



Early History of the Violin (1520-1650)

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[Violin Maker Jan F. Vesely](#) (Czech republic)

- **The Pochette:** Jacques Regnault, Georg Wörle, Matthias Wörle, Johannes Rauch, anonymous 17th century. Surface finish: Amber Oil Varnish or Spirit Varnish.
- **The Alt Viola da Gamba:** Henry Jaye, Jan F. Vesely. Tenor Viola da Gamba: Jan F. Vesely. Surface finish: Amber Oil Varnish or Spirit Varnish.

Relatively little is known about the violin before 1600, though the true violin was popular at village fêtes, taverns, in homes, and at aristocratic court functions such as the French ballet, English masque, and Italian intermedio. Its power of rhythmic articulation and penetrating tone was used extensively for dance music. Instrumental music was modeled on forms derived from vocal models not idiomatic to the violin, which was also used to double or accompany vocal parts. The real potential of the violin was not exploited until the 17th century when the Italians wrote sonatas. With the possible exception of Orlando di Lasso, no great composers wrote for violins until Gabrielli and Monteverdi. The two uses of violins contrast sharply; on the one hand, the undignified and festive use of violins for dancing, (jamming), with no music in sight; and on the other, the serious use of violins for religious or semi-religious purposes, in church, say, with

instruments held at the neck and longer bows. The unwritten tradition of improvisation is comparable to the early history of jazz, the violinist being much like the sax player. In the area of dancing, the violins gradually drove the rebecs from court. (See [The Rebec Project](#).)

Violin playing was not considered a lady-like or gentlemanly pursuit; violinists were considered to be a species of servant, and the violin had little social or musical prestige. It was considered a lowly instrument played mostly by professionals. In time, however, it spread through every class. The formation of the "24 Violins of the King," in France, symbolized increased social prestige.

"Virtuous" people (aristocratic amateurs), according to Jambe de Fer (see below) passed their time playing the viol, a family of instruments unrelated to the violins which persisted for 150 years after the violins came into being, and fell into neglect when polyphonic music went out of style. All viols (lira da gamba) were played held downward, larger ones between the legs and smaller ones on the knees, and the bow was held underhand. The violins developed independently.

Though hybrid instruments continued to exist some time after the emergence of the violin, its origins are said to have been the rebec, the Renaissance fiddle, and the lira da braccio. The rebec dates back to the 13th century and consisted of a family of treble (discant), alto-tenor, and bass instruments. It was pear-shaped, and without a soundpost; the neck and pegbox were integral parts of the instrument. There were no overhanging edges, no frets, and the three strings were tuned in fifths. The sound of this instrument is said to have been smaller than the violins, with a nasal, oboe-like quality. The bow was held overhand. The Renaissance fiddle, c. 1500, had five strings, (one a drone), and frets. Shaped like the violin, it had a top and back with connecting ribs, a separate neck and fingerboard, and it was in the soprano register. Close to the violin body outline, the lira da braccio was designed in several sizes; its bouts made it easier to bow than the rebec. Like the violin, it had an arched back and top, overlapping edges, ribs, a sound post, and f or c-shaped sound holes. It had seven strings, two of which were drones.

By a kind of organic, triangulative process between craftsmen, players, and composers, early violins came into existence around 1520 in northern Italy. The 4-stringed "true" violin family was complete in its basic structural features - though not standardized - around 1550. (Jambe de Fer described them explicitly in his *Epitome Musical*. Lyons, 1556.) The controversy over who invented the first violin is probably not answerable; Gasparo da Saló was a candidate, as were several Brescian craftsmen. It is now generally accepted that da Saló was not the inventor since he wasn't born until 1540. Better candidates are Giovan Giacobba dalla Corna and Zanetto de Michelis da Montichiario, both born in the 1480s. It is, however, clear that Andrea Amati perfected the form. Similar instruments in France and Poland suggest the far-reaching influence of the Italian Renaissance. Native schools of violin-making existed in Cremona and Brescia, and also in Paris and Lyon; but this had to do with the trade routes (and the silk trade) from Venice to Paris. Changes in the violin after 1600 were largely decorative.

Early violins could be either 1/4" shorter or 1/2" longer than the modern 14" (35.5 cm) instrument. Pegboxes sometimes ended in carved heads instead of scroll. The neck is shorter, projects at right angles from the body, and the fingerboard is shorter (by 2 1/2"), with a wedge

between neck and fingerboard. The bridge is both lower and rounder. Open strings were used when possible, and the more yielding hair of the old bow made it easier to sustain triple stops at forte. The modern chinrest was unknown, and the violin was held at the neck; perspiration marks on either side of the tailpiece indicate the chin held the instrument there. In dance music, the instrument was often or usually held lower.

