Luigi Boccherini and the Court of Prussia

By Mara Parker

The question of Luigi Boccherini’s whereabouts during the time he served as Compositor di Camera to Friedrich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia (reigned 1786–97) remains unanswered. One theory contends that Boccherini lived in semi-seclusion in Spain during the years 1787–96, devoting himself exclusively to composition. Others argue that Boccherini went to the Court of Prussia on the basis of a letter thought to be written by the composer while in Breslau. Did he stay in Spain or did he take up residence at Friedrich Wilhelm’s court? My examination of the autograph scores, originally part of the Prussian Royal Library and now housed at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin, reveals that Boccherini used Spanish paper exclusively and thus supports the theory that he remained in Spain.

Prior to his engagement with Friedrich Wilhelm II, Boccherini held the position of “Violoncellist of his [Infante Don Luis’s] Chamber and Composer of music” [virtuoso di camera e compositor di musica] in Madrid from 1770 to 1785. His contract stipulated that he compose only for his Spanish patron. Toward the end of this period (c. 1783), Frederick the Great’s ambassador was in Madrid, and the six quartets of Boccherini’s opus 33 were performed in his honor. The ambassador, hoping to curry favor with the Crown Prince, sent a copy of these works to Berlin.

Friedrich Wilhelm II, a skilled cellist and avid chamber music player, received Boccherini’s compositions with great enthusiasm. His letter of 1 October 1783 to the composer, acknowledging receipt of the quartets, conveyed his interest and pleasure:

Nothing could give me more pleasure, Signor Boccherini, than to receive some of your compositions from your own hands and just at a time when I have begun to perform your instrumental work. It alone gives me full satisfaction and every day I enjoy that pleasure. So that I am willing to believe that the pleasure you find in composition will not shortly come to an end and that we may hope to see something new from your pen, in which case I shall be most grateful if you will communicate it to me. Meanwhile pray accept, Signor Boccherini, this gold box, in memory of me and as a mark of the esteem in which I hold your talents in an art which I particularly value, and be persuaded of the consideration with which I remain, Signor Boccherini,

Your most affectionate,
Frederick William,
Prince of Prussia

1
Although Boccherini could not accede to Friedrich Wilhelm’s request as long as his Spanish patron lived, his music remained in the Prussian heir’s thoughts. When the Infante died in 1785, the Crown Prince wrote again to Boccherini:

We, Frederick William, by the grace of God Hereditary Prince Royal of Prussia, heir presumptive to the crown, having recognized the eminent musical talents of Signor Luigi Boccherini, have been induced thereby to confer upon him the present Patent, with the title of Composer of Our Chamber, and in consequence we have signed these presents and caused the seal of our arms to be apposed thereto. Berlin, the twenty-first of January, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-six.

Frederick William
Pr. of Pr.²

In return for an annual dispatch to Berlin of quartets, quintets, and trios, Boccherini received a yearly pension of one thousand German crowns.

Before and after the period of Boccherini’s Prussian employment, the composer resided in Madrid. His location during the interim, however, has remained unclear. Early biographers such as Louis Picquot wrote that during the questionable years, Boccherini remained in Spain but withdrew from public life:

Ten years passed without bringing a notable change in Boccherini’s position. The fact that he had lost his first patron made him even more sensitive to the ingratitude of the Court, [and] had led to a life in retirement, divided between the many needs of [raising] a family, his work, and the practice of [religious] piety . . . He composed . . . but for a long time he did not have the satisfaction of [hearing] his masterpieces performed. Stranger to a world that ignored him . . . wreaked by hemoptysis, renouncing the cello, he sent one composition after another to the Prussian monarch without hearing them.³

During the twentieth century, many biographers have held that the Italian composer visited Prussia, although the alleged length of his stay there ranges from a few months to as long as ten years. In 1943, for example, Lindsay and Smith suggested that Boccherini resided in Prussia for nearly two years:

In a court decree dated January 21st, 1786, Boccherini was appointed court composer to the King of Prussia. Shortly after that
date the composer left Spain to take up his new appointment. His German sojourn probably lasted until the beginning of 1788; during this time he lived at Potsdam and Breslau. He entered into intimate relationships with many high personages at the Prussian court, and was apparently held in great esteem by the King himself. . . . The exact date of his return to Madrid from Prussia is unknown. . . . For some reason Boccherini had left the Prussian court, but had not severed his connection with it, for he still drew a large part of his revenue from Frederick William.4

