

Giovanni Punto (1746-1803)

Giovanni Punto (aka Jan Václav Stich, Johann Wenzel Stich) was a virtuoso hornist (cor basse) who traveled most of Europe performing as a soloist and court musician. He composed many original works to display his unique virtuosity. Also an excellent violin player, Punto held positions in several orchestras as concertmaster.

Punto was born Jan Václav Stich in Zehušice, Bohemia, the son of a serf on the estate of Count Joseph Johann von Thun. He was taught singing, violin, and horn while growing up. Count Thun then sent him to study with Joseph Matiegka in Prague, Jan Schindelarz in Munich, and A. J. Hampel in Dresden. From Hampel, he learned hand-stopping technique, which he later improved and extended.

Stich returned to the rural estate of Count Thun and served for four years, but he acquired a reputation as a troublemaker. At the age of 20, he and four friends left the estate to find a better life. The Count sent soldiers after them with orders to knock out Stich's front teeth so he couldn't play horn again, but the runaways eluded the soldiers and escaped into the Holy Roman Empire, where Stich Italianized his name and became Giovanni Punto.

Punto played with the orchestra of the Prince of Hechingen, Germany, then in the Mainz court orchestra, and then toured Europe and England as a soloist. Charles Burney heard him play in Koblenz in 1772 and reported: "The Elector has a good band, in which M. Punto, the celebrated French horn from Bohemia, whose taste and astonishing execution were lately so applauded in London, is a performer."

Punto's use of hand stopping was criticized by some in London, probably because this technique was still novel in London at the time. He returned to London in 1777 and taught the horn players in the private orchestra of King George III. On his last trip to London in 1788, he performed at Gertrude Elizabeth Mara's vocal concerts in the Pantheon, where he met a friend of Mozart's, Michael Kelly, who noted the occasion in his own Reminiscences.

During this time, Punto played as soloist and with many court orchestras. He met Mozart in Paris in 1778. Mozart wrote to his father that "Punto plays magnifique" and composed the Sinfonia Concertante K. 297B (now lost) for him and other noted soloists (flute, oboe, and bassoon). Punto apparently contracted with Paris publishers during this visit since from this time forward nearly all his works were published in Paris editions. Previously his works were listed in Breitkopf's catalog.

Punto wanted a permanent position and a chance to conduct. After a short time in the service of the Prince Archbishop of Würzburg in 1781, he became concertmaster for the Comte d'Artois (later to become Charles X of France) in Paris. In 1787 he took a leave of absence to tour as soloist in the Rhineland.

Back in Paris for the start of the French Revolution (1789), he became the conductor of the Théâtre des Variétés Amusantes and stayed for ten years. In 1799, after failing to obtain a position at the newly founded conservatory, he moved to Munich and then to Vienna. In Vienna he met Beethoven, who wrote his Op. 17 Sonata for Horn and Piano for the both of them to premiere on 18 April 1800 at the Burgtheater. The following month they played the work again in Pest, Hungary, where a local music critic commented: "Who is this Beethoven? His name is not known to us. Of course, Punto is very well known."

Punto returned to his homeland in 1801 after 33 years away. He played a concert in the National Theater in Prague. The Prague neue Zeitung reported, "Punto received enthusiastic applause for his concertos because of his unparalleled mastery, and respected musicians said that they had never before heard horn playing like it...In his cadenzas he produced many novel effects, playing two and even three-part chords. It demonstrated again that our fatherland can produce great artistic and musical geniuses.

In 1802, after a short trip to Paris, Punto developed pleurisy, a common illness of wind players of the times. He was ill for five months, and finally passed away on 16 February 1803. He was given a magnificent funeral in the Church of St. Nicholas before thousands of people, so great was his fame at the time. Mozart's Requiem was performed at the graveside. His tomb was inscribed: "Punto received all the applause. As the Muse of Bohemia applauded him in life, so did she mourn him in death."

Like many soloists of the time, Punto composed pieces that displayed his own talents and virtuosity. He was a cor basse player, using a silver cor solo made for him in 1778 in Paris. Works composed by and for him show that he was a master of quick arpeggios and stepwise passagework. Punto was acclaimed as a virtuoso of the highest order, considered to be the finest horn player to date, and perhaps of all time.

Among his works are found 16 horn concerti (nos. 9, 12, 13, 15 and 16 lost), a two-horn concerto, a clarinet concerto, a horn sextet, 21 horn quartets, 47 horn trios, and 103 horn duos. Punto also revised Hampel's horn tutor manual and wrote a book on daily exercises for the horn.

*From:
International Horn Society*

*Honorary Life Members and
Celebrated Horn Players of the
Past*