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The Violoncello da Spalla: Shouldering the Cello in the Baroque Era*

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DURING THE LAST QUARTER OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, in the context of a flourishing musical culture in the northern-Italian region of Emilia, cellist-composers such as Domenico Gabrielli, Giuseppe Jacchini, Antonio Bononcini, and Domenico Galli produced some of the earliest compositions written specifically for the solo violoncello. These works and others by Emilian composers constitute an invaluable source for the study of early violoncello music during the period in which the term “violoncello” came into use. But the exact nature of the instrument for which these composers wrote and upon which they played is by no means certain, and perhaps too easily we assume that the late-*Seicento* violoncello is identical or at least similar to the modern violoncello. Figure 1, for example, shows a woodcut depiction of a cellist from the violoncello part of one of Jacchini’s publications, and the familiar image depicted bolsters the notion that “violoncello” as used during the late *Seicento* means largely what “cello” does to the present-day reader.¹

Organological studies of the last two decades, however, have detailed the complexity of the early history of the violoncello, whose immediate

*I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Michael Talbot to this article. Professor Talbot brought an indispensable sketch and a crucial documentary source to my attention, both of which considerably strengthen and enrich the arguments of this study.

1. This woodcut appears as the frontispiece of the violoncello part to Giuseppe Jacchini, *Concerti per Camera à Violino, e Violoncello Solo*, Op. 3 (Modena: Rosati, 1697). This print is listed as 1697c in Claudio Sartori, *Bibliografia della musica strumentale italiana stampata in Italia fino al 1700* (2 vols., Florence: Olschki, 1952–68). Although we easily recognize the instrument in fig. 1 as a violoncello, there are two noteworthy differences between the playing technique of this depiction and modern cello technique: the instrument of the engraving rests on the floor without an endpin; and the performer is shown using an underhand bow grip that is more commonly associated with the viol family of instruments.



FIGURE 1. Woodcut of a violoncellist, 1697 (Jacchini, Op. 3, frontispiece of violoncello partbook).

ancestry and emergence pose daunting questions.² In short, the bass member of the violin family was known by several different names and

2. Stephen Bonta has investigated the relationship of the violoncello to its various antecedents in a series of articles, including "From Violone to Violoncello: A Question of Strings?" this JOURNAL 3 (1977): 64–99; and "Terminology for the Bass Violin in Seventeenth-Century Italy," *ibid.* 4 (1978): 5–42. In addition to Bonta's, three other studies add to our knowledge of bass string instruments of the late-seventeenth century: Henry Burnett, "The Bowed String Instruments of the Baroque Basso Continuo

existed in several different forms.³ The purpose of this study is to extend our knowledge of the early violoncello even further by examining the enigmatic “violoncello da spalla.” At issue is a particular manner of playing the bass violin, or possibly a variant instrument, that gave rise to this term. In some cases this shoulder-held instrument was also known to *Seicento* musicians simply as “violoncello,” thereby disturbing the assumption that the term “violoncello” in a partbook of the period necessarily means the familiar cello and its playing technique that we recognize today.

Documentary Evidence

The trail of documentary evidence begins in the Emilian city of Ferrara, specifically with the treatise written there by Bartolomeo Bismantova, a *musico* in the Ferrarese Accademia della Morte, and a virtuoso cornettist. Bismantova’s treatise, *Compendio Musicale*, which survives in manuscript, was written in 1677 with revisions made in 1694.⁴ It contains information, not only on such musical concepts as notation, intervals, the modes, and the psalm tones, but also on singing and the playing of several musical instruments. *Compendio Musicale* therefore appears to be precisely what its title implies, a compendium of musical information, probably designed to aid any *maestro di cappella* in carrying out his duties as ensemble leader, teacher, and composer.

