

## **GIOVANNI BATTISTA VIOTTI**

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(1966)

Giovanni Battista Viotti was a precocious child learning to play the violin with little tutoring.

He was born in the village of Fontanetto da Po in 1755, a son of the local blacksmith. When he was only eleven he went to Turin where he astonished musicians by being able to play difficult music at sight. As a result, the Marchesa di Voghera and her son Alfonso Dal Pozzo became his patrons and paid for his education. He became a pupil of Gaetano Pugnani who was the director of the music theatre in Turin. Dal Pozzo explained that the cost of teaching him was very high but worth it because of the boy's talent.

Viotti wrote his first Violin Concerto when he was only fourteen and it is clear that Pugnani taught him theory and composition. The concerto was published in 1781. However the young man's talent was slow to be realised and, by the age of twenty, he was a violinist in the Royal Theatre sitting at the back desk.

In 1780 he was delighted when Pugnani invited him to join him on tour through Switzerland, Germany, Poland and Russia. Viotti was a good-looking young man and Pugnani was ugly and very proud and objectionable... Elgarian, in fact. As a result, Viotti took a secondary role on this tour and he and Pugnani did not get on very well. On the way home they separated and Viotti went to Paris which was then considered the musical capital of Europe. He made his debut there on 17 March 1782 conducting and being the soloist from his violin standing to play.

His sound was different. He had a Stradivarius whereas Parisians were used to the more mellow sounds of an Amati or Stainer instrument. His bow had thicker wood and more hair which added to the new sound. But there were times when his sound was brusque.

It was largely due to Viotti that Paris became the centre of violin playing. He composed concerto after concerto and it is true that the quality of his playing was vastly superior to his compositions. His concertos have never caught on and Georges Enesco found them tedious. But Viotti was now a Francophile and his music took on a Gallic charm particularly when he wrote Rondo-Finales.

In 1786 Luigi Cherubini came to live in Paris for six years and became a friend of Viotti and they lodged together. Cherubini had a fine sense of tension and drama in music and this influenced Viotti and took him away from the sweet and pretty but anaemic music that he preferred. To add to his development he discovered the symphonies of Haydn. The Haydn influence is shown in Viotti's later concertos and would explain why they are better than the earlier ones.

Viotti met Haydn in London for the 1794-95 season. Haydn was writing his London symphonies and Viotti his London concertos. Here Viotti employed the Haydnesque big opening orchestral tutti.

But to return to Paris and fourteen years earlier. In 1783 Viotti withdrew from public performances. His last appearance was on 8 September 1783. No reason was given for this decision. However, it seems clear that he became a toady and restricted his performances to the Court of Marie Antoinette who became his patroness. Similarly, Elgar was to become such a toady in Edwardian England. It is to be regretted that arrogance affects musicians who think too highly of themselves.

Viotti loved to play in front of rich and wealthy people flashing their sparkling jewellery and well-endowed young women displaying their cleavages. Once when he was presenting a new concerto to such a millionaire audience a footman cried, "Make way for the Comte d'Artois!" The music stopped; the nobleman took his seat and Viotti packed his violin away and walked out.

Later he made his peace with the aristocracy.

Now his works were being taken up by other violinists. On Sunday afternoons, at the lodgings he shared with Cherubini, he gave musical matinees. But he now had a new project... to run an opera house. As with Elgar and Britten, and others, he was devious and entered into plots with 'people that matter' to become the new director of the Theatre de Monsieur. He put on operas including the premiere of Lodoiska by Cherubini. He gave posts in the orchestra to his own pupils including the talented young Pierre Rode.

But then came the Revolution of 1789 which frightened the aristocrats and their money away from the theatre. The Queen was arrested in 1792 and while Viotti tried to keep the theatre going with his own funds he soon fled to London.

Music in London was financially well-supported. And there were threepenny concerts for the ordinary people. There was rivalry between two groups, the Concerts organised by Wilhelm Cranmer and the Hanover Square Concerts conducted by Johann Peter Salomon, an impresario of good judgment.

