

PLUMEREL'S DOUBLE BASS

Despite its taut metal strings, its rich lacquered wood, and its deep, stirring resonance, Plumerel's double bass is a freak, a blasphemy to the established art of musical construction. Yet it is these anomalies that have fascinated generations of virtuosos, from Edgar Degas to the New York Philharmonic. It is more than an instrument, it is history. By Scott Bourne ♪

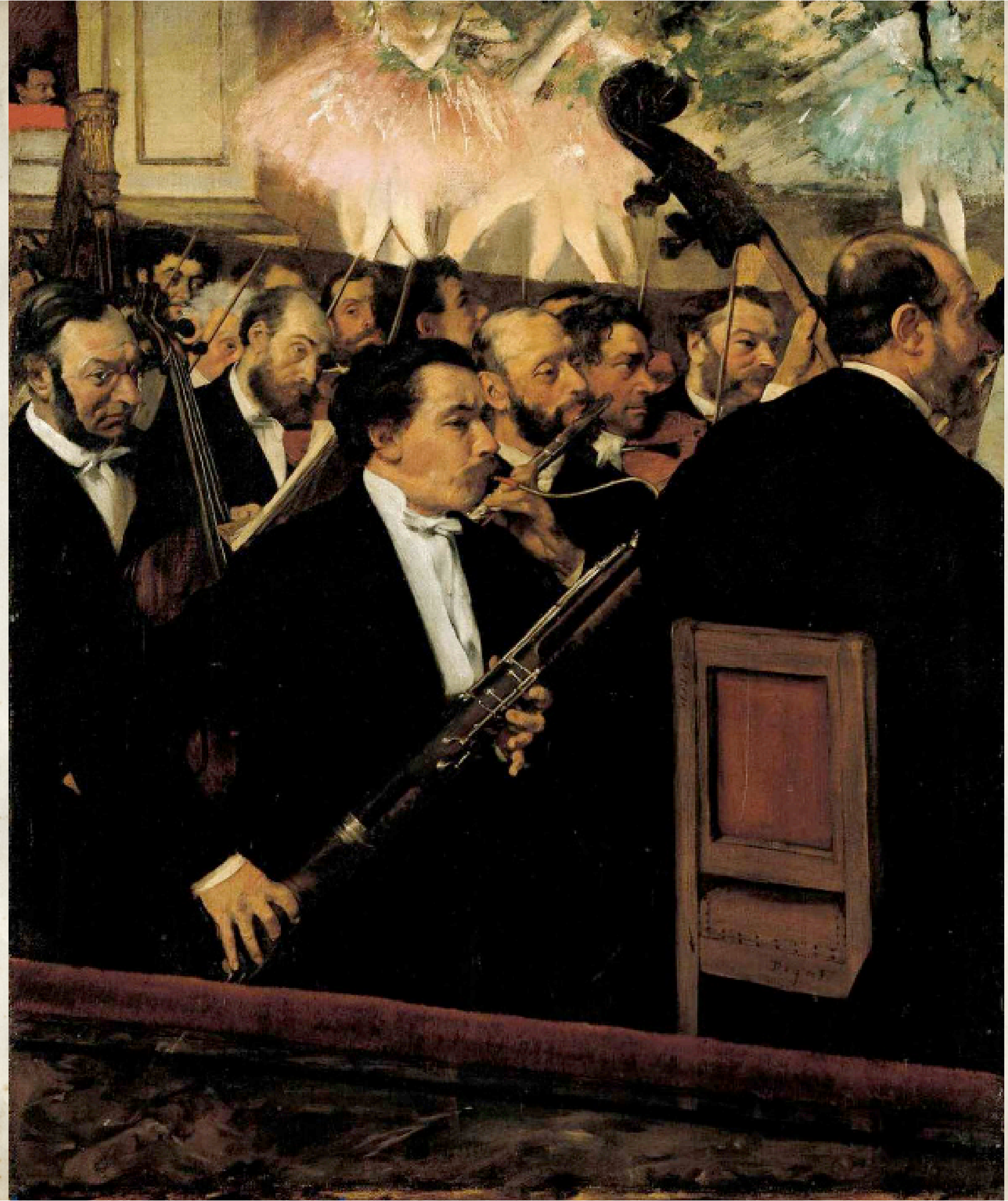


In this day and age it would be quite strange to begin a story with a letter but, considering the nature of this story, I believe it is quite fitting.

It was in late November 2007 that I received a post from my good friend Mr Shinji Eshima. Shinji has now been playing the double bass for the San Francisco Ballet, as well as opera orchestras, for 30 years. We had met a few years back through mutual friends and, when I returned to France, the letters began.