Among the musical instruments that Bismantova discusses are the *violino*, the *violoncello da spalla*, and the *contrabasso o violone grande*—the latter added in the 1694 revision. Examples 1 and 2 show the tuning and left-hand fingering given by Bismantova for the violin and violoncello da spalla, respectively. Bismantova’s tunings are nearly identical to modern

in Italy and France (Ca. 1680–Ca. 1752),” *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 8 (1971): 29–63; Tharald Borgir, *The Performance of the Basso Continuo in Italian Baroque Music* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1971; revised and expanded, Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1987); and Peter Allsop, “The Role of the Stringed Bass as a Continuo Instrument in Italian Seventeenth-Century Instrumental Music,” *Chelys* 8 (1978–79): 31–37.

3. As Bonta details in “Terminology for the Bass Violin,” the etymological roots of the word “violoncello” reveal something of the instrument’s complicated origins. The word itself contains both an augmentative ending (-one) and a diminutive (-cello), signifying that the instrument is a smaller version of the large (bass) member of the violin family, the *violone*. Other forms that convey the same meaning existed during the seventeenth century: *violoncino*, for example, appears in several Venetian sources from the latter half of the century.

4. Bartolomeo Bismantova, *Compendio Musicale* (MS, Ferrara, 1677; facsimile edition, Florence: Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1978).

G: solreut 0 1 2 3

D: lasolre 0 1 2 3

A: lamire 0 1 2 3

E: lami 0 1 2 3 4

The diagram shows the tuning and left-hand fingering chart for the Violino. It consists of four horizontal lines representing the strings: G (solreut), D (lasolre), A (lamire), and E (lami). Above each line are fingerings: 0, 1, 2, 3 for G; 0, 1, 2, 3 for D; 0, 1, 2, 3 for A; and 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 for E. Below the strings is a treble clef staff with notes: G4 (open), A4 (1), B4 (2), C5 (3), D5 (open), E5 (1), F5 (2), G5 (3), A5 (4), B5 (5).

EXAMPLE 1. Bartolomeo Bismantova, *Compendio Musicale* (MS, 1677): tuning and left-hand fingering chart for *Violino*.

D: lasolre 0 1 2

G: solreut 0 1 2 3

D: lasolre 0 1 2 3

A: lamire 0 1 2 3 4

The diagram shows the tuning and left-hand fingering chart for the Violoncello da Spalla. It consists of four horizontal lines representing the strings: D (lasolre), G (solreut), D (lasolre), and A (lamire). Above each line are fingerings: 0, 1, 2 for D; 0, 1, 2, 3 for G; 0, 1, 2, 3 for D; and 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 for A. Below the strings is a bass clef staff with notes: D3 (open), E3 (1), F3 (2), G3 (3), A3 (open), B3 (1), C4 (2), D4 (3), E4 (4), F4 (5).

EXAMPLE 2. Bartolomeo Bismantova, *Compendio Musicale* (MS, 1677): tuning and left-hand fingering chart for *Violoncello da Spalla*.

practice for both instruments; the only difference is the lowest string on the violoncello, which in Bismantova's treatise is tuned to *D*, a whole-step higher than on the modern-day cello.⁵

The fingering given for the violoncello da spalla attracts our further attention because it illustrates a diatonic left-hand fingering technique that preceded the chromatic fingering used on the modern cello. For example, the fingering of the A string on the violoncello da spalla requires that the cellist cover a perfect fourth between the fingers of the left hand, spanning a half-step, whole-step, and whole-step between the four fingers, respectively. Such a fingering is wholly outside of modern

5. Bismantova, 119, also indicates the possibility of tuning the lowest string down to C, if necessary.

cello technique: the normal left-hand position spans a minor third on a string while the extended hand-position spans a major third. This earlier left-hand technique reveals an approach to the violoncello that transferred violin fingering to the larger instrument even though the longer vibrating string length made such a fingering difficult on the violoncello.

