

Chapter 1

“Cello-and-Bow Thinking”

The First Movement of Boccherini’s Cello Sonata in E \flat Major, Fuori Catalogo

Anyone who performs old music or who has written about its history can attest to identifying with composers. The identification can be a haunting or an irritating experience, containing as it does the potential for possession or invasion; shot through with sorrow, since, in Western classical music, so often the composer is long dead; revelatory, voyeuristic; at its best and sweetest we might call it intimate, implying that it is somehow reciprocal. I will contend two things here: first, that the sense of reciprocity in this process of identification is not entirely wistful or metaphorical, but functions as real relationship; and second, that this relationship is not fantastic, incidental, or inessential to musicology. It can and should be a primary source of knowledge about the performed work of art.

In making such a claim I can do no better than show the reader the scene of one of my own trysts with Signor Boccherini, the very sheets and the stains upon them, as it were. (See example 1; CD track 1.)

Because the performer’s relationship to the work of art must have an extensively explored bodily element, a performing identification with a composer is based on a particular type of knowledge which could be called carnal. It is the rendering of this knowledge, which by its nature contains an extremely fine grain of detail, into concepts that are usefully transferable to other works, to other points of contact with the composer, and eventually to points of contact with other composers altogether that will concern me for the remainder of this book. In this chapter, however, I remain at the granular level of translation from sensation to concept.

Confronted with the necessity of executing the first part of a sonata, the performer will engage in a brief preliminary assessment of what she is about to do. The necessity, or at least advisability, of such an assessment has been acknowledged for a long time: it corresponds to the *intellectio* of classical

Example 1. Cello Sonata in E \flat Major, fuori catalogo, i (Allegro), first half of movement.

vc.

basso

3

8^{va}

(8^{va})

6

(8^{va})

9

tr tr tr tr

a loco

12

(continued)

Thro
whe
has t
of e
pla
that
edg
mus
align
text
and
SM

Example 1. (continued)

15

Musical notation for measures 15-17. Treble clef, bass clef, key signature of two flats. Measure 15 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 16 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 17 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note.

18

Musical notation for measures 18-21. Treble clef, bass clef, key signature of two flats. Measure 18 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 19 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 20 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 21 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note.

22

Musical notation for measures 22-24. Treble clef, bass clef, key signature of two flats. Measure 22 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 23 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 24 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note.

25

Musical notation for measures 25-27. Treble clef, bass clef, key signature of two flats. Measure 25 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 26 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 27 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note.

28

Musical notation for measures 28-30. Treble clef, bass clef, key signature of two flats. Measure 28 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 29 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note. Measure 30 has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a whole note.

Example 1. (continued)

rhetoric, a mulling-over and consideration of the topic at hand. When the performance involves a score, this is at first a visual act. Lodovico Viadana, writing in 1607, offers a reading musician’s version: “It will be good if the organist has first looked over the concerto which is to be sung, because in understanding the nature of that music, he will always play a better accompaniment.”¹

“The nature of that music” can mean quite a few things. There may be some kind of who-what-when, a rough and ready musicology: the composer, Luigi Boccherini, lived in the second half of the eighteenth century; what we have before us is the first half of a first movement of a sonata for cello and “basso,” the latter in this case being an unfigured bass line. Further context may arrive with this information. For instance, Boccherini is generally remembered today as having been a great virtuoso cellist. He is also generally remembered as some sort of precursor to the style of Haydn and Mozart. By these lights, we might expect a sonata-form procedure, and a certain degree of showiness.

For a prospective performer, “the nature of that music” is also inescapably physical. On this level, perusal of the score becomes an anticipatory kinaesthesia, a sub-verbal, sub-intellectual assessment of questions such as, What do I need to do in order to play this? Where will I put my hands, and how will I move them? The most basic physical terms within which this question operates—the framing of a cellist-body—are fairly easy to articulate. Many, in fact most, physical possibilities are excluded, such as standing up, leg motion of any kind, waving the arms in the air, vocalization, and so on. A certain basic position is mandated: seated on a chair, with the instrument between the legs, its neck to the left of the face, and the bow held in the right hand.

It is in the act of playing the instrument, the engagement of that cellist-body in movement and doing, that the enterprise becomes fraught with complexity. Suddenly we are involved with implications such as the following:

fixity vs. mobility (arms, fingers)

competing muscle groups (hands, arms, back)

muscular extension and contraction

joint extension, contraction, and rotation

motion of limbs or digits toward or away from the center of the body

friction and the release of friction (left-hand fingers on string; bow hair on string; between muscle groups)

use of or resistance to weight, gravity

These matters, detailed as they are, are still general. What of the piece at hand, and its specific demands? How will the cellist's body configure itself according to the solo line of this sonata? And—an integral part of my project—how may we read these configurations for meaning?

