

Dragonetti Comes to Life in the 21st Century in New Online Exhibition

By Drew Scott and Elena Hubert

Bassists around the world know the name Domenico Dragonetti, but they may not be aware of the treasure trove of Dragonetti primary source materials available at Northwestern University's Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections. Now, the online exhibit, "Digital Dragonetti: Exploring the Collections at Northwestern University" (<https://sites.northwestern.edu/dragonetti/>) makes these documents readily available to musicians and researchers exploring Dragonetti's legacy.

Debuted in January 2024, the online exhibit includes more than 250 documents related to Dragonetti, including written music and correspondence. The collection is curated by Greg MacAyeal, curator of Northwestern University's Music Library, and renowned bassist Jerry Fuller. Fuller has served on the ISB's Board of Directors and on the editorial board of the Online Journal of Bass Research. He is the recipient of ISB's Special Recognition Award for Historically Informed Performance and founding editor of Rumbings, the early music column of *Bass World*. "Jerry has selected a set of individual documents that really tell the Dragonetti story in a compelling way," says MacAyeal. "At the same time, we're linking to the whole collection so that researchers around the world can continue to study this amazing archive."

A pioneer of his instrument, Domenico Carlo Maria Dragonetti (1763-1846) redesigned the bow and technique of the double bass. He used a bow featuring a stick with a small curvature, necessitating a grip with the palm of the hand facing upward. This design, Fuller explains, increased the bow's capacity for "clarity and sharpness of attack." Dragonetti also revolutionized the tuning system and played chords that represented innovations in his era. Born in Venice in 1763, Dragonetti earned his first principal position in an opera at the age of 13. Garnering high acclaim throughout Europe, he inspired the likes of Beethoven and Joseph Haydn to further develop double bass parts in their compositions.

"He was like a rock star performer of his time," MacAyeal said. "That's the first time a bass player ever did anything like that."



Stephen Alltop and Jerry Fuller perform Dragonetti's Prelude in D Major BWV 532. The performance is available in Digital Dragonetti at Northwestern University's Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections. (Photo provided by the author.)

"Digital Dragonetti" includes videos of Fuller and ISB members and Northwestern University faculty members Andy Raciti and Ian Hallas performing Dragonetti compositions and arrangements. One recording features Fuller and organist Stephen Alltop performing Bach's Prelude in D Major (BWV 532) in a style believed to be an authentic recreation of Dragonetti's practice (<https://sites.northwestern.edu/dragonetti/the-music-of-dragonetti/>). Fuller says he has found no documentation of anyone performing the piece in this manner since Dragonetti's time, which makes the recording truly ground-breaking.

"What we've done is try, as best we can imagine, to recreate that sound world that Dragonetti had in 1836 when this arrangement was first published," Fuller says. "We can recreate that anew here with the information we found in the Dragonetti collection, which is really exciting."

MacAyeal and Fuller say they are hoping to expand Dragonetti's legacy with a modern interpretation of these 18th and 19th century materials. "It's not just stuffy letters in a box," MacAyeal says. "It's living through performance." Alongside selected documents with descriptions by Fuller, hundreds of Dragonetti materials in the digital exhibit are open to scholars' interpretations and further research. "Access to this information through 'Digital Dragonetti' creates new scholarship," says Fuller, "and that's exciting." MacAyeal emphasizes the value of continuing this research and allowing others to do the same. "Regardless of

the subject, hopefully, this exhibit will help demonstrate the kind of learning that can happen when scholars engage with primary source materials in this way," MacAyeal says. "Hopefully, it will get other people interested in wanting to work with archives, regardless of the topic."

MacAyeal concludes: "We've brought this up to a level that's never been done before. Then, I just know there are going to be others who will take it far beyond us."

Authors' Note: The documents that form "Digital Drag-onetti" are an important part of the Moldenhauer Collection, a repository of more than 3,000 music manuscripts and documents compiled by 20th century German musicologist Hans Moldenhauer. Northwestern University is

one of nine institutions worldwide that hold portions of this vast collection of scores, manuscripts, transcriptions, and correspondence spanning three centuries of musical history.

Drew Scott is Communications Specialist, Northwestern University Libraries. **Elena Hubert** is Arts and Entertainment Editor, *The Daily Northwestern*. 

Bass Violin Shop

Greensboro, NC

Double bass sales,
repairs, restorations,
setups, and rentals



(336) 272 - 2877
bassviolinshop.com
info@bassviolinshop.com