Neither the diatonic fingering nor the option to tune the low string to D, however, particularly distinguish Bismantova's description of the violoncello da spalla; instead, it is his use of the term "da spalla" in conjunction with the violoncello that marks this instrument as unique. The designation "da spalla" recalls the basic distinction between the violin and viol families of instruments, called *da braccio* and *da gamba*, respectively.⁶ At first glance, *da spalla* appears to be another way of indicating *da braccio*, therefore connoting the violin family (*viola da braccio*) as opposed to the viol family (*viola da gamba*). Adriano Cavicchi, in his study of instrumental technique as represented in *Compendio Musicale*, construes just such a meaning in Bismantova's appellation "violoncello da spalla."⁷ As Cavicchi says, "[o]ne obviously understands our violoncello, called *da spalla* because of its probable derivation from the family of 'violetti da braccio.'"⁸

Elizabeth Cowling gives an opposing reading of "violoncello da spalla" in her study, *The Cello*, wherein she interprets the term "violoncello da spalla" literally to mean a shoulder-held cello.⁹ She turns to a sixteenth-century French source, the *Epitome Musical* by Philibert Jambe de Fer, for proof that string players since the Renaissance played the bass violin—known to Jambe de Fer as "le Bas"—at shoulder height with the help of a strap.¹⁰ Although the practice that Jambe de Fer describes may well point to a significant precedent for the violoncello da spalla, the terms "violoncello" and "violoncello da spalla" did not exist before the latter half of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the violoncello da spalla was a recent invention in 1677, so that turning to Jambe de Fer

6. *Spalla* literally means "shoulder" in Italian, but its use in musical contexts has some interesting meanings. In current usage, for example, the Italian term for "concertmaster" is *primo violino da spalla* or simply *la spalla*.

7. Adriano Cavicchi, "Prassi strumentale in Emilia nell'ultimo quarto del Seicento: Flauto Italiano, cornetto, archi," *Studi Musicali* 2 (1973): 111–43, 140, n. 41.

8. *Ibid.*: "[s]'intende ovviamente il nostro Violoncello, chiamato *da Spalla* per probabile derivazione dalla famiglia delle 'violetti da Braccio'."

9. Elizabeth Cowling, *The Cello* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1975), 45. Oddly, Cowling does not mention Bismantova, who, as far as I know, provides the only reference we have to the violoncello da spalla.

10. *Ibid.*, 55.

for an explanation of Bismantova's term of a century later seems less than satisfactory.

To her credit, Cowling is correct in not interpreting *da spalla* as a synonym for *da braccio*. Sources chronologically closest to Bismantova's treatise show that the modifiers *da braccio* and *da spalla* were not at all interchangeable as Cavicchi assumes. A discussion of musical instruments from 1706 by the theorist Zaccaria Tevo, for example, makes a clear distinction between violas *da braccio*, *da spalla*, and *da gamba*:

Instruments in use are violins, cornettos, and trumpets, which play the highest parts; violas da braccio, which play the alto and tenor parts; violas da gamba and da spalla, bassoons, and trombones, which play the bass part; and violones and theorbos, which play the continuo. With ... these instruments are played large compositions, such as Psalms and Masses.¹¹

According to Tevo, the viola da braccio plays both alto and tenor parts.¹² The viola da spalla, however, is classified as a bass instrument, distinct not only from the viola da braccio but also from the viola da gamba. We may therefore conclude that for musicians in Tevo's time *da spalla* and *da braccio* were not interchangeable designations that simply connoted "violin family," but instead that they were distinctions of size given to specific violin-family instruments. Yet if Tevo's description clearly distinguishes the modifiers *da spalla* and *da braccio*, he uses *da spalla* only to distinguish one kind of viola from two others and not as a synonym for

11. Zaccaria Tevo, *Il Musico Testore* (Venice: Bortoli, 1706), 309: "gl'Istrumenti, che si usano sono li Violini, li Cornetti, e le Trombe, che suonano le parti sopra acute. Le Viole da braccio, che suonano le parti dell'Alto, e Tenore, le Viole da gamba, e da spalla, li Fagotti, e Tromboni, che suonano la parte del Basso, e li Violoni, e Tiorbe che suonano il Basso continuo. Con ... questi istrumenti, si formano le compositioni grosse, come Salmi, e Messe." I would like to thank Prof. Michael Talbot for bringing this source to my attention.