THE FIRST HALF OF THE MOVEMENT

The first specific thing the performer is likely to notice in assessing this page of music may well come with a little lurch of alarm: the piece begins "out there," technically speaking, not in the cello's more ordinary bass or tenor register, but in the soprano range, unfamiliar enough that most cellists will have to find and secure the position for the left hand before beginning to play. (For the latter-day cellist, accustomed to reading treble clef at pitch, the lurch of alarm will be unnecessarily intense: it was Boccherini's custom, as it was the custom in most solo cello music of his day, to read this clef down an octave.) From this somewhat precarious starting point comes a measured, steady descent for two bars, and then two more an octave lower. Topically speaking, such descending lines connote withdrawal, while the dotted rhythms of bars 2 and 4 connote something of the martial. From this topical mixture one might construct a scenario of a rapidly subsiding bravado, being resisted with brief shows of rigidity. But then add to this the physical experience of playing this passage, which is a kind of drawing-in toward a center: from its initial extension, the left arm moves steadily in toward the chest, and, psychologically, toward home, the familiar pastures of the tenor and bass ranges. Simultaneously, the right hand holding the bow must move minutely inward as well. In order to play with a clear sound in a high register, the bow hair is positioned on the strings rather close to the bridge, where there is quite a bit of frictive resistance to the bow; as the pitches descend, the bow can be moved "in," again toward the body's center, a half-inch or so, and the strings' resistance diminishes considerably. For both hands this is an experience of increasing ease and relaxation, and probably relief. Thus the retreat from the screwed-up courage of the opening is, physically speaking, pleasant, welcoming, grateful.

If we combine the physical experience of the passage with its topical/

gestural significations, we get a complicated little picture: retreat and subsiding manifest as desirable. Gratification is associated with a withdrawing motion. Meanwhile the persistent dotted rhythms, which become increasingly gruff in sound with the descent in pitch, militate against this esthetic of introversion. (Yet they are subtly comforting as well: the execution of dotted rhythms such as these involves minute rooting-inward motions of the right hand on each thirty-second note followed by slightly longer releases into the air after each sixteenth, allowing the right hand to repeatedly confirm its position, short-long, short-long, with each thirty-second–dotted-sixteenth pair.)

At this point, having made the piece's first full statement, the performer must return abruptly to the high place in which the piece began—this time, without the luxury of being able to find the position outside of musical time. In negotiating this leap, muscle memory will help, but should that memory prove less than perfect, and the two-and-a-half-octave jump to the soprano register go awry, Boccherini immediately offers two opportunities to regroup and correct the intonation. The minor third G–B \flat , on which the new phrase begins, is most sensibly played by the left thumb and second finger,² the upper-neighbor third, A \flat –C, by first and third fingers. Each upper-neighbor third provides a brief moment in which to lift and adjust the position of the thumb. Unless there has been a really gross initial miscalculation, this should permit everything to be all set, by the third beat of bar 5, for the passagework that follows. This starts out brilliant, if formulaic, with its cascading triplets, but begins to droop by bar 7, the thumb position reset a step lower, and then another, finally by halfway through bar 8 landing on a dominant drone, which murmurs itself away into a cadence.

Much of this passagework—the figuration of bars 5 and 6, and bars 8³–10 being examples—is written so that one can just twiddle around within a position, oriented around the fixed and immobile left thumb. Since thumb-position is a technique used only by cellists and virtuoso contrabassists, and since it is central to Boccherini's idiom, a brief reversion to the level of framing the basic cellist-body may be in order here. Thumb-position involves placing the right side of the left thumb across two strings, usually the top two, as a “bar,” or artificial nut (see figure 1).³ The pitches produced by a pair of thumb-stopped strings will always be a perfect fifth apart, since the strings themselves are tuned in fifths. Thumb-stopped notes will also have a tone quality somewhat different from those stopped by the other fingers, since it is the side of the thumb that makes contact with the string; joints are considerably less flexible under sideways pressure, and there is less flesh on the side of a digit. Vibrato becomes more difficult. Thumb tone could be described as rather hard and bald.

This sonata is rather unusual for Boccherini in the amount of thumb movement implied in its first eight bars; but it is perfectly characteristic of him in



Figure 1. Lyra Howell, *Left Hand in Thumb-Position*. Charcoal, pencil, chalk. Copyright Lyra S. Howell, 2003. Photo copyright Lyra S. Howell, 2003.

the fact that this movement is always downward in pitch. Boccherinian technique more typically involves “planting” the thumb in a convenient location for part or all of an extended passage, thus fixing register for that passage’s duration. With the thumb planted, the remaining fingers can fill in the pitches of a diatonic or chromatic scale around and within the thumb’s bar-fifth, and can, in the upper registers, extend to a tenth or even further above the bottom note of the bar. Typically, Boccherini will signal both the beginning and the end of a fixed-thumb-position passage with a clef change, and he often uses a different clef to signal the placement of the thumb.⁴ The elegance of this system of implying (without ever dictating) the most convenient or appropriate means of execution, together with the sense it gives, on the page as well as to the ear, of a substantial cast of characters, each with its own voice, is lost in every modern edition I have encountered, since all avoid the rich variety of clefs an eighteenth-century cellist was assumed to be able to read. In addition to bass and “old tenor clef” (treble-clef-down-an-octave) this included all the C clefs (soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor), as well as the rather daunting invention of tenor-clef-up-an-octave, to my knowledge unique to Boccherini.