The authors place him more definitely in Breslau during the year 1787: "In Vienna, in July 1787, Boccherini’s elder sister, Maria-Esther, married the ballet-master and dancer Onorato Vogano . . . we know that about this time Boccherini was in Breslau" (italics mine).5 This assumption is substantiated only by a letter that was supposedly written by Boccherini while in Breslau, the text of which is given below:

To the Chamberlain Marchese Lucchesini, in Potsdam

Most Generous Friend,

The departure of the Minister of Hoym (the excellent and worthy Councillor Mustau went with him) makes me despair of ever seeing the great King again. I had had such high hopes of this that I made a large wager that I would see this province again; the recall of the Minister means that I have lost my wager.

It is a great comfort to me to hear that the Frau Marchesa, in her interesting condition, is getting on well. May she bestow upon you successors who resemble you! Lenisque Ilithyia tuere matrem! It is with the most sincere satisfaction that I imagine to myself how proudly now she displays those hallowed rights of parenthood which she is shortly to confer upon you.

I have not seen Signora Zannetta for many months. She was in the country for a long time, and when she returned I found myself confined to my room in consequence of frequent blood-spitting, and what was worse, a violent swelling of the feet accompanied by an almost total loss of strength.

I do not venture to importune you with the questions which I should like to ask you, but I cannot refrain from mentioning that I read in a Berlin newspaper that Potemkin has collected 17 scattered regiments of his division and—N.B. with the knowledge of the quiet and peaceable Peppino—proclaimed himself monarch of the Crimea and its dependencies. Incredible as this news appears to me to be, it
would be no less agreeable were it true; for it would convince the two ladies of Tsarskoe Selo of the fidelity of their beloved allies.

What do you say about Birster and Nicolai? What a spirit of tolerance their writings breathe! May God preserve us catholics from patriots and friends of humanity of their kind!

To my mistress the Marchesa my most humble compliments.

Farewell, remember kindly your

Luigi Boccherini
Breslau, July 30, 1787

P.S.—I am enchanted with Herr Graf Munarrini.

This letter, in its German translation, first appeared in *Musikerbriefe*, an 1886 collection of letters. The editor, La Mara, claimed that the original was contained within a group of autographs collected by the Abbate Masseangeli and later bequeathed to the Accademia Filarmonica of Bologna. Inspecting these "autographs", Germaine De Rothschild found only a manuscript summation of the letter.

In 1958, Alfredo Bonaccorsi contested the authenticity of the document itself. His findings have since won acceptance; thus, current opinion again holds that Boccherini did not leave Spain. This position, however, is based more on the negation of previous claims rather than positive evidence.

The theory that Boccherini remained in Spain during the time 1787–96 is supported by evidence from the manuscripts in Friedrich Wilhelm’s personal collection, now in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin. During these nine years Boccherini sent his royal patron eleven trios, twenty-eight quintets, and sixteen quartets, as well as other instrumental and vocal works. Some of these chamber works exist in handwritten parts; others are in score. It is these scores that provide us with crucial information regarding Boccherini’s residence.

Georg Thouret, an early cataloguer of the Royal Library, now the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz, indicated that all the Boccherini scores held there were autographs. Yves Gérard confirmed these findings, but did not explain his rationale:

Only after the years 1771/1772 when the composer entered the service of the Infante Don Luis, have we any reliable information on these points [verification of autographs]. We have reserved the word “autographs,” without qualification, for those manuscripts of which we have absolutely no doubts.

Ellen Amsterdam disagreed with both Thouret and Gérard:
The scores . . . have generally been assumed to be autographs. I have found that this is not invariably the case. The scores are apparently in three hands—those of the composer and two copyists. What will be called the first hand corresponds to that of the excerpts from Boccherini's autograph thematic catalog appearing in photo-reproduction in Arnaldo Bonaventura's book *Boccherini*, published in Milan in 1931. All of these (9) quintets are accurately dated, and all are concluded with the words "Laus Deo," characteristically used by authors. The signature "Copirt v. Schober," with dates, appears on the final pages of some (but not all) of the manuscripts in both the second and third hands. We may presume that the copyist Schober had a helper. Or, Schober may have made parts from already existing scores, occasionally (and inconsistently) affixing his signature to the score, so that a subsequent copyist would know that the parts had already been made from that score. Indeed the second hand unquestionably belonged to a copyist. The third hand resembles more closely the first hand (autograph) than the second, but the manuscripts themselves differ considerably in appearance. Those in the third hand, in contrast to the autographs, are small in size, coarsely written, and lack the typical concluding words "Laus Deo." 

