

GIOVANNI BATTISTA VIOTTI
A COMPOSER BETWEEN THE TWO REVOLUTIONS

AD PARNASSUM STUDIES 2



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GIOVANNI BATTISTA VIOTTI
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Edited by Massimiliano Sala

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to my parents

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PREFACE

Le monde, la société, les amusemens, rien de tout cela n'avoit d'attrait sans eux¹, et leur maison ou je vivais comme un parent, comme un frère, est devenue la bienne propre, celle ou j'aurois voulu être sans cesse, celle d'ou je n'aurois jamais voulu sortir. [...]

Vivant ainsi au sein de l'amitié, j'étois cependant contrarié par l'exercice de mon talent, et la gêne qu'il m'imposoit me fit prendre le parti d'y renoncer et me donner un autre état. Je communiquai mon intention nm on ami, il l'approuva, et nous convinmes que je rassemblerois toute ma petite fortune, que je la metteroie dans le commerce, et que je m'établirais marchand de vin².

Thus wrote Viotti in his autobiographical *Précis de la vie* in 1798, thus deciding for the second time to abandon the fray of concert playing, after formerly forsaking the arena of the *Concert spirituel*, to work in the 'private' sphere of the court palaces. He was then only in his early forties. On close analysis, Viotti's professional life has a somewhat heterogeneous and often apparently contradictory appearance, displaying a continual and incessant alternation of involvements and retirements, successes and failures.

In Paris Viotti divided his time between the *Concert spirituel*, the palaces of the nobility and the court, and then went on to manage the Theatre de Monsieur. While in London we find him on the stage of the Hanover Square Concerts, at the Professional Concert and working as 'acting manager' at the King's Theatre. He subsequently embarked on trading in wines and spirits, an activity that was to involve him for the rest of his life, though he again attempted to work as an impresario at the time of the foundation of the Philharmonic Society in London (1813) and then there was his directorship of the Paris Opéra in 1819. All of these commitments distracted him from composition and performance, which tended to diminish in the course of time, to the extent that he almost completely retired from this scene in the last twenty years of his life. According to Chappell White, such inconsistent behaviour cannot be justified by the traditional explanation that Viotti «disdained public applause»³.

¹. William Bassett and Margaret Chinnery.

². *Précis de la vie de J.B. Viotti depuis son entrée dans le monde jusqu'au 6 mars 1798*, 23 March 1798, in: GIAZOTTO, Remo. *Giovanni Battista Viotti*, Milan, Edizioni Curci, 1956, p. 230.

³. WHITE, Chappell. *Viotti and his Violin Concertos*, unpublished Ph.D. Diss., 2 vols., Princeton (NJ), Princeton University, 1957, vol. 1, p. 32.

Instead it was rather the composer's sensibility and ambition that prevented him from adapting to the instability of a period of great social and economic changes. Hence,

At a time when the new position of the musician was not yet secure [...] he was born too late to settle into the subservient position of a court musician, but too early to enjoy the fortunes and social prestige of the next generation of virtuosi⁴.

To be sure, the social status of a musician in his day was not an elevated one and hence the aspiration towards 'management' could in some way satisfy an ambition that, according to White, «was certainly part of his nature, and it was not confined exclusively to artistic achievement»⁵.

But let us briefly consider certain distinctive features of the period in which Viotti lived. In the span of time that bridged the *ancien régime* and the Restoration, the absolute monarchies made way for bourgeois liberal aspirations, the cities opened their walls to the increasingly broad horizons of trade and industry, and society witnessed a gradual conversion of rural into urban communities and the birth of new social classes linked to the categories of work. The court, as a stable socio-economic system, began to be replaced by processes of liberalization in the professions and respective 'productive' systems. Thus in the musical sphere the growth of public places for hearing music that provided alternatives to the court drastically influenced the system of production, modifying the boundaries between the public and private spheres and the relationship between production and fruition.

On this subject Chappell White stresses that for «a sensitive and ambitious man, under the inescapable influence of increasingly democratic thought, the life of a violinist must have been in many ways unsatisfactory»⁶. Yet I believe that another hypothesis should also be advanced, or at least attempted, if we wish to clarify why «whatever the causes behind Viotti's decision, [...] the tragedy of an otherwise brilliantly successful life was the abandonment of those fields in which his great talent lay»⁷. In this respect Viotti's human, and not only professional, history could be revealing.

A profound streak of dissatisfaction, melancholy and discomfort runs through the entire correspondence between Viotti and his close friends

⁴. *Ibidem*.

⁵. *Ibidem*.

⁶. *Ibidem*, p. 32-33.

⁷. *Ibidem*, p. 33.

William Bassett and Margaret Chinnery in the second half of the composer's life. The letters display an incessant search for tranquillity and the recurrent desire to withdraw to private life, retire from the public eye and dedicate himself to his dearest affections and most intimate relationships. Nonetheless, without resorting to facile psychologisms, I believe that it is also important to consider the degree in which he was affected by the political events of his day.