Because thumb technique orients the left hand around a stopped fifth, it also lends itself to the addition of a drone or pedal point, an addition Boccherini often exploits, as in bars 8³–10 here. Double-stopping and drones are written-out resonators, ways of increasing the harmonious vibrations coming out of the instrument (and disguising the bald tone of the thumb-stopped notes!) but they will function in this way only if the performer is very conscious and deft with the balance of friction and release in the right hand. In terms of sensation, playing two strings at once will offer increased resistance to the right hand and arm; further resistance takes place between muscle groups: the deltoid and biceps, which are responsible for the pronation (inward rotation) that sinks the arm weight into the strings, war subtly with the trapezius and back muscles that are responsible for the lateral motion across them. If the performer gets this balance of resistances right, it will result in a warm, bright, carrying sound, one which is definitely pleasant to work at.

In the sonata movement at hand, Boccherini invites an exploration of the pleasure of making resonant sound through the amount of repetition he provides; this gives the performer plenty of time in which to find the requisite muscular balance. This appears at many levels: from the micro-repetitions of bars 5–6 (CD track 2), to the pastoral musette music of bars 8³–10 (CD track 3) and its slightly more dreamy cousin in bars 18³–22³ (CD track 4), to the sonorous momentum of bars 26³–27 and 29³–30 (CD track 5). The repetitions in the pastoral mode are introverted and calm; they invite a sound that seeks resonance without seeking much projection. This plays out as physical calmness, since making such a sound involves a greater submission to gravity, less effort by the arm and shoulder muscles. The repetitions toward

the end of the movement are more urgent, implying a crescendo of sound and muscular activity. Both passages in their different ways incite and encourage the performer to explore different pathways toward a frictive physical pleasure. This is not friction toward a climax, however. Even the tumult of bars 26³–27, and then again 29³–30, issues only in a delicate, lazy descending line and a rather indolent cadence.

There is in fact only one complete phrase on this page that is not written in thumb-position, and which is not based on layered repetitive gestures. This is in bars 11³–18² (CD track 6). Here the left hand must move up and down the neck of the instrument to follow the line of the melody, a much more commonplace cellistic technique. The whole passage falls within the most grateful, “singing” register of the instrument, and its vocality is further emphasized by the fact that, without the thumb on the strings, it is much easier to use vibrato, producing a warmer, more “natural” tone. In his violin treatise of 1787, Leopold Mozart tells us that

tremolo [his word for *vibrato*] is an ornament that springs from nature itself, and not only a good instrumentalist but also a skillful singer can make it an appropriate adornment for a long note. Nature itself is the teacher for this: when we strike a loose string or a bell sharply, we then hear a certain wave-like beating (*ondeggiamento*) of the tone we have struck, and we call this shuddering aftersound tremolo or tremoleto.⁵

Shifting up and down the instrument’s neck, by progressively shortening and lengthening the strings, mimes the melodic “shapes” created by the invisible shortening and lengthening of vocal cords. This ability of our bodies to generalize such an activity from one situation or body part to another, our marvelous self-analogizing propensity, can be experienced by the string player nowhere so intimately as in the physical analogies of tone production for voice. To be launched upon a melody, airborne among the expressive and muscular demands of shaping it, seems only to be adequately described by reference to the experience of singing. David Sudnow remarks that a central process in learning an instrument is the acquisition of “a general style of bodily movement . . . of a complexity that in no way can be readily reduced to some existing equation” and which has the signal feature of generalizability to (and from) the rest of the body, rather in the manner of a hologram.

Put a person with a piano-knowing hand above major-scale pedals on the floor of an organ, and the feet learn their ways and the pedal’s spaces faster than the feet of a body without a piano-knowing hand. Put the piano-knowing hand over a child’s-sized toy keyboard, and in a few moments the piano-knowing hand displays perfect familiarity in moving about.

Put a pencil in the knowing hand and watch a scale get played, a melody picked out. That scale and its distances are thoroughly incorporated for the

body, an inner acquisition of spaces somehow arrayed all over as an ever-present potential. And when fingers in particular learn piano spaces in particular, much more is in fact being learned about than fingers, this keyboard, these sizes.

A music-making body is being fashioned.⁶

And as in singing, every instrumental “voice,” however produced, will have its own stamp; a mature string player develops a tone that is identifiably her own, as flexibly characteristic as the sounds that issue from her larynx. This is not wholly dependent upon the particular instrument being played, nor on the apparent type of body playing it: fine players can produce “their” sound on a wide variety of instruments, small people sometimes have a huge, robust tone, and so on.

Boccherini’s exploration of cellistic *bel canto* delivers to us the most personal part of the piece so far. CD track 6 contains an abrupt turn into the minor mode (bar 13³), with a number of its topical attendants: pathos, in the form of descending chromatics (bar 14) and an augmented second (bar 15); and anxiety or unrest, conveyed by the syncopations (bars 16–17). The passage that begins at bar 13³ uses plangent chromaticism to confirm the inward bent of the whole movement: in order to play this descending line—to make a G become a G^b—the left hand must move, however minutely, toward the heart. Kinesthetically, this is a motion toward the center of balance; and gesturally it references the motion associated in classical oratory with heartfelt sincerity.

Pathetic connotations to chromatic passages and descending lines are scarcely peculiar to Boccherini, of course; what is so characteristic is the way in which those associations are physically welded, as it were, to one of the most fundamental acts of playing the instrument at all. Such drawings-in are always toward a center, not only of sentiment, but of physical efficiency and balance. We can confirm this reading again and again in the course of exploring this sonata; and it is a notable feature in all its kindred works. It seems that for Boccherini as he manifests himself to us in the sonatas for cello and basso, the performer’s basic aplomb upon his instrument tended to be manifested in pathos or sentimental reflection, even in a major-mode Allegro.