Amsterdam's argument is flawed because she relied solely on the visual appearance of the manuscripts and so arrived at erroneous conclusions. In particular, her mention of the copyist Schober compels us to re-examine the scores.

While the presence of Schober's signature has been verified, the identification of several distinct hands is not supported by an examination of the scores. Table 1 lists, with relevant data, the scores held by the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz for the period 1787-97. Distinctions between those scores with and without the Schober signature are indicated in Table 2.

I do not believe that the absence of "Laus Deo" proves, as Amsterdam implies, that a manuscript is not an autograph. Furthermore, her comparison of musical orthography is not convincing. The primary distinction between the two hands is in the shaping of the noteheads. Although differences can be discerned, one might explain them as a result of variable speed of writing. Variations in ink color, while noticeable, tell us little.

The issue of the notated measure numbers is a complex one. One possible explanation is that these additions were made by a copyist so that the work could be checked as he progressed. A second explanation is that these numbers were made by the composer himself. In the Boccherini
**Table 1**

Boccherini Scores (1787–96)

Held by Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Call No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Schober Sig. Date</th>
<th>Dimensions (cm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M.517</td>
<td>Quintetto in B♭</td>
<td>(none)</td>
<td>31.0 x 22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.518</td>
<td>Quintetto in F</td>
<td>(none)</td>
<td>32.0 x 22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.521</td>
<td>Quintetto in D</td>
<td>26 April: 1787</td>
<td>31.0 x 22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.523</td>
<td>Quintettino in A</td>
<td>(none)</td>
<td>15.5 x 10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.538</td>
<td>Quintetto in F</td>
<td>(none)</td>
<td>15.5 x 11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.596</td>
<td>Quartettino in B♭</td>
<td>24 April: 1792</td>
<td>29.5 x 19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.540</td>
<td>Quintetto in c</td>
<td>25 April: 1792</td>
<td>16.0 x 11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.545</td>
<td>Quintetto in E♭</td>
<td>10 Marz: 1794</td>
<td>22.0 x 16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.548</td>
<td>Quintetto in B♭</td>
<td>15 [?] : 1794</td>
<td>22.0 x 16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.550</td>
<td>Quintrittino in C</td>
<td>[?] [Nov.]: 1795</td>
<td>15.5 x 11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.604</td>
<td>Quartetto in D</td>
<td>4:30 Mai: 1795</td>
<td>22.0 x 16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.606</td>
<td>Quartetto in G</td>
<td>25 [?] : 1795</td>
<td>22.0 x 16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.608</td>
<td>Quartetto in f</td>
<td>20 Nov.: 1795</td>
<td>22.0 x 16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.610</td>
<td>Quartettino in D</td>
<td>[?] Mai: 1796</td>
<td>22.0 x 16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.552</td>
<td>Quintetto</td>
<td>(none)</td>
<td>21.5 x 15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

Comparison of Scores with and without Schober Signature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unsigned</th>
<th>Schober signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May conclude with “Laus Deo”</td>
<td>Signed “Copirt v. Schober”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rounded note heads</td>
<td>Note heads are smaller, less rounded, more angular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light brown ink</td>
<td>Dark brown ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May number measures at double bars</td>
<td>Invariably puts measure numbers at double bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All scores were folded at one time</td>
<td>Most of the scores were folded at one time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good quality paper, opaque</td>
<td>Good quality paper, opaque</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paris autographs, measure numbers appear at each double bar. Upon comparison, one finds that these numbers bear a remarkable resemblance to those found in the Berlin scores. One can surmise that as Boccherini made his own personal copies from the scores prior to sending them to Berlin,¹⁵ he checked his work to ensure that his copies had the same number of measures as the scores.
Figure 1. Boccherini Scores (1787-96): Watermark Types

Watermark Type 1
Reproduced with the permission of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz

Watermark Type 2
Reproduced with the permission of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz
That so many of the scores show signs of being folded suggests they were so packaged for mailing. Although Amsterdam concluded that the smaller scores were not autographs ("Those in the third hand, in contrast to the autographs, are small in size, coarsely written, and lack the typical concluding words 'Laus Deo.'"), Gérard’s comments are more plausible:

This manuscript [G.340/M523] can without exaggeration be described as a pocket score (about 16 cm by 11 cm). It was no doubt for easier transmission through the post that Boccherini adopted this small format or one only slightly larger (about 20 cm by 15 cm) for a large number of works specifically composed for Frederick William II which had to be dispatched from Madrid to Berlin or Potsdam.¹⁶

In general, the musical handwriting in the scores signed and not signed by Schober is not so clearly different as to suggest that two hands are responsible; moreover, a comparison of the Berlin scores with autograph parts from the Paris collection reveals numerous similarities. The title pages all display a consistent and distinctive shaping of the letters “g,” “r,” and “i.” Uniformity is also evident in the construction of the treble and bass clefs, and the formation of numbers, staff brackets, and colophons. Certain “habits” such as the writing out of dynamic indications and the use of double slashes also contribute to a homogeneous appearance.

Although the evidence given above remains subject to debate, the paper on which these scores were written provides more conclusive proof that we are dealing with a single hand. Two types of paper have been identified; the chief difference between them is that of their watermarks (figure 1). Both watermarks belong to the firm of Romani, a Catalan family of papermakers; each branch of the family, however, had its own peculiar variation of the basic watermark. “Type 1” dates from early in the second half of the eighteenth century and was in use up through the end of the century. “Type 2” is found on Romani paper throughout the entire century. These watermarks were well known and appeared on the majority of Spanish music papers during the 1700s.¹⁷

Table 3 lists the relevant Boccherini scores with their dates of composition and watermark types. Two scores with incomplete watermarks—M.523 and M.596—are included in this list, since those segments which are visible bear a marked similarity to watermark type 2. Physical evidence (size, paper quality, staves per page) and handwriting characteristics also suggest these works belong in this group. These two scores do appear on the same quality paper as the other manuscripts in question and display the same style of writing. All the scores sent to Friedrich Wilhelm II during
the nine years in question were written on Spanish paper of a particular maker.

Based on this information it is highly doubtful that Boccherini composed these works while in residence at the Court of Prussia; had he been there, he certainly would have used whatever paper was available to him. One can hardly imagine that Boccherini refused to write on anything but Spanish paper, or even more unlikely, that he brought his own large supply with him from Spain. Secondly, one must question some of Amsterdam's conclusions regarding the authenticity of the autograph scores. Although Schober's name appears on ten of the manuscripts, it is improbable that Boccherini sent blank Spanish paper to the Court of Prussia along with an unknown manuscript in order for a score copy to be made. Furthermore, it is just as unlikely that Schober lived with Boccherini in Spain, sending his or an unnamed copyist's work back to Prussia. The fact that Schober had previously attached his signature in a similar fashion to the end of an autograph score by the Italian composer, Carlo Graziani, who resided at the Prussian Court, suggests an established practice.

I conclude that the scores are autographs. The signature, "Copirt v. Schober," indicates that Schober made separate copies and notated his deed on the autograph for future reference. Indeed, all of these works exist in parts on non-Spanish paper, for it appears that Friedrich Wilhelm II routinely had one and sometimes two copies made from the full scores for his own use or for that of his royal chamber players. This also corre-
sponds to part of Amsterdam's hypothesis, that "Schober may have made parts from already existing scores occasionally (and inconsistently) affixing his signature to the score, so that a subsequent copyist would know that parts had already been made from that score." In each of these cases however, Schober affixed his name to an autograph, and not a copy. Based on the consistent use of a particular make of Spanish paper and similar orthographic characteristics among the Berlin scores and Paris autographs, there is little doubt that Boccherini resided in Spain during the years 1787-96.