On this particular morning, as I opened Shinji's letter, I had no idea the adventure that would follow or the emotions I would have and how they would mix with a history that ran far deeper than our friendship. As I read the letter, he explained to me that he was in the mist of possibly purchasing a new bass, not just any bass, but one which had been painted into a Degas piece. As I read these words I could not help but imagine the hands that had held such an instrument nor the events that had painted it.

Being that I lived in Paris, Shinji had written to ask if I might take the time to go by the Musée d'Orsay and examine the painting, in search of a distinguishing mark that would have been painted into the bass in Degas' paint. To say the least, I was thrilled at this idea. That evening we spoke on the phone, I made a print out of the painting and the following morning, I was off.



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I find certain anticipation as I climb the steps that lead to the sixth floor. Renoir, Rousseau, Guillaume, Bernard, Lacombe and, the most popular, Van Gogh. The body, the form, the line of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. I am captivated by the redheaded beauty who drags a brush through her hair in Degas' *Femme se peignant*. For a moment, I find my thoughts turning towards a beautiful red head whose hair has been in my brush. My mind spinning at the women of my life. How I love, who I love and how I am unable to hold on to any of them.

I turn around and return to my search. I am close. It's almost as if I know that it is in the room which I have just entered. I see what looks much like a ballet studio, male dancers stretching on the floor – but a closer look reveals something very different. These are not ballet dancers at all, but men scraping and refurbishing the floorboards of a building. Gustave Caillebotte's *Raboteurs de Parquet*. I am fascinated, overtaken by its deception. Beauty captured in the seemingly ordinary that becomes a fine art form when painted by the right man.

On a wall just behind it are Degas' ballerinas. I am amazed and overtaken by the beauty of the human body at work in all forms. And there, just to my left, I find the piece that Shinji has sent me to search: Degas' *L'Orchestre de l'Opera*! It's a fabulous painting with extraordinarily detailed faces. Just overhead we see the ballet stage, dancers' legs, then the big bass captured in the artist's paint. It's the piece I have come to find, but the mark I am sent to search I surely cannot see.

The experience was something that made me reflect on the beauty of the world and how it takes paint, not to mention where a man draws inspiration or what drives him to create. As I stared into Degas' painting, I could almost hear all the fabulous pieces the bass had played. I was made to reflect on all the live performances I had seen and how someday soon Shinji would be pulling on these painted strings. Much more sure of the history of the instrument than myself, Shinji went on to buy that bass. On the side, one will find an inscription that reads:

A.M. Ach. Gouffé	To Mr. Achille Gouffé
Imitation de Stradivarius	Imitation of Stradivari
par F. Plumerel (aine)	by F. Plumerel (father)
Paris le 10 Janvier mil huit quarante trois	Paris 10 January 1843

Stradivari never made a double bass as the inscription might actually lead one to believe. It is uncertain if Plumerel believed he was copying a Stradivari design or not. Much research has been done into this particular peculiarity, and no record of a double bass instrument by Stradivari has ever turned up. Whatever it was that Plumerel had in his mind or believed he was copying, the result turned out a phenomenon of its own.

Plumerel's choice of materials was a most unusual mix, a sort of Frankenstein-esque composition of parts and pieces from alternate time periods. The wood, although not known for its particular beauty, was one of fabulous tone and quality: a sparsely figured two-piece Maple back, its ribs and head made from similar wood but apparently not the same piece. The table is constructed of two separate pieces of spruce with an open-backed peg box of which the French have never been known to use in any time period. A style that seems to have been stolen from the guitar but no one is quite certain of when. The lower portion of the peg box has been decorated in a floral design that is most commonly found on 18th century Parisian cellos. Two of the four original peg-holes have been rearranged, and even the instrument's skin is of a superhuman



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composition. Typically, the French treated their instruments in a spirit-based varnish that time often turned hard and caused to crack or chip. Plumerel has used a light, brown varnish, which gives the instrument a golden glow that has aged most gracefully with his creation... and so a bass is born.

It has been said that Plumerel's creation is certainly competent but by no means the standard of his time, or any other for that matter. What the bass is, in fact, is a beautiful freak instrument.

For 35 years, Achille Henry Victor Gouffé was a soloist of the Paris Opera and The Society of Conservatory Concerts where he would often play Plumerel's Bass. Although he had much in common with Auguste Degas and their paths most certainly crossed, it was his son, Edgar, who was said to have an insatiable taste for the opera (where at the time Gouffé was the principal player). It's also known that Desire Dihau, a bassoonist in the opera, as well as a colleague of Gouffé's, was quite intimate with the Degas family. It's Dihau and Gouffé that were immortalised in Edgar's painting *L'Orchestre de l'Opera*.