To recapitulate and summarize these combinations of physical experience with topos and affect, then: a daring beginning proves to be the beginning of a retreat; in bar 5, potential discomfort (the large leap upward) is mitigated by some musically simple but technically sophisticated repetitions; something showy follows that is not at all difficult to play; this too subsides, step by step; in the drone passages, both reflective and cumulative, there are invitations to explore pleasure in the sliding and resistance of muscle fibers, and in the instrumental resonances that go into developing tone; in the passage from bars 11³ through 18², the minor-mode affects of pathos, melancholy, and anxiety are set apart and emphasized through their vocalistic ex-

ecution, evoking that central eighteenth-century understanding of the voice as the ideal marker of a feeling selfhood.

COMMUNICABILITY AND RECIPROCALITY

In a live performance (and to some extent in a recorded one) not only will the performer feel things such as those I have described, but the listener-observer will feel them too, or will at least feel that the performer feels them, through the subtle physical identification that comes with proximity and close attention to another human being. Such matters communicate themselves entirely without the benefit of a verbal exegesis, and are a proper, if always only contingent, part of the performed work of art. None of these kinesthetic associations can ever be really free, on account of Western culture's powerfully normative, powerfully tacit understandings of embodiment; hence, much of the verifiability and transferability of this carnal approach to musicology must rest upon unpacking and discussing those norms.

The first norm we encounter here is the one that says, in a very reasonable voice, you cannot have a physically reciprocal relationship with someone no longer living.

Yet I do claim it as reciprocal. My role constitutes itself as follows: as living performer of Boccherini's sonata, a work which he wrote for himself to play, I am aware of acting the connection between parts of someone who cannot be here in the flesh. I have become not just his hands, but his binding agent, the continuity, the consciousness; it is only a step over from the work of maintaining my own person as some kind of unitary thing, the necessary daily fiction of establishing and keeping a hold on identity. The act is different perhaps in urgency and accuracy, but not, I think, in kind. As this composer's agent in performance, I do in this wise become him, in much the same manner as I become myself. And my experience of becoming him is grounded in and expressed through the medium of the tactile.

As for Boccherini's role in this endeavor, I turn to Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique*, the entry on execution; this book was published in Paris in 1768, the year in which Boccherini visited that city. Rousseau is addressing the performer of vocal music in terms that mandate a radical identification with the composer.

Begin then by a complete knowledge of the character of the air which you are going to render, of its connection with the sense of the words, the distinction of its phrases, the accent which it has peculiar to itself, that which is supposed in the voice of the executant, the energy which the composer has given to the poet, and those [energies] which in turn you also can give the composer. Then relax your organs to all the fire which their considerations may have inspired you with; do the same as you would, were you at the same time poet, composer, actor and singer.⁷

The recommended trajectory of attention is from an educated listening inward, through a grasp of conventions, and toward a level of experience neither conventional nor well understood, here introduced by that extraordinary phrase: “that which is supposed in the voice of the executant.” What can this mean but the composer’s reliance on knowledge of, or assumptions about, the performer?—who can only make the acquaintance of this ghostly version of themselves “supposed” in the work through a careful evaluation of what it is like to execute it. This is, I would suggest, not primarily an auditory matter. Rather, it resembles the process I have been describing in this chapter: initially abstract, then visual, increasingly kinesthetic, evolving in detail and precision through the course of learning to play a piece. In Rousseau’s native French, the primary meaning of *sentir*, to feel, was “to receive some impression by means of the senses . . . It is never used for simple perceptions of sight and hearing.”⁸ In the Italian that he championed as the ideal, the musical, the most fully human language, *sentire* had a crucially different usage: “A generic term with which one commonly expresses the suffering or receiving of . . . impressions . . . It is used for some senses in particular, and first and most frequently for hearing.”⁹ Rousseau explicitly invokes *sentire* in performance. Through this, then, I come to know what the composer supposed me to be.

This is a vivid experience, full of poignance.¹⁰ As I practice *sentire* in Boccherini’s music, I become aware of a poignance of presence, the unmistakable sensation of someone here—and not only here, but inhabiting my body. It is a commonplace in any kind of physical education that intensive involvement with certain bodily configurations will change one’s habits, change one’s choices, change the very way things feel. Here, as I educate myself physically about the highly characterized work of this composer, these changes occur in the image, or rather the feel, of *someone else*. They delineate him with an uncanny and entirely un-visual clarity, and it is this vivid experience of being pierced and pervaded by Boccherini, I maintain, that constitutes the reciprocity of our relationship.

And what of its subjectivity? Despite my carefully generic locutions about the experiences of “the performer,” plainly that performer is myself; the detailed assessments of possible physical experience in playing this page of music derive directly from what I felt (both *sentir* and *sentire*) as I learned to play it. It may appear that I have chosen only fingerings and bowings that reinforce my interpretive points; that every such point I have made is thoroughly arguable as to its generalizability, its usefulness; and that what appears above is not musicology, not history, but an exercise in narcissistic free association by a particularly verbose performer.

