel in the Palace of the Tuileries in 1782-1783. Or perhaps he met the violinist at the salon of Mme Helvétius, which both men are reported to have frequented.

As for Lagrange, he clearly enjoyed the friendship of musicians. A letter of his to D'Alembert, dated 16 December 1771, begins as follows: «You will receive, my dear and illustrious friend, or perhaps you have already received, from Monsieur [Johann Peter] Salomon, a musician of Prince Henry [brother of Frederick the Great] who recently left for Paris, a book which I am sending to you; it is the first volume of the *Nouveaux Commentaires* of Goettingue, which appeared recently»⁶. D'Alembert replied on 6 March 1772 that «Monsieur Salomon did not hand to me until only two days ago the volume of Goettingue, for which I am much obliged to you»⁷. Salomon, Prince Henry's first violinist and music director, played a sonata of his own composition in the Concert spirituel on 2 February 1772. Beginning in 1781, he became one of the leading violinists and musical impresarios in London, and his career intersected in various ways with Viotti's in London.

Salomon, Bagge, and Viotti: was it only a coincidence that Lagrange chose three violinists to act as his emissaries? Or was it to please D'Alembert, of whose profound interest in music he was well aware?

After the death of Frederick the Great in 1786, Lagrange came to Paris (in June 1787) on the invitation of Louis XVI of France. He was given apartments in the Louvre and enjoyed public esteem throughout the Revolution and under Napoleon. It is not known whether he renewed his acquaintance with his Piedmontese compatriot, Viotti, who remained in Paris until July 1792, but it seems likely that he did.

It may be stretching things, even for those of us who admire Viotti, to suggest that his acquaintance or friendship with the two eminent mathematicians was underpinned by his well-known interest in things scientific. But we do have the evidence, perhaps not entirely irrelevant, of the meticulous manuscript copy, in Viotti's hand, from some time in the first decade of the nineteenth century, of his friend Francesco Bianchi's *Theoretical and Practical Treatise on Counterpoint (Trattato teorico e pratico del contrapunto)*⁸. The first volume of this work, the theoretical part, some fifty pages long, is an exhaustive treatment of the elements of advanced, not to say abstruse, music theory, containing text, musical examples, and several exquisitely drawn diagrams illustrating, among other things, the mathematical ratios and geometric proportions of musical intervals.

We will allow ourselves a last, admittedly whimsical question: did Viotti, during that long winter journey in December 1781, in an idle moment in the coach, or in an inn, reach into his baggage and thumb through or even peruse the pages of the two weighty tomes he carried from Berlin to Paris?

Warwick Lister
Florence

⁶. LAGRANGE, Joseph Louis de. *Op. cit.* (see note 1), pp. 221-222.

⁷. *Ibidem*, p. 225.

⁸. The manuscript is held by the Royal College of Music, Ms. 8218i and 8218ii.