

Giovanni Bottesini (1821-89) Double Bass Concerto no. 2 in B minor

- (i) *Allegro*
- (ii) *Andante*
- (iii) *Allegro*

One of the most colourful – and mysterious – celebrities in nineteenth-century music is Giovanni Bottesini, the double bass virtuoso who also became a successful opera composer and conductor. Bottesini was to the double bass what Paganini was to the violin, or Liszt to the piano, a virtuoso supreme who astonished his audiences with effects previously unimaginable.

At the age of fifteen he applied for a scholarship at the Milan Conservatory. On learning that there were only a few remaining places, including one reserved for double bass, he gave himself a crash course on the instrument, mastering enough technique to convince the selection panel he was worthy. He left the Conservatory four years later, taking with him a prize of 300 francs for solo playing. Soon he was touring the world as a principal bass and conductor for leading opera houses from Havana to London, delighting audiences during interval with his spectacular variations on arias from whatever opera was being presented.

Bottesini must have been a splendid conductor. His friend, Giuseppe Verdi, entrusted him with the premier of *Aida* in 1871. Bottesini also composed operas himself, at least ten, but none survives in the repertoire. His works for double bass, however, including two concertos, have become essential repertoire for bass players. But Bottesini was less than systematic in his paper work, and scholars are unable to date most of his works. Some, including his Second Concerto, survive only in piano reduction form, requiring others to create orchestral versions.

Alexander Arai-Swale, ANAM alumnus and currently a member of the Karajan Academy, speaks to us from Berlin about the mysterious Maestro Bottesini.