

THE STRING QUINTETS OF GEORGE ONSLOW

By Ali Kian Yazdanfar

Bassists, we need to face the facts. Unfortunately, our usual catalog of chamber music pales in comparison with the repertoire available to upper string players. It is true that there are the important quintets by Schubert, Dvorak, Prokofiev, and Vaughan-Williams, and there are also excellent pieces by Schulhoff, Françaix, and Hindemith, lesser-known works by Milhaud, Toch, and Sperger, and also many contemporary works such as those by Golijov, Aho, and Dutilleux. Yet a string quartet has the ability to choose from not just one Beethoven masterwork, but from over fifteen of his quartets, in addition to numerous works by almost every other major composer in the Western canon. Because of this situation, we as bassists must be on the lookout for new ideas for repertoire, from either today's composers or by searching through the huge number of lesser-known works that are not included in the "standard" repertoire.

Years ago, I remember looking through a Lemur Music catalog and seeing a listing for a piano quintet by George Onslow. No one I knew had ever heard the piece or heard of the composer. Although years later I finally did get a recording and score, it was not until I first heard some of his string quintets that I sat up and took notice. While I was taken by the wonderful music, I was blown away by the realization that no one seemed to know or play these works anymore. Here were well-written, thoroughly likable, and mature Classical/pre-Romantic musical works which contained a double bass! In addition, the bass actually had a role greater than just doubling the cello. Why is it that almost no bassists knew about these pieces, and more importantly, how was it that all the musicians I asked did not know about George Onslow?

My goal is to introduce you to the composer George Onslow and present his string quintets, which I think deserve to be as popular with bassists as any of our most well-known chamber works.



Die Musik, II:1 (1902)

Who Was George Onslow?

George Onslow was born on July 27, 1784 in Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne region of central France. He was the son of Edward Onslow, an English nobleman who, in 1781, was forced to leave London amid tales of scandal. The senior Onslow would subsequently take refuge in the French countryside, and he later married Marie-Rosalie de Bourdeilles of the influential Brantôme family. The couple would go on to have four sons, two of whom would become painters, while the eldest, André-George-Louis, was to become a musician.

As a young student, Onslow began his early musical training on the piano with Jan Ladislav Dussek in Hamburg, and he would continue later with Johann Baptist Cramer

during trips to England. In addition, Onslow had the opportunity to experience firsthand the varied musical life of cosmopolitan Paris by spending the majority of his winters in the capital. At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, opera was all the rage in France, and his exposure to these dramatic works would fuel his desire and enthusiasm for performing music. It was not until he was twenty-two years old, and only at the urging of a friend, when he would try his hand at composition. Due to the lack of an available professor, he taught himself the basics of music composition from an elementary book on harmony, and he would later fastidiously copy string quartets of the classical masters. His first works were a series of string quintets, modeled after the

quintets of Boccherini and Mozart, and some piano trios, which showed the influence of both Haydn and Beethoven.

While these early works hint at Onslow's potential, they were not complete successes, since fundamental weaknesses remained in his compositional technique. Aware of his deficiencies, Onslow in 1808 sought out help from one of the masters of his time, Anton Reicha (1770-1836). Reicha, later a teacher of Liszt and Berlioz, was known for his straightforward and concise style of teaching, and it was under Reicha that Onslow would get the training he so desperately needed.

In the early 19th century, chamber music was exactly what the name implied. It was music that was not written for the concert hall, but rather for the salons of the upper class. In their homes, the aristocracy would partake of refined pursuits including one of the most common, music. It was not unusual for everyone to play an instrument (with varying degrees of skill), and leading performers and composers of the day were often invited to the salon performances, to increase the interest of the evenings as well as the esteem of the host. As mentioned, however, the darling of the French public was opera, and not chamber music, as was the case in Germany, where Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven were the norm. In fact, Onslow was one of the few French composers to devote most of his time to chamber music. He rarely intermixed with Parisian musical life, and throughout his career he stayed committed to the instrumental tradition of Viennese chamber music, preferring this to the *nouveautés* of the romantic tide.

During his life, Onslow was very highly regarded, and his music was much admired and played at home and abroad. Composers no less than Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Schumann thought highly of him, and even Berlioz wrote in 1829 that "since the death of Beethoven, he [Onslow] wields the scepter of instrumental music." Nevertheless, soon after Onslow's death in 1853, his music, once commonly seen alongside the music of Mozart and Beethoven, began to appear less and less.

