

# CONCERNING THE AUTHENTICITY OF GRÉTRY'S FLUTE CONCERTO

JOHN SOLUM

IN RECENT YEARS the authenticity of André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry's C major flute concerto has been questioned. The source for this doubt is apparently the Grétry article in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), where the concerto is listed as "doubtful" in the Grétry work-list prepared by José Quitin with M. Elizabeth C. Bartlet. At least one other reference work then followed suit : Frans Vester's *Flute music of the 18th century* (1985) which lists Grétry's concerto but adds a confusing and contradictory statement : "Commissioned by Lord Abingdon. Authorship doubtful."<sup>1</sup> There seems to be no published literature which discusses the reasons for questioning Grétry's authorship of the concerto ; apparently *The New Grove* made its determination without any published accountability. This is regrettable, because this concerto, unquestionably one of the finest classical flute concertos composed prior Mozart's concerti of 1777-78, enjoyed a respectable post-war popularity through concerts and recordings until the appearance of *The New Grove*.

---

1 Frans VESTER, *Flute music of the 18th century. An annotated bibliography*, Monteux : Musica Rara, 1985, p. 182.

Grétry himself wrote about the circumstances of his composing a flute concerto in Rome for Lord Abingdon :

Je fus instruit par le public que milord A... amateur de musique, et jouant fort bien de la flûte traversière, avoit demandé plusieurs fois des concerto de flûte aux compositeurs les plus distingués ; mais que ne les trouvant jamais à son gré, il leur renvoyoit la partition avec un présent magnifique pour le pays. J'eus mon tour, et je fus prié de faire un concerto de flûte. Je répondis que ne connoissant point les talens de milord, je ne pouvois rien faire qu'au hasard. Je fus invité à déjeuner ; milord joua long-temps de la flûte. Quelques jours après je lui envoyai un concerto qui étoit bien plus de sa composition que de la mienne, car j'avois mis en ordre presque tous les passages que je lui avois entendu faire en préludant : il m'envoya un beau présent, et m'offrit une pension annuelle si je voulois lui envoyer d'autres concerto par-tout où il seroit. J'acceptai sa proposition.<sup>2</sup>

In the second volume of his *Mémoires*, Grétry continued the story :

L'autre [lettre], datée de Londres, étoit de mylord A... dont j'ai parlé ci-devant ; il m'écrivit "qu'il ne jouoit plus de la flûte, et qu'il suprimoit ma pension".<sup>3</sup>

The 4th Earl of Abingdon (1740-1799) studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, then went to Geneva. In 1765 he toured Italy with his private flute tutor, Weiss, and probably at that time commissioned Grétry to write his flute concerto. Lord Abingdon's later written statement from London that he had given up the flute, if true at the time, was certainly not the case later in his life. He must have continued to play the flute because later in the century many prominent composers wrote for him or dedicated flute works to him, including a flute trio and four quartets (Opus 19) by J. C. Bach, a trio by F. C. Neubauer, four trios (Opus 16, 1785) by Abel, and one of Haydn's 1794 "London" trios (Hob. IV : 2).

2 André-Ernest-Modeste GRÉTRY, *Mémoires, ou Essais sur la musique*, Paris, 1789, p. 110-111.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 158.

The only surviving source for Grétry's flute concerto is a set of non-autograph manuscript parts in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The parts are for flauto traverso, violino primo, violino secondo, viola, basso, corno primo and corno secondo. The music manuscript paper is watermarked with a fleur-de-lys, J H & Z, and J Honig & Zoonen. Each part is bound into a separate decorative folder (no watermark), the engraved cover of which is captioned by hand : Concerto/per Flauto Traverso/Due Violini/Due Corni/Viola et Basso/del Sigr. Grétry. An engraved coat of arms appears at the top of each of these cover pages (see Figure 1). According to the preface of the New York Public Library's 1937 score of this concerto, edited by Sydney Beck, the coat of arms belonged to Franz Karl Eusebius, Truchsess von Waldburg (1701-1772), Prince Bishop of Chiemsee and Cathedral Dean of Salzburg. This information is credited to Erich Prince of Waldburg-Zeil, an authority on the family heraldry. The preface continues, "Just how these parts happenend to be made for the Vicar-General and Suffragan Bishop of the ranking German Catholic See is not yet known... Naturally the relations between Salzburg and Rome were close in the eighteenth century." The fact that Franz Karl Eusebius died in 1772 would indicate that these parts were copied out no later than that date.