12. Partbooks from several mid- to late-seventeenth-century prints distinguish between different types of viola, *alto viola* and *tenore viola* being the most common. See Sartori, *Bibliografia*, 1654a, 1665a, 1667a, 1671f, 1678b, 1684b, 1685f, 1685j, 1691h, and 1700g for the frequent occurrences of the tenor viola in prints of instrumental music. Simone F. Sacconi, *The Secrets of Stradivari*, trans. Andrew Dipper and Cristina Rivaroli (Cremona: Libreria del Convegno, 1979), 3 and 21, contains illustrations of Stradivari's distinct patterns for the alto and tenor violas, which provide evidence of distinct sizes of instruments correlating to the alto and tenor parts. David D. Boyden, "The Tenor Violin: Myth, Mystery, or Misnomer?" *Festschrift Otto Erich Deutsch*, ed. Walter Gerstenberg, Jan LaRue, and Wolfgang Rehm (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1962), 273–79, argues, however, that listings of alto and tenor violas in seventeenth-century sources refer in both cases to c-tuned violas that were played in different registers. Violas of various sizes, therefore, were probably all tuned *c*, *g*, *d'*, *a'*: the larger models were considered suitable for tenor parts; the smaller, for alto parts.

violoncello. The meaning of the modifier *da spalla* thus emerges more clearly for us, but the exact nature of the violoncello da spalla still remains mysterious. In fact, we are now confronted with two unfamiliar bass instruments, Bismantova's violoncello da spalla and Tevo's viola da spalla.

Probing further into Tevo's use of the term "viola" begins to untangle the evidence relating to the *da spalla* category of strings. Further along in his treatise, in a discussion of instruments that make up a typical four-part ensemble, Tevo writes:

It seems that ordinarily one would make use of the following instruments: two violins for the highest part, a viola da braccio for the contralto part, and a viola—or bassoon or trombone—for the bass, [all of] which may serve together *à quattro*.¹³

In this passage, "viola da braccio" seemingly corresponds to an alto viola and "viola" without any modifier indicates some sort of bass instrument. This use of "viola" to mean a bass violin was by no means uncommon in northern Italy during this period: for example, in 1673 Giovanni Buonaventura Viviani published a set of sonatas for two violins, viola, and continuo, in which the "viola" part is the string equivalent of the continuo line, a role usually handled by the violoncello in more recent eras.¹⁴ In his study of *Seicento* terminology for the bass member of the violin family, Stephen Bonta finds that the use of "viola" to designate the bass violin is particularly common in Venetian sources.¹⁵

Since Tevo's treatise was published in Venice, this explains his usage and raises the possibility that Bismantova's violoncello da spalla and Tevo's viola da spalla might have been the same instrument. Other Venetian sources show that "violoncello" (without modifier) and "viola da spalla" were in fact interchangeable. The composer Antonio Caldara,

13. Tevo, *Musico Testore*, 309: "[p]are che per ordinario si adoprino degl'Instrumenti, due Violini per la parte sopra acuta, una Viola da braccio per la parte del contralto, & una Viola, ò Fagotto, ò Trombone per la parte del Basso, li quali potranno servire à quattro."

14. Giovanni Buonaventura Viviani, *Suonate a 3. Due Violini, e Viola*, Op. 1 (Venice: Francesco Magni detto Gardano, 1673). The four partbooks are for *Violino primo* (treble clef), *Violino secondo* (treble clef), *Viola* (bass clef), and *Organo* (bass clef). See Sartori, *Bibliografia*, 1673b. Another example of this usage is Carlo Fedeli, *Suonate a due, e a tre, et Una a Quattro*, Op. 1 (Venice: Giosepe Sala, 1685); Sartori, 1685s. A further example, Giovanni Battista Mazzaferata, *Il Primo Libro delle Sonate a due Violini con un Bassetto Viola se piace*, Op. 5 (Bologna: Monti, 1674) uses the term "bassetto viola," thereby furnishing another variation on the association of "viola" with bass violin. See Sartori, 1674d.

15. Bonta, "Terminology for the Bass Violin," 36.

for example, is listed among the instrumentalists of San Marco as a performer on the viola da spalla (1688) and later on the violoncino (1694).¹⁶ On the title page of his Op. 1 sonatas, however, Caldara calls himself a violoncellist.¹⁷ While it is possible that Caldara played more than one instrument, he probably would have listed his various talents in his publications were this the case. Instead, it is most likely that he played only one instrument, which went by different names—viola da spalla, violoncino, and violoncello.