Notes
2 Ibid., 42. Originally part of the Boccherini family archives, published by Alfredo Boccherini.
3 L'ouis Piquot, Notice sur la Vie et les Ouvrages Luigi Boccherini, suivie du Catalogue Raisonne de Toutes ses Oeuvres, tant Publiees qu'omedotes (Paris: Philipp, 1851), 17-18. "Dix ans s'écoulerent de la sorte sans apporter de changement notable dans la position de Boccherini. La perte de son premier protecteur, rendue plus sensible encore par l'ingratitude de la cour, l'avait conduit à une vie retirée, partagée entre les soins d'une famille, nombreuse, ses travaux et l'exercice d'une douce piéte . . . Il composait dans son coeur mais quant à l'exécution de ses chefs-d'oeuvre, il n'avait plus depuis longtemps la satisfaction d'en jouir. Etranger au monde qui l'ignorait . . . à la suite d'un crachement de sang, de renoncer au violoncelle, il envoyait successivement, sans qu'il les eût entendues ses compositions au monarque prussien."
4 Maurice J. Lindsay and W. Leggat Smith, "Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805)," Music and Letters 24 (1943): 77. See also Hans Keller, "Mozart and Boccherini," Music Review 8 (1947): 245: "We have evidence that in the following year [1787] Boccherini visited Berlin and Breslau."
5 Lindsay and Smith, "Luigi Boccherini," 77.
6 Quoted in De Rothschild, Luigi Boccherini, 61-62.
7 La Mara, Musikerbriefe aus fünf Jahrhunderten, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1886), 270.
8 De Rothschild, Luigi Boccherini, 61.
9 Alfredo Bonaccorsi, "Contributo alla storia di Boccherini," Rassegna Musicale 28/3 (1958): 198. Bonaccorsi does not lay out a specific argument. Rather, he simply doubts that Boccherini wrote this letter and points out that no one has yet provided conclusive proof that the composer left Spain during this period.
11 See the Appendix for a complete list of the Boccherini manuscripts composed 1786-1797 which are still located at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz. A number of autograph parts dating from this period are also to be found in the Paris Bibliothèque de l'Opera (Reserve 507, 508); however, there is no evidence to suggest that these works were originally sent to the Court of Prussia and later transferred to France. The Paris manuscripts were originally part of Picquot's library; they have the same physical charac-

The contents of Paris Réserve 508, entitled "Manuscrits autographes de Boccherini," comprise a number of string quintets forming part of Janet and Cotelle's complete edition of Boccherini's string quintets. Réserve 507 bears no such heading. It is possible that these particular works come from the collection published by Pleyel at the turn of the nineteenth century. We know that in 1796 Boccherini sold to his publisher fifty-six copies in his own hand of compositions previously sent to Friedrich Wilhelm II. See, for example, Boccherini's letter to Pleyel, dated 11 October 1796 from the Pleyel archive, No. 52. (unpublished) and translated in De Rothschild, Luigi Boccherini, 105: "The 56 pieces which I have referred to are the most recent of my compositions and are not included in those which I mention later in this letter—of these 56 only the King of Prussia possesses the originals, as their legitimate proprietor, and I possess a copy written in my own hand."

12 Georg Thouret, Katalog der Musiksammlung auf der Königlichen Hausbibliothek im Schloss zu Berlin (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1895).


15 See note 11.

16 Gérard, Thematic Catalogue, 386. Gérard adds these same comments for G. nos. 233 (M604), 234 (M606), 235 (M608), 237 (M610), 354 (M532), 355 (M540), and 364 (M545). A number of the Berlin scores (M517, M518, M523, M538, M545, M548, M552, M604, M608, M610) were at one time folded in quarters and one (M596) was folded in eighths. This also might have been done for easier posting. The idea of using smaller paper for the purpose of easier transmission through the mail is not unique to Boccherini. See also Haydn's letter of 8 January 1791 to Maria Anna von Genzinger in which he adds a postscript: "I missed it [Symphony in Eb] yesterday and need it urgently, and so I beg you to get it from my kind friend, Herr von Kees, and to copy it in your own home on small-sized paper for mailing" (italics mine). The full letter is quoted in H.C. Robbins Landon, Haydn: Chronicle and Works, vol. 3, Haydn in England, 1791-1795 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 36-37.


18 The title page of the Graziani manuscript (M1960) reads as follows: "Sonata a Violoncello solo e Basso / di Carlo Graziani / composta per S.A.R. Principe di Prussia." Schober's signature appears at the bottom of the verso side of the fourth leaf: "Copirt 22 [?]br: 1776 von Schober." Carlo Graziani (d. 1787) served as Friedrich Wilhelm II's cello instructor until 1773, when he was pensioned and replaced by Jean Pierre Duport. Graziani remained in Potsdam, where he continued to compose until his death.