

# FRANK PRATO: A CARMEN FANTASY FOR DOUBLE BASS AND PIANO

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## ABSTRACT

If we are to approach a musical piece for double bass featuring a diverse language, with compositional elements blending the European melodic scene with harmonies typical to American Jazz, then Frank Prato's *Carmen Fantasy* is by far the ultimate choice. Composer and double bass player Frank Prato is one of the most important and prolific among American composers, who have written for double bass. Meeting François Rabbath in 1978, with whom becomes a close friend, will lead to five great pieces for double bass and piano (orchestra). These pieces hold a very complex soundscape. One of the before mentioned works is *A Carmen Fantasy for Double Bass and Piano* (1991). The piece represents the key to understanding double bass free interpretation technique through the composition technique used, the clear script and the specific indications. This instrumental technique developed by François Rabbath implies a more ergonomic movement of the body, the arms and thus of the fingers on the double bass fingerboard. Moreover, Prato's piece includes an improvisation moment in the second act, *Aragonaise*, offering the audience a new experience, characterized by authenticity, every single time it is performed. The compositional talent, intertwined with a profound understanding of double bass interpretation technique, turns this work into a masterpiece accessible to future generations of interpreters.

**Keywords:** proto, bizet, carmen, fantasy, double bass

## Introduction

Frank Prato (born 1941, Brooklyn, New York, studying between the ages of 7-16 the piano, and then double bass at the High School of Performing Arts in New York, continuing at the School of Music in Brooklyn) is most definitely one of the most important and prolific American composers to create valuable double bass pieces. Beginning with some of the most familiar aria of the opera *Carmen* (1875), by George Bizet (born 1838, Paris) Frank Prato composes *A Carmen Fantasy for Double Bass and Piano* in 1991. It was written and dedicated to François Rabbath (born 1931, Aleppo, Syria, double bass player and composer).

Through the composition technique used and the clear script with specific indications, the piece represents the key to double bass free interpretation technique, the same technique used and developed by François Rabbath. The *Fantasy* is written in a lyrical and relaxing manner. The harmony employed by the composer is typical to American jazz. The resonance of the accompanying piano seems to resemble Bill Evans. Frank Prato makes use

of the contrasting dynamics, extended interpretation techniques, encompassing the entire palette of sound shades and technical possibilities on the four strings of the double bass. The piece also contains an improvisation part, offering the interpreters the chance to introduce something new each time.

The premiere took place in 1991, in the interpretation of François Rabbath. After the premiere, Rabbath asked the composer to write a version cu orchestra accompaniment. The second premiere, containing the orchestra accompaniment, took place in 1992 with the Toulouse chamber orchestra (Orchestre de Chambre Toulouse).

It is not at all surprising that arias from Carmen were used as base by other composers. The most popular adaptations belong to Pablo de Sarasate (Carmen Fantasy for violin, 1882), and Franz Waxman (Carmen Fantasy for violin and orchestra, 1946). Consequently, Proto's double bass version is more than welcomed. The drama of the Carmen opera consists in the moral decline of a man due to unconquered love, an obsession which leads to crime, ending in the man's arrest for killing the woman he loved.

Proto's piece is not a Bizet themed group of variations. The suite contains 5 parts and includes a lyrical *Prelude* designed in the form of a cadenza without accompaniment, Aragonaise, Nocturne – Micaela's Aria, Toréador and Bohemian Dance. The 5 parts keep melodious elements and the savor typical to Bizet, completed by harmonization and cadenzas brought by Proto, revealing his sound signature and an expressive script enhancing the double bass particularity.

Prelude, designed as a cadenza, is a small musical poem invoking the ominous feeling of imminent danger, intelligently using a few simple harmonies. Technically speaking, this section encompasses certain moments of increased difficulty. This entails the need to use particular effects and approaches specific to double bass musical performance, surpassing classical frontiers by using new approaches and allowing the interpreter to display his technical and expressive craftsmanship, alternating semiquaver and thirty second notes in high speed with intervals played on double strings and false flageolet (Ex. 1)



Ex. 1

The unprecedented choice of the composer to note in the score the unison produced by simultaneously executing a sound on two strings – situation never before encountered in double bass music (Ex. 2), as well as the use of consecutive intervals of melodic fourths, which are difficult to perform, but have an outstanding sound effect (Ex. 3)



Ex. 2



Ex. 3

The Spanish spirit of guitar can be encountered here due to sudden character changes, sometimes nervous and agitated, other times mighty and glorious such as a bullfighter in the arena, these being some well-found effects written by the composer. The cadenza is sung in one breath, preparing the beginning of the Spanish dance.