Grétry's career did not flourish until 1768, when his operas began to be staged in Paris. If his flute concerto is not authentic, it is difficult to believe that his fame was already so great by 1772 that an anonymous, highly skillful composer would have written a charming, substantial flute concerto by that date, falsely attributing it to Grétry.

Moreover, it is obvious that Grétry was being facetious when he wrote in his *Mémoires* that the concerto was "really more his [Abingdon's] composition than my own." In fact, it is not difficult to guess which passages were probably based upon Lord Abingdon's luncheon warm-up (see<sup>4</sup> the predominantly thirty-

4 Bar numbers refer to those of the Otto Heinrich Noetzel edition, Wilhelmshaven, 1961.

second note passages in bars 55-67 of movement III). Even here, Grétry turns these easy-to-play “virtuoso” passages into something artful by varying the phraseology : 3 bars, 3 bars, 4 bars, 3 bars. The themes are musical, the orchestration masterful, the harmonies engaging, the phrase structures interesting. In fact, the concerto represents a notable artistic advance over the six pleasant but rather academic string quartets which Grétry wrote during his years in Rome (published in 1773 in Paris).<sup>5</sup> Everything about the concerto shows the skill of a highly trained, talented composer seeking his own individuality.

Consider, for example, the sonata-form first movement. The recapitulation (starting at bar 108) begins with the second subject, not the usual first subject. The first subject appears later in the recapitulation, starting at bar 115, at which time the accompanying strings play an inversion of the original accompanying quarter-note motif (bars 1-2, 37-38). Details such as these are not usually practiced by mediocre composers.

I have referred to this concerto as “one of the wittiest flute concertos ever written”.<sup>6</sup> Several short examples will illuminate this observation. In the first movement’s opening tutti which is normally reserved for the orchestra, two short solo passages are assigned to the flute, as if the flautist could not wait to begin his solo in the “proper” place (see bars 14-21 and 28-32). Before the “proper” entrance of the soloist in bar 37, the previous bar (concluding the opening tutti) is really two bars condensed rhythmically into one, “hurried up” as if to facilitate the soloist’s desire to appear as quickly as possible. In the closing tutti of movement I, after the cadenza, again the flautist is allowed to perform as a soloist (bars 134-137), as if reluctant to relinquish the spotlight. Could this concerto be Grétry’s musical characterization of Lord Abingdon ?

\*\*\*\*\*

5 André-Ernest-Modeste GRÉTRY, *Six quatuors à cordes*, ed. Maurice BARTHÉLEMY, Versailles : Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles, 1997.

6 John SOLUM, *The early flute*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 120.



FIGURE 1 : Cover of folder (containing manuscript flute part of Grétry's flute concerto) showing engraved coat of arms of Franz Karl Eusebius (Washington, Library of Congress)

Many passages in the flute concerto closely resemble passages in Grétry's six strings quartets as well as in his operas *Les Mariages samnites* (1768-1776), *Le Huron* (1768), and *Silvain* (1770). It is worthwhile examining a few of the more prominent comparisons, since it would be difficult to believe that they do not all originate from the pen of Grétry.

A descending passage in the flute concerto's first movement (bars 39-41) resembles a passage in the first violin part of the second movement of Grétry's String Quartet V (bars 72-74).

FLUTE CONCERTO, I, BARS 39-41



STRING QUARTET V, II, BARS 72-74



A theme which the flute plays in the concerto's first movement (bars 43-46) is very similar to a theme played by the first violin in Quartet I, movement II (bars 25-30).

FLUTE CONCERTO, I, BARS 43-46



STRING QUARTET I, II, BARS 25-30



Bars 7-9 of the opening tutti of the flute concerto's third movement are similar to bars 11-13 of the first movement of Grétry's Quartet II. The descending diatonic scale of the violins in the flute concerto may be regarded as the inversion of the ascending scale in the quartet.