To take only one example, is it not possible to construe the opening of this sonata as a triumphal, rather than a retreating, trajectory? Doesn’t the descent into the lowest register bring with it connotations of increasing mas-

culinity and thus authority, supported by the attendant increase in resonance and volume from the instrument? And doesn't the gradual progress of the performer's left hand from soprano to bass registers inflect this with an additional rigidity, involving as it does a motion upward, against gravity, which actually requires more muscular contraction in the upper arm as the phrase continues?

The answer, of course, is yes. It's a rather nice reading of the passage, in fact. The prerogative I have taken of interpreting it in another light would go unquestioned in performance. I propose performance and analysis as two faces of interpretation, an act which is both art and science. If we accept this (and doing so is fundamental to the epistemology of a carnal musicology) the whole simplistic and ultimately rather boring notion of an authoritative reading simply auto-digests, leaving us with its compost: that complex layering of interpretations that builds up around any work of art, and, culturally speaking, constitutes the nourishment it must have in order to survive.

Eschewing authoritativeness, however, we must still have plausibility; and it comes readily enough if we focus more historically on the composer at hand. Explorations of his music's placement within its cultural milieu confirm these executional readings, as well as suggesting further terms for and conceptions of the Boccherinian character, with its marked tendency to gravitate toward ease and comfort—there is something positively gentlemanly about the way he refuses to sacrifice the performer's ease to virtuosic excitement—toward introversion, toward melancholy, and, in and through all of these, toward an unorthodox kind of goal-less pleasure. Through the music, one intuits an appealing and most interesting character. Much of this book will be given over to placing that character, and those intuitions, in historical context.

THE SECOND HALF OF THE MOVEMENT

To return to the sonata: if the section we have considered so far suggests Boccherini's character to us through its physical and experiential elements, how does its second half continue or build upon this process?

Special caution is required here. Twentieth-century ears, even highly educated ones, will have been raised on a diet of Viennese conventions in late eighteenth-century music; a particular "template" of first-movement sonata form, laid out in elegant practice by Haydn and Mozart, theorized in loving detail by German critics of the first part of the nineteenth century, and taught as a kind of gospel ever since, has a hold over modern expectations that should not be underestimated. One of its side effects has been a certain deafness to earlier or non-Viennese models, resulting at worst in their interpretation as incomplete or clumsy attempts at the "real thing"—an inevitable result of elevating a certain stylistic moment as classic. Boccherini is one of

a number of eighteenth-century composers whose instrumental music suggests other pathways to coherence. Late Viennese sonata form makes a sadly Procrustean bed for the piece under consideration here, as it does for much of his music.

It is safe enough, however, to locate our expectations within some broadly defined parameters of the way sonatas behave. By this halfway point in the movement, our outlook as listeners (or as the kind of sublimated or deferred listeners that readers of musicological description perform become) will differ from what it was at the outset. We no longer confront the piece with the implicit question, “What do you have to show me?” since that “what,” in the form of the sonata’s theme or Main Idea, has been shown. In the process, it has become more or less personified, so that we will be likely to regard it not as “what” but as “whom” (such personification is of course especially clear in a solo sonata). Our listening interest and engagement will henceforth center around the progress of this sonic being through certain vicissitudes, and our expectation will focus on an eventual return to or reconciliation with its initial aspect. Thus our question has become, “What is going to happen to you?”

In contrast to the listener, however, the prospective performer, whose primary concern is physical exigency, keeps asking the same question as at the beginning: “What do you have to show me?” Thus the performer continues to engage with the second half of a sonata in its expository capacity. Is such exposition even susceptible of development? Do narrative structures of characterization and expectation operate on a kinesthetic level?

Some of the possible intersections between a listening and a performing engagement with a work play out in the opening bars of the second half of the sonata, which begins at 4:14 on CD track 1 (see example 2). This half of the piece begins with the opening theme in the dominant (upbeat to bar 33), serving as a kind of rubric to announce the beginning of a new section. It is melodically familiar, and its very familiarity may encourage us to “take it as read,” directing our attention toward what is to come: presumably a section of vicissitudes.

Executionally, meanwhile, the descending trajectory of the tune, its small repetitions and its pitch confirmations rounding off into quasi-martial dotted rhythms are likewise familiar; but to the hand, there is much more that is familiar than that is new about the register in which they appear, for it is the same register and the same position in which the preceding *fourteen and a half bars* have taken place—the thumb has been planted across the B \flat -F fifth ever since bar 18³. Such familiarity is in danger of breeding contempt, or at least hand-strain: maintaining a fixed-thumb position for extended periods is not particularly comfortable, and by this point not only attention but considerable desire is likely to be focused on getting somewhere else. The longed-for exit from the fixed-thumb position takes place gradually in the course of the phrase’s descent (a characteristic piece of Boccherinian tech-

Example 2. Cello Sonata in E \flat Major, fuori catalogo, i (Allegro), second half of movement.

vc.

basso

33

36

p

40

43

dolce

46

① Probably:

Example 2. (continued)

50

53

56

59

62

64

(continued)

Example 2. (continued)

nical courtesy, its stepwise motion downward allowing a gradual release of the accumulated hand tension). Thumb-position is finally abandoned altogether in the last half-beat of bar 33, just in time for the martial gestures of bar 34.

