

LUIGI RODOLFO BOCCHERINI (1743–1805)

Franz Joseph Haydn may be the father of the string quartet, but Luigi Boccherini might be considered one of its uncles. Born on February 19, 1743 in Lucca, he was the third child of a double-bass player, Leopoldo Boccherini, and Maria Santa Prosperi. His father was a professional musician and the first double bassist to perform solo concerts. The elder Boccherini started to give his son cello lessons when the boy was five years old. Luigi continued his studies from the age of nine with Abbe Vanucci, music director of the cathedral at San Martino. At the age of 13, he was sent to Rome to study with the renowned cellist Giovanni Battista Costanzi, musical director at St. Peter's Basilica. In Rome Boccherini was influenced by the polyphonic tradition (i.e., music with two or more interweaving melodic parts) stemming from the works of Giovanni da Palestrina and from the instrumental music of Arcangelo Corelli. After one year in Rome, Luigi and his father were summoned to Vienna in 1757, where they were hired by the Imperial Theater Orchestra for a short time.



On his second journey to Vienna (1760), Boccherini, at 17, made his debut as a composer with his *Six Trios for Two Violins and Cello*, G 77-82. During his third stay in that city (1764), a public concert by Boccherini was enthusiastically received. However, in spite of his success, Boccherini grew homesick for Lucca, to which he returned (August, 1764), having obtained a permanent position with the local church and theater orchestras there.

In 1765 Boccherini and his father went to Milan, which at the time was a magnet for talented musicians. It was there that he wrote his first string quartet. It was also there that he was given a position in the orchestra of Giovanni Battista Sammartini. Through his association with this Milanese composer, the 22-year-old Boccherini strengthened the new “conversational” style of the quartet: the cello’s line was now as important as the counterpoint (i.e., the intertwining of independent melodic lines) of the violin and viola. Boccherini had a chance to put into practice this new style with an extraordinary string quartet made up of outstanding Tuscan virtuosos.

In the same year, the ill health that would plague him all his life began to take its toll. He endured a further blow in 1766 when his father died. He then formed a new partnership with the violinist Filippo Manfredi; they toured Italy in 1767 and made their way to Paris, where they became a sensation. Paris was a happy choice since France welcomed Italian musicians.

In Paris the French publishers Grange, Venier, and Chevardiere published Boccherini's compositions of the previous years as well as new ones, including a set of six string quartets. Musical Paris competed for the young man from Lucca; he was a prolific composer during this



Charles III of Spain
1716-1788

period. From Boccherini's contact with Madame Brillon de Jouy, the harpsichord player, was born the *Six Sonatas for Harpsichord and Violin, G 25-30*. Boccherini's style spread throughout Europe, and his *Cello Concerto No. 6 in D Major, G 479* (c. 1768), became the model for Mozart's *Violin Concerto in D Major, K 218* (1775).

Such vital contacts and enthusiasm for him within music circles in Paris were interrupted when the Spanish ambassador to Paris persuaded Boccherini to move to Madrid. Attracted by this flattering offer, in 1769, Boccherini journeyed to Spain where he enjoyed great acclaim. He began his long sojourn at the intrigue-ridden court of Charles III. The king's brother, the infante Don Luis, conferred on him a yearly endowment of 30,000 reals as a cellist and composer.

He flourished in Madrid under royal patronage. (It was during this period, in 1772, that Boccherini wrote his well-known *Six String Quartets, G 177-182*). Madrid became Boccherini's second home. In 1771, he married Clementina Pelicho, with whom he had five children. He accompanied Don Luis to Arenas de San Pedro, a little town at the foot of the Gredos Mountains. It was there and in the nearby town of Candeleda that Boccherini wrote many of his most famous works.

In addition to Don Luis, one of his important patrons while living in Spain was the Duchess of Osuna, who, with her husband, was a major patron of the artist Goya. Goya's famous portrait of the Duchess was one of his important portraits. The Duchess appointed Boccherini conductor of her private orchestra at the Puerta de la Vega Palace in Madrid. This appointment gave Boccherini ample time to compose some of his major works, in addition to giving him ample funds for his living needs.



The Duchess of Osuna, by Goya, 1785.