The effects of the Revolution influenced Viotti's life on various occasions. He was forced to flee from Paris in 1792, and two years later — not being able to cross France — he was to tackle a long and difficult journey that took him to Italy to settle some business following the death of his step-mother. On that occasion, he was able to meet old friends who had themselves also escaped from Paris on account of the Revolution, such as Hélène de Montgeroult «malade et dans un état à faire pitié»⁸ and her husband, who died in prison in Mantua shortly after the composer's visit. The grief and harsh reality of war and a sense of impotence left a tangible mark on Viotti the man:

Oh! Mes amis qu'on est mal à son aise dans ce monde!
Pour moi je suis plusque jamais convaincû que le bonheur est
un chimere⁹!

[...] ne pouvant être plus utile à mes pauvres amis je me
remetterai en route pour revenir en Angleterre, revenir auprès de
vous, de votre aimable moitié, verser dans votre sein la tristesse
dont je suis accablé, et remettre un peu une santé qui depuis long
tems à souffert de si rudes atteintes, je suis si maigre, si pâle que
vous ne me reconnoitriés plus¹⁰.

His dejected spirit also notably affected Viotti the artist:

Depuis que je vous ai quitté je n'ai pas touché mon Violon.
Ne me grondés pas, ma situation est telle que les sons égis de cet
instrument sont incompatibles avec mes sensations douloureuses¹¹.

[...] j'ai fermé l'oreille à tout, et mon étui a été constem-
ment fermé. L'harmonie me contrarie depuis que les evenemens
de ma vie ont effacé celle qui existoit dans mon etre¹².

⁸. YIM, Denise. *Viotti and the Chinnerys: A Relationship Charted through Letters*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004 (Music in 19th-century Britain), p. 53.

⁹. *Ibidem*, p. 54.

¹⁰. *Ibidem*, p. 55.

¹¹. *Ibidem*, pp. 57–58.

¹². *Ibidem*, p. 59.

In 1798 political events closely affected Viotti, who was accused by the British government of suspected Jacobinism and forced into exile in Germany. This was a very difficult period, during which Viotti again retired from concert performing and devoted himself solely to teaching and cultivating a few select acquaintances. On his return to England, around 1800–1801, his concert activities progressively diminished to create the opportunity for exclusive work as an impresario and as a wine merchant.

It is understandable, therefore, that Viotti should aspire to emotional and affective serenity more than anything else, particularly if one considers the contemporary evidence that describes him as having been a person of extreme sensitivity and profound humanity. White concurs, stating that

He was admired and respected, both as a man and as an artist [...] The warmth that was so quickly felt in his playing must have been as integral part of his personality, for he never lacked friends, and their loyalty sometimes went to considerable lengths¹³.

This general context I have briefly outlined, with its profound dynamics and numerous vicissitudes, must have influenced Viotti's human and professional history in some way, though it is obviously impossible to establish very direct ramifications — which would in any case would hardly be significant. Instead it is interesting to note the progressive development, in the composer's personality, of a certain fragility linked to the fact of performing in the public sphere, whether it be in the civil arena (owing to the political events mentioned earlier) or in the world of 'real performance' and musical display. Indeed what one notes is that the man Viotti gradually withdrew into himself. This orientation is initially represented by the symbolic abandonment of the role of concert artist and also by the withdrawal from the public eye. A world in continual transformation like that inhabited by Viotti, a world poised between two revolutions, was capable of engendering such a degree of inner tension as to induce a progressive renunciation that took the form of successive and differentiated actions (concert performing, impresario activities, trade) and eventually a wholesale escape. In fact Viotti first abandoned these scenes (on various occasions) and then gradually even rejected the very 'sacred' object of his own aspiration: that is, music. The concert artist, impresario and tradesman were all protagonists of the 'theatre' of Viotti's mind. The virtuoso-composer,

¹³. WHITE, Chappell. *Op. cit.* (see note 3), p. 31.

who uses the sense of self as an instrument for manifesting his own way of feeling, in continual contact with the original meaning of the creative act

J'ai passé hier tout mon tems à la campagne dans une maisonnette, ou plutot dans le jardine qui en depend appartenant à Mr Rauzzini. Je suis sorti de la ville à une heure tout seul, j'ai passé par un chemin champêtre bordé d'arbres de toutes especes et chargés de fleurs. Ce chemin va en montant et conduit à une espece de forée qui couronne une montagne de la quelle on domine sur toute la ville. C'est la ou je me suis arreté pour contempler cette belle nature et son inconcevable auteur¹⁴.

feared that the revelation of such intimacy might fail to be understood or perceived in the corporate sphere of concert playing and hence gradually rejected the public sphere, both as an artist and as a man.