Onslow's String Quintets and the Double Bass

While the string quartets of the great masters evidently provided much inspiration for the thirty-six quartets to appear under his pen, Onslow's *oeuvre* is remarkable for the string quintets, both in their number (thirty-four), as well as their variety of character and instrumentation.

The string quintet was a common form in the French salons, mostly in the version often used by Boccherini (two cellos), but also later in that of Mozart (two violas), and Onslow found himself drawn to these arrangements. His Op. 1 is a notable group of three quintets, the first and third containing two violas, while the second requires two cellos. From 1821, sustained interest in the genre would result in the appearance of fourteen quintets in just nine years.

All of this brings us to the fateful encounter between the composer and none other than the bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti at a concert in 1826 premiering his tenth quintet, Op. 32. It seems that the second cellist neglected to show up at the concert, and after an hour, the question was put to Onslow whether he might accept Dragonetti to step in. Initially more than reluctant ("no..., no..., one hundred thousand times no! [...] I am sure, the bass will give a detestable effect"), he finally relented. However, he was enthusias-

tically enamored of the result, so much so that for the upcoming edition of this work and the three following quintets (Opp. 32-35), the cover page would clearly read

Quintets for two violins, viola, violoncello, and double bass.

In fact, in order to make the works available to the largest number of people possible, these editions were published with two supplementary parts, not just a violoncello-basso (second cello), but also an alto-violoncello (for a second viola to play the first cello part). Therefore, these works could theoretically be played with two violas and cello; viola and two cellos; viola, cello, and bass; or even two violas and bass.

So, the question remains whether or not we, as bassists, are merely transposing a second cello part or whether we are really following the composer's wishes. Onslow answers the question himself in a note approving of an 1842 manuscript of double bass parts for the quintets Nos. 1-20 (Opp. 1-45):

I have to say that if the 4-string bass[...]were more in use in France, I would have greatly preferred it to the second violoncello, in that it separates the instruments in the group and serves as a true bass without confusion of sound with the first violoncello. I believe that in addition to the useful effect obtained, bassists would see a means to extend the domain of their instrument and to multiply their presence in chamber music.

To the end of his life, George Onslow would continue to write string quintets, and, apart from a few works written specifically for two violas (Nos. 32-34, Opp. 78, 80, 82,) the majority would be published with supplementary parts including double bass. Quintets Nos. 26 and 27 (Opp. 67 and 68), were, in fact, written specifically for the bass, with No. 26 (1843) dedicated to Achille Gouffé, a bassist at the Paris Opera who from 1836-1874 regularly held concerts at his home. Gouffé was a great admirer of Onslow, and he would later create an edition of double bass parts for all thirty-four quintets.

Onslow's Style

At the end of the eighteenth century, the chamber music scene in France consisted mostly of amateurs and dilettantes playing relatively simple music for enjoyment. The works of Mozart and Haydn, with their more involved development of themes, harmonies, and rhythms, were relatively unknown due partially to their difficulty of execution. Onslow entered the French scene as a pioneer, even though he was clearly taking his cues from the Viennese masters. From the beginning and throughout his *oeuvre*, his music remains true to the traditional classical form, and yet it retains a characteristic easy lyricism coupled with personal charm and inventiveness.

We can also see the similarities of the composer's early music to that of his pre-Romantic contemporaries such as Schubert, Weber, Spohr, and the young Beethoven. In addition, Onslow remained a man of his country, and always professed an admiration for the dramatic music of the stage. His music is dynamic and full of energy, and it often plays with the contrast between masses of sound and brusque silences; syncopation is commonly employed, and throughout his work we find a predilection for dotted rhythms.

Lyric melodies are graceful and elegant, and the texture never becomes heavy or thick, even in the quintets.

However, Beethoven, whom Onslow so much admired, was to shake Onslow's musical foundations upon the appearance of the former's late quartets, which were first heard in Paris in the late 1820's. The groundbreaking complexity and daring harmonies acted so strongly on Onslow; they stimulated his creative energies while at the same time upsetting his conservative sensibilities. It is at this time that we see a great refinement of his compositional technique, a broadening of his aesthetic, and a developing maturity. Although his musical temperament, with its tempestuous energy and audacious transitions, is often comparable to that of Beethoven, his music always projects the refined and unique voice that has defined it from the start.