He lost his wife to a stroke in 1785; his patron, Don Luis also died in 1785. This death of his patron meant that Boccherini was left without a position. He petitioned King Charles, asking to be retained in some musical position. Charles granted him a pension of 12,000 reals and assigned him various

musical duties. However, when the King expressed his disapproval at a passage in a new trio and ordered Boccherini to change it, the composer, no doubt irritated with this intrusion into his art, doubled the passage instead. This act of disobedience led to his immediate dismissal.

To his prodigious instrumental production, Boccherini during this time added vocal compositions: including the *Stabat Mater*, G 532 (1781), and the *Christmas Villancicos*, G 539 (1783).

There was an upturn in Boccherini's fortunes in 1786 when he was commissioned as "Composer of Our Chamber" by Friedrich Wilhelm II, who was soon to become King of Prussia. Though he wrote most of his new music for Friedrich Wilhelm, Boccherini remained in Spain, where he wrote his only opera, the *Zarzuela La Clementina*, G 540 (1786), with libretto by Ramon de la Cruz. Boccherini also took up another new genre, the string quintet. He in fact became best known for these works, written for string quartet with an additional cello. Also, in 1787, Boccherini married his second wife, Joaquina Porreti.



In 1796 he entered into an arrangement with publisher, composer, and piano manufacturer Ignaz Pleyel, who both praised and published Boccherini's works while cheating him of income. In 1798 the new king of Prussia (Frederick William III) withdrew Boccherini's pension, the Duchess of Osuna moved to Paris, and Boccherini's financial distress was aggravated by poor health.

In February 1803, Boccherini was reported as living in "distress." This was probably from emotional depression as much as from financial hardship, for in 1802 two of his daughters had died from an epidemic within a few days of each other. In 1804 both his second wife and his only living daughter died. He was subsisting, for the most part, in poverty that by 1804 had compelled him to live in one room with his three surviving children.

It seems clear that Boccherini, although he continued to compose up to the end (his last complete work, *String Quartet No. 90 in F Major*, G 248, was composed in 1804), had little interest in living. He died on May 28, 1805 in Madrid of what was described as "pulmonary suffocation."

He was buried in the Church of San Justo in Madrid. In 1927 his remains were disinterred and he was reburied in the Basilica of San Francesco in his hometown of Lucca.

ASSESSMENT

Boccherini was primarily a composer of chamber music. He produced more than 100 quintets and quartets each, more than 50 trios, and more than 50 chamber works in other forms. The *Cello Concerto in B-flat*, Boccherini's best-known complete work, was actually arranged from two Boccherini concertos by the 19th-century composer and cellist Friedrich Grutzmacher. Boccherini's well-known minuet is from his *String Quintet in E Major, G 275*.

As a composer Boccherini has often been compared to Joseph Haydn, usually to his disadvantage. A contemporary, Giovanni Puppo, characterized him as no more than an emasculated Haydn. But their qualities are of different kinds. It is true that his music often lacks Haydn's characteristic forward drive and virility, qualities which derive from a keen sense of form and symphonic development. Thus, whereas Haydn's first movements usually center upon the closely reasoned argument of their development sections, Boccherini's depend on their thematic material and the way in which it is presented and re-presented, and his development sections often lack a firm sense of direction and purpose. Concertante writing was of fundamental importance to Boccherini's music, and he obtained a wide variety of tone colors by writing high viola or cello parts (he was clearly influenced here by his own instrumental ability). His varied treatment of instrumental texture was one of the most characteristic features of his music. Whereas Haydn, with his emphasis on the dramatic nature of sonata form, was in the mainstream of musical development, Boccherini can be said to have represented a backwater. His concern was the production of smooth, elegant music: his favorite expression marks were *soave* (soft), *con grazia* (with grace), and *dolcissimo* (very sweetly). It is in his gentle warmth and superlative elegance—often with a hint of melancholy just below the surface—that Boccherini's most characteristic contribution is found.



Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from www.cello.org; mymusicbase.ru; 8notes.com; Wikipedia; and on-line version Encyclopedia Britannica.

Listen to Boccherini's Minuet from String Quintet No.5 in E major, Op. 11, (G.275):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AZOknKotVc>