Aragonaise, includes an improvisation passage, which represents a true pleasure for interpreters. The piano begins this part with an 18 bars introduction, beginning in *ff* decreasing *poco a poco* to *pp* in the double bass themed entry. This Spanish dance, alert in ternary measure is more complex. The first period (A), presents the theme twice: once in a simple manner (a1), the second time slightly modified (a2), preparing the second section (B) in the relative major tonality. The second section also has two phrases. The first phrase (b1) is more lyrical, more dramatic, the second one (b2) is more playful, more joyful. For 15 bars it is reverted to the first period (A), presenting the phrase (a1) diversified, continuing with phrase 3 which sets up the development of this part. The highlight of the second part Aragonaise is encountered in the development section (C) and is delivered by repeating certain syncopated rhythmical motifs (Ex. 4). It all settles down in a few bars, and here, the composer brings back the cadenza from the beginning, The Prelude, in an almost identical manner, missing the last bars, section noted D.

 Musical score for Ex. 4, consisting of two systems of piano music. The first system starts at measure 164 and includes a double bass entry. The second system continues the piece, featuring a development section with syncopated rhythmic motifs. The notation includes various dynamics like *sfz* and *f*, and includes fingerings and slurs.

Ex. 4

We return to the development (C1), but this time it is an improvisation moment for the interpreter, accompanied by a number of eight bars repeating ad lib by the pianist (Ex. 5), on the structure of harmonic figuration from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> bar from the beginning of the dance.

178 **Improvisation**  
Optional.

*p*

If improvisation is used: Repeat this section "ad lib". On cue from soloist take the 2nd ending. <sup>⓪</sup> **Improvisations**  
If improvisation is not used: After the cadenza play through this section once using the 2nd ending.

*pp*

**Improvisations**

The score consists of two systems. The top system is a single staff with a treble clef, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. It contains a series of slanted lines representing an improvisation. The bottom system is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic. It features a repeating harmonic pattern in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A circled '0' symbol is placed above the second ending of the improvisation section.

Ex. 5

Using the second volta it returns to the second A interpretive, which ends the movement.

Nocturne – Micaela’s Aria is the slow part of the suite. This one has a simple monopartite form of a lied. The theme is presented twice by a double bass, this time the instrument having an accompaniment role, but not for long, combining simple accompaniment with counter melodies as secondary themes. It is reverted to the theme and the lied is over.

Reharmonizing the aria by the composer appears to have its inspiration in Sondeheim’s impressionist style, using on the left hand, on the piano, the eights arpeggios scale overlapped with a fourth accord in the right hand (Ex. 6), or perhaps inspired by the improvisations of jazz pianist Bill Evans (Ex. 7).

4 **A** a tempo

*p*

a tempo

*rit.*

*pp*

The score is in a grand staff. The top staff (treble clef) begins with a section marked 'A a tempo' and a piano (*p*) dynamic. The bottom staff (bass clef) features a series of arpeggiated eighth notes, with a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic. A 'rit.' (ritardando) marking is present in the middle of the piece.

Ex.6

17 **Adagio**

*p*

*pp*

*rit.*

*pp*

*rit.*

The score is in a grand staff. The top staff (treble clef) is marked 'Adagio' and begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The bottom staff (bass clef) features a complex harmonic structure with piano-piano (*pp*) dynamics. A 'rit.' (ritardando) marking is present in the middle of the piece.

Ex. 7

This aria was imagined so that it could be interpreted outside of the Fantasy. The Toréador is written in a light and relaxing manner, reminding us of Proto's love for jazz. You will not hear the castanets rhythm, nor low sounds, but tranquil and gentle arpeggios, with occasional surges. After the most extravagant cadenza, the culmination of the piece appears materialized in the main theme of the Toréador, very slow but with unexpectedly beautiful harmonies.

At the beginning, the accompaniment of the theme is done in piano arpeggios reminding us of the harp's resonance (Ex. 8), every now and then interrupted by syncopated block chords (Ex. 9), with big-band resonance, followed again by the arpeggio.