Another characteristic of Onslow's *oeuvre* is the complexity of the writing, thereby causing difficulty in execution. In the quintets this is usually due to the virtuosic writing for the first violin and the (first) cello. This is, without a doubt, one of the reasons that his pieces fell out of favor long ago and led to being almost forgotten by today's musical establishment.

As far as the writing for double bass is concerned, Onslow was not content merely to double the cello. His use of the bass for the true bass line freed the cello to contribute in a more melodic context (hence the virtuosity required), but also demanded of the double bassist a greater responsibility than that of a mere source of texture. Although extended bass solos are rare, the melody from time to time does find its way to the lower octave. The inclusion of the bass feels organic and never forced, and the harmonic and rhythmic role is truly independent of the other voices.

Where To Start?

If, as I hope, at least some of Onslow's quintets can become part of the standard chamber music repertoire, we must ask ourselves where to begin. When a bass appears in chamber music, it is very important that its presence is not an event in and of itself. In other words, the music needs to speak for itself. In addition, bassists have been somewhat limited by the lack of availability of the sheet music, another reason perhaps why Onslow's music has fallen into relative obscurity. However, from various sources,

we can obtain a large cross section of works from all of the composer's periods, and at the end of the article I will list a number of them.

It would be insightful to discuss one of the works written specifically with bass in mind, namely the Quintet No. 26 (Op. 67) in C-minor (1843). Onslow himself considered this one of his most complete and substantial works. The Op. 67 opens with a dramatic introduction almost operatic in nature, setting the tone for the ensuing *Molto moderato e grandioso*. The first theme, filled with dotted rhythms, is quite resolute and filled with gravity, while a lyric, easygoing second theme provides relief from the previous tension. The second movement, *Scherzo. Allegro non troppo presto* is a petulant and feverish movement, and insistent off-beats contribute to the stormy, tormented atmosphere. In the trio, a pastoral atmosphere provides a backdrop for youthful figures by the violin. An *Andante. Sostenuto e cantabile* is classic Onslow. Its noble theme in G-major demonstrates a show of restraint and elegance, and the movement's melancholy reminds the author at times of later romantic English composers. Instead of a boisterous finale in C major, Onslow instead opts for an expressive *Allegretto quasi Allegro*, retaining the dramatic use of the minor key. Through the use of chromaticism and some daring harmonic transitions, he shows himself to be a master of his art.

In conclusion, I must state that I have always found it a pleasure whenever I am lucky enough to perform one of Onslow's string quintets. I hope that others will share my enthusiasm and make these pieces a regular part of our chamber music repertoire.

Sources

For space considerations, I have refrained from quoting sources, but for those interested in more complete information, I can recommend two large-scale references (both in French only). The Niaux treatise contains a chapter specifically on the question of the double bass in the quintets, as well as a catalogue of all of Onslow's works. In addition, there are many online sources that can give more background on George Onslow.

Jam, Baudime. *George Onslow*. Clermont-Ferrand: Les Éditions du Mélophile, 2003.

Niaux, Vivian. *George Onslow, Gentleman Compositeur*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2003.

Association George Onslow. Site de l'Association George Onslow. Association George Onslow – The French Onslow Society. <http://www.georgeonslow.com> {accessed April 7, 2010}.

The George Onslow Web Site. <http://george.onslow.online.fr/> {accessed April 7, 2010}.

To obtain parts, there are many sources. Some of them are listed below.

The Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen has a website where you can download several of Onslow's quintets for free. The following quintets are supplied with specific double bass parts: Opp. 32, 33, 35, 43, 44, 45, 51. <http://www.kb.dk/en/nb/samling/ma/digmus/1800/onslow.html>

www.KammerMusikVerlag.de has a constantly growing catalog of newly typeset parts, including scores.

The catalogue of Verlag Walter Wollenweber contains several Onslow works.

Doblinger (Diletto Musicale) carries Quintet No. 30, Op. 74.

Recordings of Onslow's quintets with bass are rare. Three good examples are the following:

Onslow, George. *George Onslow: String Quintets, Opp. 34 & 35*. Quintett Momento Musicale. MD&G Records, 2004.

Onslow, George. *George Onslow: String Quintets, Opp. 38 & 67*. Quintett Momento Musicale. MD&G Records, 2006.

Onslow, George. *Onslow: String Quintets, Opp. 33 & 74*. Ensemble Concertant Frankfurt. MD&G Records, 2004.

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