At the end of bar 34, therefore, both listener and performer will be chiefly focused on the question, “Where now?” But the desires motivating that question in the two parties are quite different, as bars 35 and 36 make clear. To the listener, the abrupt return to the opening idea in the tonic and in a familiar register may constitute a disappointment: this is scarcely new! Or it may be a puzzlement: is this some sort of premature recapitulation? But for the performer, it is both relief and pleasure in that relief: how thoughtful of the composer to continue the phrase in a known place, in a known manner, giving a few seconds of additional time for the muscles of the left hand and arm to recover themselves! Thus for the performer the first novelty offered, the first quantity to be developed, is a new level and extent of comfort or comfortingness. Novelties, developments—vicissitudes, in a word, as we encounter them in this piece—will tend to be of this elusive type.

Meanwhile the ear’s eagerness for newness, intensified by having been checked, seems to be acknowledged in the omission of the double-stops, with their settling effect, at the end of the phrase (bar 36²) and then, most promisingly, in the two-octave arpeggio that sweeps upward out of the closing gestures. Now we would appear to be going somewhere!—and so we do, gesturally speaking: straight off a cliff. Bar 37 is unprecedentedly static, an unexpected dominant of A \flat major, hanging over the third in the bass, suspended for an endless-seeming half a bar, resolving leisurely in the second half, and marked *piano* (CD track 7).

What has happened to the sense of momentum? The hand, especially the right hand, has been summarily arrested; a much slower bow speed than hitherto required in the piece will be necessary to sustain this double-stop for an entire bar.¹¹ Too much momentum in that rising arpeggio in bar 36, and it will be difficult to brake with the larger muscles that control a slow bow. The performer will be inclined to make the arpeggio decrescendo and perhaps slow down slightly, measure and collect itself, at precisely the moment when the listener is primed to desire the opposite.

These are indeed vicissitudes; one could call them development of a sort, for to the extent that it is accomplished through execution, it proceeds in a clear and characteristic direction. In this second half of the piece, it has taken a scant five bars for the same scenario to play itself out twice: at precisely that part of the piece where an appetite for newness might be keenest, momentum is checked, boldness restrained, desire firmly redirected inward. As a consequence of this, the listener receives the modulation to C minor that closes in bar 38, and the new tune that begins at 38⁴, in a chastened spirit. Clearly, in the context of this sonata, we are not to expect some sort of pioneering foray away from the introversions of the first half of the piece, but rather an intensification of them.

In the next six bars the left hand is given an enjoyable respite from fixed positions of any kind, and allowed to maneuver around the neck of the instrument in its best register, in much the same manner as in bars 11³–18² (CD track 6) in the exposition. To the ear, there is no obvious thematic resemblance between these passages, but to the hand the resemblance is very strong; this type of writing is scarce enough in this piece to feel really distinctive when it arrives, distinctive enough that we might speak of it as an executionally constituted theme. Both passages generate pleasure through the moving-inward gestures involved in executing descending melodies and chromaticisms: in the earlier passage this was most clearly shown in the shift to the minor mode that began in bar 13³, while in this episode trajectories of descent can be traced through bars 39–40, and again in 41–42. Harmonically, too, a “moving inward,” or at least homeward, has been achieved by the time we arrive at the cadence in bar 44, which makes a firm statement in the original dominant, thereby sending a strong formal signal. We are primed to hear . . . something. Dare we expect a reprise?

Perhaps the question ought to be, a reprise of what? The passage that begins in bar 45 implies that the left thumb will be positioned on the same bar-fifth as the one used at the beginning of the piece, E_b–B_b above middle C (a fact somewhat obscured by the use of “old tenor clef” at the beginning and soprano clef here). The exigencies of finding this position, and Boccherini’s earlier compositional gyrations around those exigencies, will be pretty strongly ensconced in the player’s muscle memory, especially if the first-half repeat has been taken. Kinesthetically, positionally, this does indeed feel very

much like a return; the “out-thereness” of this high position will have been supplanted by a sensation of familiarity peculiar to this piece. In the executional sense this position, *merely as a position*, could be said to constitute a theme, an interpretation supported by the fact that the left hand does not move from it again until the final two chords of the movement: once this return has been accomplished, it is decisively maintained. In this sense, bar 45 is very much a reprise.

Meanwhile, the audible features of the passage mitigate the kinetic reprise in a way that is psychologically astute. Too unanimous a sense of return at this point, in the context of a piece so characterized by myriad little pullings-in, repetitions, and confirmations, and things would shut down altogether; the sonata would die of premature closure. And so in bar 45 Boccherini destabilizes the harmonic return by the use of a G, and not an E \flat , in the basso part, while from the left hand’s “home position” issues a brand-new melody (CD track 8).

Its features are in themselves telling. The use of an unprecedented clef is not casual: in any vocal score of the period, it would imply that a new character is singing. And sing she does: this is the first and only time in the entire piece that the soprano register is used with no hint of retreat. Bars 45–46 and 47–48 constitute a beautifully balanced antecedent-consequent pair, and bars 49–51 sail out unabashedly *cantabile* over a newly rich and flowing accompaniment texture. The whole passage receives the only explicit expressive marking of the whole sonata: *dolce*. Affectually, it is not only sweet but serene.