J'ai joué hier pour la 3me fois, j'ai été passablement content de moi: on dit que j'ai beaucoup de succès, je vous assure Amica que je ne m'en apperçois pas de tout. Ils ont une singulière maniere de le témoigner il faut en convenir! Je vous avoue ma chere Margaritina que je ne saurois m'accoutumer à cette maudite froideur, en verité je suis plus porté à croire vos chers compatriotes des buches, des ignorans, que de leur accorder comme ils le pretendent une sensibilité concentrée. Il est bien heureux que j'aye une passion décidée pour la musique, que je l'aime pour elle même et pour moi, sans cela je sens que le gout m'en passeroit bien vite¹⁵.

J'ai déjà connu beaucoup de monde, et du monde beaucoup plus aimable que je n'avois crü d'abord, bien entendu du monde femme, car hommes, oh ceux la je ne sçais pas ce qu'ils font. Mais pourquoi ces maudites femmes ne se montrent-elles pas tout de suite ce qu'elles sont, au lieu de se présenter avec un visage de marre au premier abord¹⁶?

Helas je mène une vie fort maussade tout ayant de quoi la passer fort agréablement. J'ai fait beaucoup de connoissances après le premier concert. L'usage est ici de se rassembler après la musique dans une grande salle pour causer et prendre du Tea, cela est fort agréable pour quelqu'un qui sait en jour, mais moi qui suis un peu ours je suis toujours pressé de m'en aller¹⁷.

¹⁴. YIM, Denise. *Op. cit.* (see note 8), p. 72.

¹⁵. *Ibidem*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁶. *Ibidem*, p. 74.

¹⁷. *Ibidem*, p. 73.

Becoming an impresario therefore turned out to be a fairly successful compromise between self-exposure and retirement. In this way instead of revealing the most intimate self of the artist, he replaced it with the ‘container’ of his work: the theatre or (if one prefers) the stage. Hence the guarantee of economic stability and the need for greater social prestige cannot be taken as the only reasons for the continual oscillation between the stage and trade. One must also consider or, at the very least, take into account that the «gêne»¹⁸ cannot be attributed only to an «intolerance of ill-educated public audiences»¹⁹, but underlies the intimate sphere of his personality, the profoundest features of which can explain that «loyalty and devotion in friendship that determined his fate. Fidelity was his strongest character trait, and in the end it triumphed even over music»²⁰. Public-private; artist-man. These are important dualisms that place Viotti in a continual search for a positioning of the self in the world outside: a world of dramatic social, economic and political changes.

For these reasons I have wished to give the volume a title that is as ambitious as it is significant. It is my profoundest aspiration that a reading of the following essays may reveal significant correspondences between the facts of the composer’s life and the anxieties and bewilderments of a man of his day.

To conclude this brief introduction, the editor thanks all those who made this book possible. My thanks go, first of all, to Roberto Illiano, colleague of the editorial staff of *Ad Parnassum*, for his support during the preparation of the volume, to Giuseppe Tumminello for his useful and acute advice, and to all the authors for their magnanimity and patience; secondly, to Hugh Ward-Perkins (Verona) for his careful translation work and to the whole staff of Ut Orpheus Edizioni (Bologna) for believing in the project and for all the help with the volume.

I am also grateful to Philip Olleson, who agreed in 2005 (the 250th anniversary year of the composer’s birth) to organize a session dedicated to Viotti at the *Fifth International Conference on Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Hugh Stewart Hall, University of Nottingham, 7-10 July 2005. Also present at the session, chaired by Simon McVeigh (London), were Federico Celestini (Graz), Rohan H. Stewart MacDonald (Cambridge, UK), Denise Yim (Sidney), and the present writer. This experience also generated the

¹⁸. Cfr. note 2.

¹⁹. YIM, Denise. *Op. cit.* (see note 8), p. 270

²⁰. *Ibidem*.

PREFACE

recent article by Rohan H. Stewart-MacDonald, *Elements of 'Through-composition' in the Violin Concertos Nos. 23 and 27 by Giovanni Battista Viotti*, published in *Ad Parnassum. A Journal of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Instrumental Music*, III/6 (October 2005), pp. 99-131.

Finally, I wish to express a profound debt to Chappell White, who died recently (1920-2004) and who showed sincere enthusiasm for the project. He was an imperative point of reference for all concerned with Viotti and his period. The doctoral thesis, *The Violin Concertos of G. B. Viotti*, supervised by Arthur Mendel and Oliver Strunk, was the first of White's long series of projects devoted to the life and music of the Italian composer. In addition to his dissertation on Viotti, Chappell White also published periodical and dictionary articles on that musician, as well as *Giovanni Battista Viotti: Four Violin Concertos*, Madison (WI), A-R Editions, 1976 (Recent Researches in the Music of the Classical Era, 4), *Viotti's Second Symphonie Concertante*, New York, Garland, 1982 (*The Symphony: 1720-1840*, Ser. D, vol. 10), *Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755-1824). A Thematic Catalogue of his Works*, New York, Pendragon Press, 1985 (Thematic catalogues, 12), and *From Vivaldi to Viotti. A History of the Early Classical Violin Concerto*, Philadelphia, Gordon and Breach, 1992 (Musicology, 11).

Massimiliano Sala
Cremona, May 2006