From the perspective of existing drawings and the painting itself, it's apparent that Degas had a front-row seat, audience left. Gouffé is 66 years old in this painting and is undoubtedly playing a four-string instrument with French tuning gears. Although he owned a second bass in this same time period, which was constructed by Auguste Bernardel in 1841, it's one of the drawings that assure us that he's in fact playing the bass by Plumerel. After all, only the Plumerel bass has a crescent-shaped 'step' on the cheek of the instrument's pegbox.

It is also interesting to know that in 1889 Degas sold two other paintings that may have also depicted this same instrument, both of which were purchased by Theo van Gogh, the brother of Vincent van Gogh. However, the whereabouts of *Dancers, Double Basses* and *Blue Dancer and Double Bass* are still unknown to this day.

But where did it go from there? Gouffé died in 1874, and it is then believed to have passed into the hands of Ludwig Manoly who was the student of Franz Simandl. Simandl was one of the very first pedagogues of the double bass instrument. He was most well known for his book *New Method for the Double Bass*, which is still widely used to this day. In 1889, Manoly would play this exact bass at the inauguration of the original New York Metropolitan Opera House. He was a principal for the New York Philharmonic and then went on to become a teacher at the Institute of Music and Art, which later became known as Juilliard. In 1930 Manoly would then pass the bass onto one of his students, Herman Reinshagen. Reinshagen also played as a principal in the New York Philharmonic.



In 1940, the bass was passed on to Frank Sollner who played for the NBC Symphony Orchestra under its famed conductor, Arturo Toscanini. Toscanini, who was said to have a photographic memory, suffered memory loss during their last performance on 4th April 1954 and never conducted in public again. When Toscanini retired, the orchestra was disbanded. However, many of the NBC Symphony Orchestra formed the Symphony of the Air, who often played without a conductor at all.

David Walter, who also played in the NBC Orchestra, would acquire Sollner's bass instrument in 1956. Walter took a leading roll in organising the Symphony of the Air, playing as not only the principal bass but also the board chairman. He went on to join the New York City Ballet where he played the instrument for more than 30 years. It was as a faculty member at Juilliard that Walter would meet and teach my good friend Mr Shinji Eshima. It would not be until nearly six years after his death that the instrument would then pass into his hands.

Shinji's debut performance with the Plumerel Bass would be in January 2008 at the 75th anniversary of the San Francisco ballet. I would not see the instrument until December that same year.

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Caroline and I awoke at eight, showered, ate and made our way towards Civic Center for the Christmas Eve performance of *The Nutcracker*, of which Peter would conduct the opening overture.

What began as talk has now become a reality. Peter will today make his debut in a Santa Suit. This is, of course, the work of Mr Shinji Eshima. Caroline and I are to meet them at the stage door of War Memorial Auditorium 45 minutes before the show. Both Peter and Shinji are smiling ear to ear as we arrive backstage. Familiar faces, some new, some old: tiny pint-sized ballerinas, principals, the orchestra, the make-up artist and stagehands, the flyman and the band.

We descend into the depths of the building, then rise again in the orchestra pit. Out before us, the empty audience. Peter steps to the plate and begins to conduct as he imagines his orchestra. In his hand, a gift from the most beautiful Susan Graham. As I stare up at him, I once again see not only the brilliance of Peter Brandenhoff, but his fear and solitude. Shinji smiles largely and laughs out loud as Peter pantomimes the notes before an empty orchestra. It's the deep belly laugh of a man in love with life. Looking up from the orchestra pit, I see the empty opera house just before the Eve of Christmas performance. When I take a seat, I can see neither the stage nor the audience... this is the way that Shinji views each and every performance.

Afterwards, he takes us to see the instrument I was once sent to examine in a Degas painting at the Musée d'Orsay. As he pulls the bass from its cabinet, I am thrilled and excited. The circle is now complete. He urges me to hold it, to feel the wood, and the notes it produces. He pulls the bow across the mighty strings, and then thrusts it into my hand. I love the way he not only plays the priceless instrument, but also how he wants to share it. He laughs joyfully as Caroline plucks out a few notes, and when I pull the bow across the strings, I know that for him too, the circle is complete. Pete stands by staring at us. His smile is large, as large as the bass and as broad as the humility of the man who now owns it.

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