In his book on Boccherini’s symphonies, Luigi Della Croce includes a short section entitled “Il ‘cielo’ di Boccherini” in which he offers a collection of passages reminiscent of this one, with the following commentary, itself of a curiously eighteenth-century flavor:

The suavity of Boccherini’s melodies . . . sometimes assumes the “open” form of a celestial message announced in the middle of a work, independent of the context and in any case not part of a preordained system of statement, response, and repetition such as is usual in the music of the Classical period. They are phrases at once elaborate and simple, every note, every rhythmic value touches the right chord, beginning a discourse that finds an immediate echo in the soul.¹²

The whole passage distinguishes delicately between the acts of returning and of retreating, for the hand’s enactment of return to the E \flat –B \flat bar-fifth brings to the ear a brief, calm vision of new horizons. That it comes at exactly the point where, physically, the experience is of a cessation of newness suggests a subtle meaning: the sweetest, most Arcadian face of the new is located in what we know best.

But we know that earthly paradise is also inevitably unstable and tempo-

rary. In this case its disintegration comes precisely at the moment that the ear detects a familiar melody, in bar 52: and what should return here, but the most anxious, unstable gestures of the whole piece? Being thus recalled to "reality" is an uneasy sensation, both to hand and to ear: the minute syn-copations are not gratifying to execute, evading as they do the centering and settling of the right hand involved in emphasizing a beat; nor does the ear have a happy time making melodic sense of the apparent whole-tone scale produced through chromatic alterations in the first half of bar 52.

Only in the second half of bar 54 does this nine bars of fruitful disparity between auditional expectation and executional sensation come to an end, when the piece's second theme arrives in the proper and expected tonic, its bagpipe-like, fixed-thumb stability making a fitting resolution to the instability of the preceding section, as well as an earthier version of the Arcadian ideal. From here to the end of the movement, repetitive flourishes and accumulations of resonance proceed along exactly the same lines as in the first half, from bars 18³-32. Enough of exquisitely conflicted subtleties: this closing material both sounds and feels facile, spinning forth and blithely repeating cadential formulae, and being gratefully written to sound considerably more difficult than it is.

CARNALITY AND COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

This sonata is but one of more than thirty such works which hold a special pride of place in Boccherini's oeuvre by virtue of their beauty, originality, and distinctive technical demands, and through their centrality to an understanding of him as a composer. They are central in the sense that they are probably mostly early works, and of a formative nature: Boccherini was performing in public by the age of fourteen, and his main stock in trade as a youthful concert artist seems to have been sonatas of his own composition. Certainly they are in a personal vein: one so entirely personal, in fact, that their composer did not include any of the pieces in the catalog of his own works that he made retroactive to 1760.¹³

For the purposes of a carnal musicology, Boccherini's sonatas are central because of the way they evoke the physiognomy of the personal, and through the evidence they offer of the influence of physical action and sensation upon artistic production. "An earlier process has been internalized into the finished forms of the figures . . . His figures act out his creative process in the shape they have taken; and this displaced performance of the self feeds an idiosyncratic vitality into his depictions."¹⁴ This characterization of the paintings of the elder Tiepolo (an elderly resident of Madrid when the young musician arrived there in 1768) seems uncommonly apt for Boccherini, even as it begs important questions.

In the case of Boccherini's music, that "performance of the self" displaces

itself directly onto or into the living performer, to whom there is such poignant experience available through attention to physical sensation. Vivid it may be, but it is also momentary, leaving much about Boccherini's process still opaque, particularly as it pertains to the issue of the way one idea arises from another, particularly the way continuity and contrast are achieved. If the themes in this sonata movement are conceived through a process of physicalistic association and transmutation of gesture, how was that process initiated and sustained? Did Boccherini just imagine playing, a kind of cellistic subvocalization informing his decisions—writing seated at a desk, the cello across the room, his process one of a more or less deliberate reflection on and reprocessing of earlier cellistic forays? Or did he improvise, experiment, fool around on his cello while seated next to a writing desk, and when something fine came to his fingers, quickly grasp a pen and write it down? Each approach would be likely to produce different results, especially in the way one theme or gesture moves into another.¹⁵

There is evidence of both these kinds of composerly engagement with execution in this sonata. The first, a kind of macro-level, corresponds to the process of *dispositio* described by musical rhetoricians: the positioning and transpositioning of themes into certain places in a movement, a conscious, desk-seated process of deliberation and design, with the design in this case strongly suggested by certain conventions of first-movement form. The second level is of more interest to me; it is the level of *inventio*, a micro-level, having to do with why themes are the way they are, and how and why other themes might relate to them. Because this process was, for this composer, so kinesthetic, I will submit that it was also usually not conscious. Its re-creation involves fixing our imagination and our surmise upon what were at best elusive states, fugitive acts, and it is of its essence that its most characteristic manifestations occur in what are, formally speaking, subsidiary passages. One imagines, for instance, how a passage like bars 5–6 of this sonata might have rushed into the composer's fingers (first upon the instrument, later translating that touch through a quill pen) as the suitable, the comfortable thing to do in just such a place. The little repetitions, the lightly descending scales, sound and feel like those grateful turns of the hand that instrumentalists typically do unthinkingly as part of warming up: habits, little gestural ingrains. That this passage is not memorable melodically and never recurs (except in the taking of the repeat) is of its physicalistic essence: it consists of noodling. As such, it is entirely defined by its function, which is to settle the hand to the more public business of the piece.