Ex. 8



Ex. 9

The theme is presented twice by the double bass, but not identically, the second is melodically enriched, the third presentation is done by the piano, using fourth accords played in unison by both hands. The double bass imitates the arpeggio accompaniment in bariolage figures (Ex. 10)



Ex. 10

The expansion appears at the same time as the beginning of a fugue in two voices, which uses as starting point the first three sounds of the theme (Ex. 11). The first entry of the fugue theme is in discant, at the piano, the second voice belonging to the double bass, doubled in unison by the soprano at the piano.



Ex.11

The fugal nature does not last long, being thinned by the enlargement of the rhythms, afterwards changing tempo to a quieter one, *Maestoso*, until it reaches *Larghetto*. Crossing little cadenza moments, Proto uses the three notes motif in order to prepare the following moment. Everything turns into something tranquil by repeating the same sound for three bars. The main theme of the *Toréador* arises. It is presented in an unexpectedly beautiful manner, reharmonized, in *pp dolce*, in a slow tempo (Ex. 12). When we almost feel the new theme settled, it is dispelled by something even more tranquil, a free cadenza that flows from the double bass low notes, reaching up the very high notes of the flageolet. The last three bars making up the finale of the part have a castanet resonance, meanwhile the bullfighter curtseys in an elegant and short manner (Ex. 13).



Ex.12



Ex.13

The Bohemian Dance, “fast and glorious, full of life and virtuosity for the interpreter”, according to David Hayes in *The British International Bass Forum* completes the work. The dance represents the most spectacular part of the piece. The recurrence of the first rhythmic sequence descending from step to step, to a fast tempo, gives the impression of a carousel (Ex. 14).



Ex.14

The first period (A) consists of two phrases. The first phase on a base tonality, the second one on the relative minor tonality. The accompaniment is extremely rhythmic and poignant, sequential, contributing to the spectacularity of the part. It seems to be a

castanet dance, descending step by step. The inlet into the second period is set by the rhythmic formula of the base accompaniment. The B has the same tonality as the A, being distinguished through character and melody, as a contrasting theme. It is followed by a small development which uses rhythmic and melodious elements of the second period (B), in a very low and tranquil tempo. Every once in a while, the tempo is interrupted by short comebacks of the rapid tempo, which resembles the lively and lilt character of the dance. Following this short development, the third period is introduced (D), in *Maestoso* tempo. It possesses an expressive and lyrical character, totally different from before, alternating the notes in the sharp register of the flageolet double bass, thus changing the tonality, between a round vibrating and poignant notes, and the flageolets with their white and airy sound, (Ex. 15).

The musical score for Ex. 15 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The piece begins at measure 98. The tempo is marked *Maestoso*. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *p dolce*, and *rit.*. There are also performance instructions like *Solo: Ad lib (loco)* and *gva*. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Ex.15

In this case, the accompaniment is done by using fourth arpeggio accords, every once in a while, infused with *ad lib* moments played by the piano. This section resembles Micaela's Aria, through its harmonic and melodious expressive beauty reached by the composer. The return of the A, is done unexpectedly. The tempo is more alert, quickening to the finale of the piece. The finale is grand, the double bass mounting from the lowest C# note up to the highest fourth flageolet C#, more and more thinning out, the last note of the piece being played in *sfz*, the lowest F# of the double bass, doubled by the octave of the piano (Ex. 16).

The musical score for Ex. 16 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The piece begins at measure 174. The tempo is marked *poco rit.* and *molto rit.*. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *sfz*. There are also performance instructions like *gva* and *sfz*. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Ex.16

Due to its expressivity in the melodic line, spectacularity, but also the emotional charge transmitted by the interpreter to the audience and nonetheless the necessary interpretation technique – this piece is a great addition to the repertoire of any double bass player.

## Conclusion

Proto's contribution to the double bass repertoire is impressive, and his partnership with Rabbath resulted in emergence of numerous important works, which will last as long as there will be double bass players. Similar to Paganini, who has influenced his contemporaries, Proto has had the same influence in the double bass field, and even in the field of music in general. Frank Proto's creation for the double bass is extensive and deserved the attention of interpreters, not only for the pleasure of having a spectacular concerto work, but also for the opportunity of technical instrumental development.

Proto believes that interpreters and composers should not hesitate in tackling the issues society encounters nowadays – social and political issues, which will be encountered in some chamber music works, but also orchestra pieces. Proto likewise firmly believes in the preservation of the liaison between composition and interpretation, never hesitating in picking up the double bass and playing alongside a jazz band, a chamber music one, or traveling (even to Europe), for a solo recital, or to conduct a piece" (Liben Music Publishers Cincinnati, Ohio).

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