FLUTE CONCERTO, III, BARS 7-9

Vn. I  
Vn. II  
Vla.  
Cello/Bass

STRING QUARTET II, I, BARS 11-13

Vn. I  
Vn. II  
Vla.  
Cello

A passage in the flute concerto's third movement (bars 40-42) resembles a violin passage in the overture to Grétry's *Les Mariages samnites* (bars 58-60).

FLUTE CONCERTO, II, BARS 40-42



LES MARIAGES SAMNITES, OUVERTURE, BARS 58-60, VN. 1



Cadenzas appear at the end of each of the three movements in the manuscript in the Library of Congress. The one at the conclusion of the first movement is as follows :



The first part of this cadenza bears a strong similarity to bars 9-10 of the overture to *Silvain* (where the oboes play the phrase in unison) :





This cadenza example is important because it establishes the strong probability that the three cadenzas which appear in the Library of Congress manuscript are by Grétry. Writing for an amateur musician, he probably felt it advisable to write out the cadenzas, or perhaps Lord Abindgon asked him to do so. Betty Bang Mather, who with David Lasocki published a study of classical woodwind cadenzas based upon consideration of 200 authentic 18th-century woodwind cadenzas, states that the cadenzas which appear in the Grétry manuscript are among the two finest sets which they encountered.<sup>7</sup>

Many other examples could be given of similar thematic material appearing in the flute concerto and other works by Grétry. For example, compare the concerto, movement I, bars 79-80 with Quartet V, movement III, final three bars. Or compare the concerto, movement III, bars 12-16 with Quartet II, movement I, bars 36-38. The idea of three quick, jabbing downbeat notes in the concerto, movement III, bars 17, 18, 21 and 22 also is used in *Le Huron* in the vocal quartet "Il a les yeux" as well as in String Quartet II, movement I, bars 39-40 and 46-47 of the first violin.

Another aspect of Grétry's compositional style which appears in the flute concerto is his frequent use of phrases of uneven bar lengths. The opening tutti movement begins with a seven-bar phrase. The flute solo entrance in the third movement (bars 38-46) is a nine-bar phrase. The flute plays five-bar phrases in the third movement in bars 68-72, 110-114 and 115-119. I have not examined Grétry's later operas for phraseology, but there is no doubt that in his early career (c. 1760-1770) he was fascinated with phrases of five, seven and nine bars, and he incorporated them into his instrumental and operatic works with consummate

---

7 David LASOCKI and Betty Bang MATHER, *The classical woodwind cadenza : a workbook*, New York : McGinnis & Marx, 1978. The other outstanding set they encountered is found in the manuscript source to the Gluck flute concerto. Neither the Grétry cadenzas nor the Gluck cadenzas are included in their book, an oversight acknowledged to me in a letter from Prof. Mather.

skill (see Quartet II, Allegro ; Quartet III, Minuetto ; Quartet IV, Andantino ; Quartet V, Allegro ; Quartet VI, Allegro moderato). In Grétry's opera *Le Huron*, see the seven-bar phrase introduction to the duet "Ne vous rebutez pas" as well as the duet "Ah ! que tu m'attendris !" which masterfully alternates an eight-bar phrase with a seven-bar phrase, first alternating the two phrases between the oboe and the flute, then repeating them in the two vocal parts. Of course, other composers wrote themes of uneven numbers of bars, but as anyone who has studied strict composition knows, it is not easy to write a convincing phrase of uneven numbers of bars. Grétry excelled at it.

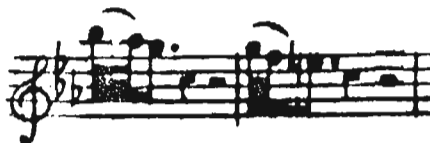
FLUTE CONCERTO, III, BARS 21-22



LE HURON, "IL A LES YEUX", VN. 1



STRING QUARTET II, I, BARS 39-40, VN. 1



---

Considering Grétry's own detailed account in his *Mémoires* of the circumstances of the commissioning of the flute concerto, the dating of the source manuscript to 1772 or before, the high musical quality of the concerto itself, and the many musical phrases in the concerto which are similar to passages in other works by Grétry written at around the same time, it seems evident that the Grétry flute concerto should be recognized as an unquestionably genuine work by the great master of *opéra-comique*.