Viotti made his debut at Hanover Square on 7 February 1793, his first public performance in ten years. Apparently it was a spectacular comeback. Later, Salomon was the other soloist in Viotti's Symphonie Concertante for two violins and orchestra.

In October 1794 Viotti was appointed as acting manager for the King's Theatre in London where operas had been staged. But in Viotti's time there were concerts of vocal and instrumental music including Haydn symphonies and the Morning Chronicle of 3 February 1795 praised the powerful and energetic new violin concerto by Viotti.

Haydn returned to Austria in mid August 1795. Viotti remained in London and enjoyed his continual success. But it did not last. Politics interfered.

He was expelled from England on 4 March 1798 under the authority of the Alien Bill. The charges of revolutionary sympathies were false and all protestations were dismissed. Viotti had fled France having been accused of being a royalist and now was expelled from England on the charge of being a Jacobin and, therefore, a threat to the British throne. He continued to write to his London friend, Mrs Chinnery and wrote some piano pieces for her daughter, Caroline.

Viotti spent the next three years near Hamburg in Germany devoting his time to composition. In February 1801 the expulsion order was cancelled and he returned to London. He visited Paris in 1802 expecting some acclaim and to find a position. He returned disillusioned to London before his fame both in Paris and London had been largely forgotten. He was advertised as the French glory of the violin and 200 people attended a concert in London to hear his newest concerto.

Having failed in music he took up a new career as a wine merchant. For ten years he conducted this business, composed and gave a few private concerts. His final two concertos, numbers 28 and 29, date from this time. In 1813, London launched the New Philharmonic Society led by Salomon and Clementi, one time rivals and this hurt Viotti's pride. But he was guest leader or concert master a few times. When Cherubini visited London he was welcomed but Viotti was regarded as a minor person.

He did appear in Philharmonic concerts as a composer-performer. In 1813 and 1814 he took the lead in his String Quartet and in his own Sinfonia Concertante for two violins and orchestra in 1815. He was bitter about his treatment and neglect by the Philharmonic. To add to his dilemma his wine business went under in 1814, and he was deeply in debt and, indeed, became bankrupt. In Paris, Louis XVIII was now on the throne and he had been a patron of Viotti who returned to Paris again to see if he could obtain a position and recognition. He did meet up with old friends and pupils.

He returned to Paris in 1818 and was given a surprise party at which the composer Habeneck had a cantata in Viotti's honour performed. Viotti played his last concerto, in E minor. On 1 November 1819 he was appointed as director of the Italian Theatre. Cherubini was in line for that post and this nearly cost them their friendship. But the theatre was in decline and on the verge of bankruptcy and a few months after Viotti's appointment the King's nephew, the Duc de Berry was assassinated while attending the opera. The theatre was closed. There were other problems and, eventually, on 22 October 1823 Viotti was dismissed with an annual pension of 6000 francs.

He knew that he was finished as a musician. In late July 1823 he returned to London, lodging with Mrs Chinnery, who, with her husband George, had befriended him in 1793. He died at their home on 3 March 1823. His last will and testament left all his property to her. He was buried in the parish of St Marylebone in the presence of a very few friends.

Viotti was admired by some discerning musicians. Brahms adored the Concerto no 22 in A minor and wrote to Clara Schumann to that effect. The bars 168-172 of the first movement of the Viotti concerto appears in a slightly altered form at bars 236-242 in the first movement of the Brahms' Violin Concerto.

Viotti wrote three concertos in Turin up to 1780, sixteen in Paris between 1782 and 1791, eight in London between 1792 and 1798 and the final two in London during 1801 to 1804. He also composed ten piano concertos, sonatas, trios, string quartets and a few vocal works. Violinists are undecided about his work but many regard his duos for two violins to be of a high order. As we have said, he was a better performer than a composer.

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