While the Tourte bow rendered the older bows obsolete and of no commercial value (therefore none exist today), the older violins were carefully preserved, though apart from rare exceptions, usually opened and altered with modern fittings, including neck, fingerboard, bridge, bass-bar, sound-post, strings, chinrest and E tuner. Because of the lower tension, the old bass bar was shorter and lighter and the soundpost thinner. Early (convex) bows varied greatly in shape, and the modern frog was predated by various attempted solutions to holding the narrower ribbon of hair in place. The modern Tourte bow, with its logarithmic inward curvature, cannot be pressed too deeply in the middle, or the wood will be scraped by the strings. Baroque bows did not have this problem, though the degree of curvature began to decrease at the end of the 17th century.

Early in the 16th century the advantages of combining from its predecessors the greater sonority, the easier and more efficient playing and tuning, and the more sensible fingering were discovered. The new instruments were easier to carry at dances, weddings and mummeries (theatrical productions including masked figures), and their sound "carried well," which was important for dancing. Many musicians played both old and newer instruments, and technical practices were borrowed from the old.

Though the Baroque violin was considered "beaucoup plus rude en son" (Jambe de Fer, 1556), it was, by our standards, less intense, purer, reedier and more transparent. Gimping, or the practice of using gut strings overspun with fine copper or silver wire, was not practiced until the early 18th century. Strings were gut, (for this reason the G was unresponsive, and seldom used), and gauges were not known, though violin strings were stronger and thicker than viol strings.

Early Baroque violin music, (of which there is very little before the turn of the century, and that in the last 20 years, and not idiomatic), seldom ventures beyond the third position. (The first written music designated with a violin part is that of a Royal French wedding in 1581.) Therefore the usual range was d'-b" or c", (since the low G was seldom used)--the typical range of the soprano voice. Though lute players were encouraged to play "beyond the frets," the short, fat neck of the violin did not encourage playing in upper positions, and made it more difficult to use the fourth finger; the momentary robustness of open strings was not uncommon.

There were no accepted standards of pitch; string players were regularly told to tune their instruments up as high as they would go, (Agricola, 1528) and pitch varied from town to town and even from one organ to another within a church. Nor was there any equally tempered tuning system. There was probably a distinction between harmonic pairs of notes, but it worked opposite to what it is today. (For example, violinists today think of F#, say, as a sort of leading tone to G, and the F# is played higher than the upper enharmonic. The reverse was true in the Baroque.)

Nor was there any standardization in the way the bow of the violin was held. As mentioned

above, the violin was held in a more relaxed position while dance music was played on the breast or arm, (hence, the distinction "lira da braccio,") and held at the neck for more serious music. The bow was held in two styles; that of the French -- very different than the modern way -- with the thumb under the hair and not between the bow and stick, as in the second, or Italian way, which is said to be entirely similar to modern teaching, such as that of Carl Flesch.

The animated styles of dancing and the short bows were made for an articulated style, unlike the "endless bow" idea of modern practice. Vibrato was not continuous, but used as expressive ornamentation. (Our wide and continuous vibrato would have been disruptive.) No fingerings have been found before 1600 even for such simple music that exists. Playing in the higher positions seems unlikely, considering the way the instrument was held in dance music. (From the modern viewpoint, second position is excellent to use, particularly in sequential passages.) However, there was more to violin music than the extant pieces indicate. So much money was spent on fine instruments, and this is not compatible with the idea of primitive instruments and technique. Orchestral and chamber parts were not required to go above the third position, but virtuoso pieces were another matter. Some advance technique may have been lost because it was considered a professional secret.

After 1600, violin players built on the technical achievements of the viol players, and the practice advanced rapidly. Monteverdi's operatic writing included idiomatic sections with comparatively sophisticated technique. After 1610, the advent of the violin sonata, the formative period of violin practice ended and a new technical virtuosity came about in response to an age which produced Galileo, Kepler, Bacon, Descartes, Newton and Harvey. (And anticipated by da Vinci and manifested in the Reformation.) The rise of opera and instrumental forms not subordinate to the voice is analogous to the gradual subordination of religious to secular authority. Musicians were usually lower-middle class, and traditionally from long lines of musical families; socially, the lot of the musician varied from little better than beggar to that of the Royal musicians, who enjoyed fine clothes, salaries, and some measure of security. Even the ordinary musician was protected by unions in both France and England. During the early 17th century, the preeminence of violin making continued in Brescia and Cremona, and Biagio Marini of Brescia (1597-1665) was the most important composer of violin music of the time; he and contemporaries such as Dario Castello, Salomone Rossi, Maurizio Cazzati, and Marco Uccellini experimented with purely instrumental forms. The sonata -- most advanced of instrumental forms -- came from the old practice of doubling vocal parts of a chanson, one of the principle Renaissance forms.