The sonata's opening bars are much more difficult to execute and, one surmises, to generate: such gestures do not rush to the fingers for their comfort or their obviousness, but would have to emerge from some kind of dialogue between kinesthetic *inventio* and deliberate reflection upon the requirements of distinctiveness and a clear character in a good opening theme. One

can postulate that, seated at the cello under this mandate, and responding gesturally to the implicit need for boldness, Boccherini reached high and far down the neck of the instrument; but once the act of playing began, undertook the physical enactment of a different mandate, that of sentiment—neither bold nor fond of difficulty, but consoling and compassionate—thus drawing from that initial flamboyance an artful but unmistakable trajectory of retreat. One can further postulate from such a scenario a particularly Boccherinian set of tensions among the *sensible* esthetic of mid-eighteenth-century music, the virtuoso’s natural impulse to show off, and conventional exigencies of form, affect, and presentation.

There is similarity here between the carnal description of music that I am proposing, and an account of a dance or set of oratorical gestures. Themes sometimes become pictures of themselves, their particular characters read through a series of visual associations with physical gesture, such as “moving the arms in toward the torso connotes heartfeltness.” This invites our consideration of a third level of compositional process: besides unconscious kinesthetic invention and conscious aural deliberation, the composer-performer contends, more or less consciously, with the self-consciousness attendant upon the near inevitability of being seen. (Organists and offstage trumpeters are the only soloists regularly exempt from this aspect of performance.) In terms of compositional process, the visual images created by the physical gestures of playing will tend to be by-products, and not sources, of aural and kinesthetic impulses; but it is important to distinguish between their functional secondariness in the creative process, and their very considerable problematization in latter-day understandings of instrumental music. Our disdain of theatricalization and visualization in instrumental performance runs deep, a legacy of the German idealism that was developing during Boccherini’s own day, and of the powerful notion of absolute music that emerged from it; more even than physical sensation, the notion of visual effect as intrinsic to the instrumental work is likely to seem excessive, even repellent. Yet the fact remains that all experienced performers develop considerable awareness of what they look like in performance, even if only in order to restrain themselves from gestural excess and thereby simulate transparency; and it is also a fact that the visible element of a musical idea will function in varying degrees for the listener-observer, confirming or resisting that idea’s sonic presentation. In Boccherini’s case, it will generally tend to do the former, and will frequently do so with real artfulness; in the case of, say, Beethoven, it will often do the latter, and for reasons no less artful. A performance- and body-oriented musicology is positively obliged to account for the visible, especially in the case of a composer like Boccherini, who as an Italian of his generation was only minimally under such restraints as we have subsequently invented.

There is one place in the movement under discussion where the visual el-

ement is particularly striking and goes some distance toward explaining a passage that is simultaneously aurally static and physically awkward: this is in bars 23³–26², and again in the commensurate place in the second half of the movement, bars 59³–62² (CD track 9). The arpeggiation pattern set up in 23³ (the ensuing shorthand notation implies that it should continue throughout the passage) is not a simple one. Simple arpeggiation across strings alternates upward and downward motion, allowing the right arm to move fluidly and continuously away from and back toward the torso. But on each half of the fourth beat of this bar, the arpeggios move only from high to low, and omit the other direction, obliging the performer to make two different, rapid grabbing or stabbing motions outward, in order to “catch” a downbow and then an upbow motion from the top down.¹⁶ This alternation of the pattern is admittedly more interesting to the ear than would be twelve solid beats of sawing away, up and down, up and down, at a simple tonic-dominant arpeggiation; but it finds further justification in the fact that it is really arresting visually. Twice on each second and fourth beat in these passages, the tip of the bow—if it is a bow such as Boccherini used, it has a sharp, swan-like head—moves through the air like an épée. These alarmingly flashy gestures alert us to the arrival of the cadential material.

IN CONCLUSION

The act of describing and interpreting this aggregate of fleshly phenomena called a sonata is a complex one, perceptually, epistemologically, linguistically. The shading over of *sentir* into *sentire* implied by Rousseau, its continuation into interactions with auditional expectation and visual spectacle, mean that I can never be sure whether the experience I am describing is primarily heard, or primarily felt, or primarily seen. (The question must and should arise as to how far it is meaningful to subscribe to the notion of their separability in the first place).

It is certainly appropriate that such ambivalent language should be used to propose the habits and features of this man with whom I have arrived at so peculiar an intimacy, a man who cannot be here to confirm or deny my accuracy. Because of the huge privilege I enjoy in this situation—that of being alive—I am obliged to assert here that at no time do I wish my descriptions to imply that Boccherini’s creative choices were made for him by his habits or his character, however powerful or ingrained these things might appear to have been. I have been using this sonata movement for the traces it offers of the way choice may have been encountered, considered, and engaged.

It is not that his designs are in any strong sense medium-determined. He had chosen and developed this inventive medium after years of experiment with

options. . . . Yet clearly in these inventions there is an element of pen-and-wash thinking, of reflecting through the wrist. . . . Such forms are at least medium-reinforced.¹⁷

Of course there are differences. When he wrote his sonatas, Boccherini, unlike the Tiepolo described here, was a young man; in them one cannot rightly credit him with the mature artist's "years of experiment" so much as a healthy and versatile faculty of experimental intuition. The following chapters will trace some of his processes in the years of experiment that were to come, and the evolution and attenuation of his "cello-and-bow thinking" into other compositional media.