Marini's work is calculated in terms of the violin; the rapid passages fit the hand, particularly in descending or ascending sequences and arpeggios and broken chords involving playing back and forth across strings. Marini used the "stile concitato," predating Monteverdi, and experimented extensively in double - and triple-stops. (Capriccio per Sonare il Violino con tre corde a mondo di lira, Op. 8.) His scordatura was written at pitch, leaving the player to work out the fingerings. (Most later scordatura works were written in "hand-grip" notation.)

Other special affects of the Baroque were the use of pizzicati like that used in Monteverdi's operas (not called such), the mute, col legno, sul ponticello and sulla tastiera. Harmonics may or may not have been known, and the matter is not settled. Two types of ornaments were used; (a)

those with specific names, such as the trill, mordent, vibrato and (b) those which constituted some improvised melodic formulae. The practice of adding passages to the written score was so common that sometimes composers felt it was necessary to add "come sta senza passaggi." Since the demands of dance music were chiefly rhythmic, it is not known if violin practice included ornamental elaboration like the diminutions and passaggi of Francesco Rogniono. (Selva de varii passaggi secondo l'uso moderno. Milan, 1620.)

All of these physical characteristics contributed to a sound which was altogether less assertive, less massive, and more edgy, pungent, and colorful. "Just as the painter imitates nature," (wrote Ganasssi, in "Regola Rubertina," the only detailed treatise on string playing in the 16th century; Ganassi was a professional viol player,) "so wind and string players should imitate the human voice." Vibrato on long notes must have been combined with dynamic nuance, and the *messa di voce* probably carried over into string practice.

Though if one sees a lot of dynamic markings in a Baroque piece, and it may be inferred that they were put there by the editor, they nevertheless existed from the start of the period and increased in frequency throughout. Performers considered them hints, however, and dynamics are properly used for structural shaping, to delineate the form by terraced fortes and pianos, and to mold the texture within the form. This may cause a built-in echo effect, as in some of Marini's sonatas, particularly the Sonata in Echo for three violins, Op. 8. (Composed in Germany and published in Vienna. Marini was concertmaster to Schutz.) Agogic accents were probably used for expression, but no mention is made of the audible shifting or portamento so usual in modern playing; the practice was that several shifts were preferred over one big one. Marini's greatest contribution lies in his purposeful adaptation of vocal style to idiomatic violin writing. *Affetti Musicali*, the title of Op. 1 (1617) may be said to indicate that the affections could be moved (that all-embracing Baroque ideal) by means of instruments alone. The Sonate in d-moll (a sonata for violin and cello with organ or harpsichord) well illustrates the Baroque form, idiomatic composition, and the use of *affetti*.

The sonata is in three movements: Grave/Allego/Moderate. All three movements are imitative; that is, the slow (and serious) opening (white note) phrases in the cello are answered rhythmically and melodically by the violin in measures 8-11. This imitative faculty is repeated one beat apart in 16th notes (idiomatic to the violin, as they lay so well within the hand and would, I think, be unlikely as vocal exercise), at measures 17, 24 and 26.

This practice is continued in the Seconda part, the cello's opening phrases repeated by the violin in measure 35, 39, 48. Though diminution and *affetti* may certainly have been included at moments not suggested by the score, they are specifically suggested in this movement by the fanfare-like configuration of measures 59-72. (Dynamic markings are probably the editor's.) How this solo actually was played can only be deduced according to the skill and imagination of the performer.

Movement three (*terza parte*) is, again, imitative, but unlike the other movements, is in triple meter. Hemiola is used characteristically in measures 75, 90-94 and 100-102. Starting around measure 90, a brilliant, fiery, "concitato" tension is built, culminating in the high c-b-d-b 16th note figure in the violin, measure 95, which calms down slowly in the alternating eighth note-

quarter note figures, measures 96-98.

The Baroque ideal is an arch of sound, appropriately well-sustained and well-proportioned. For Baroque music to get airborne, the line must soar. The bow is like the breath of a singer. To quote Donington (p. 88): "Phrases generally go to a peak note, which is often though not always the highest note, and then relax to a note given away at the end. There is the unit; that much, and no less nor more, is the phrase; and it is for our own musicianship to recognize the fact. Nothing in the notation and nothing in the historical evidence, is going to show us the pattern if our own musicianship does not." To achieve this, the modern violinist (with modern instrument) would have to slow down the bow, use less of it, and play into the string with the hair a little flatter and near the bridge. Donington remarks: it can be done.

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