Drawing upon a wider range of sources, dictionary definitions for musical terms written in the early eighteenth century by German writers strengthen the association of violoncello and viola da spalla.¹⁸ In these sources, the viola da spalla is described as a variant of the violoncello and the *da spalla* modifier has a specific and literal meaning distinct from both *da braccio* and *da gamba*. The following entry for violoncello in Johann Mattheson's *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (1713) makes this clear:

The excellent *violoncello*, the *bassa viola*, and the *viola da spala* [*sic*] are small bass violins in comparison with the larger ones with five or six strings, upon which one can play all manner of rapid things, variations, and ornaments with less work than on the larger machines. Additionally, the *viola da spala*, or shoulder-violin produces a great effect when accompanying because it cuts through strongly and can express the notes clearly. A bass [line] cannot be brought out more distinctly and clearly than on this instrument. It is attached by a band to the chest and thrown at the same time on the right shoulder, and thus has nothing that in the least holds back or prevents its resonance.¹⁹

As seen here, the larger part of Mattheson's description of the violoncello is actually given over to the viola da spalla—spelled, however,

16. This information is drawn from tables compiled by Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi*, 3rd ed., rev. (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 342. See n. 3 above for a brief explanation of the etymological origins of the term "violoncino."

17. Antonio Caldara, *Suonate à tre, due Violini con Violoncello, e Parte per l'Organo*, Op. 1 (Venice: Giuseppe Sala, 1700); Sartori, *Bibliografia*, 1700e.

18. See Sybil Marcuse, *A Survey of Musical Instruments* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 538–39, for a brief overview of these and other sources that discuss the violoncello and its variants.

19. Johann Mattheson, *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg: Benjamin Schiller, 1713), 285: "Der hervorragende *Violoncello*, die *Bassa Viola* und *Viola di Spala*, sind kleine *Bass-Geigen*, in Vergleichung der grössern, mit 5 auch wol 6 Saiten, worauff man mit leichter Arbeit als auff den grossen *Machinen* allerhand geschwinde Sachen, *Variationes* und *Mannieren* machen kan; insonderheit hat die *Viola da Spala*, oder *Schulter-Violo* einen grossen *Effect* beim *Accompagnement*, weil sie stark durchschneiden und die *Tohne* rein *exprimiren* kan. Ein *Bass* kan nimmer *distincter* und deutlicher herausgebracht

with one *l*, as it is in all of the eighteenth-century German sources that discuss this instrument. Also, for Mattheson the viola da spalla is one of several types of bass violin, together with the violoncello and bassa viola. Each of these is a smaller type of bass violin, in comparison with the violone, which Mattheson describes as a “large bass violin.”²⁰

The difference between the violoncello and its variant, the viola da spalla, is striking: the latter, according to Mattheson, is strapped to the chest and “thrown” over the right shoulder. Viola da braccio, by contrast, is synonymous with violetta or viola, each signifying an instrument that is tuned a fifth lower than the violin.²¹ Viola di gamba [*sic*] is a six-stringed instrument known in French as the *basse de viole*, and this is obviously the bass viol that is known today as the viola da gamba.²²

From the definitions given by Tevo and Mattheson we can see that, generally speaking, Mattheson uses the generic term “viola” to mean an alto instrument whereas Tevo uses it to signify a bass. Both authors, however, carefully distinguish the three modifiers, *da braccio*, *da gamba*, and *da spalla*, and both describe the viola da spalla as a type of bass. In addition, *da spalla* was used by Mattheson literally to mean “shoulder-held,” and subsequent lexicographers—J. F. B. C. Majer, Johann Gottfried Walther, and Johann Philipp Eisel—simply copied or paraphrased Mattheson’s definition.²³ Walther, for example, adds a tuning at the end of his violoncello entry, which is otherwise identical to Mattheson’s, and it is probable that this tuning—*C, G, d, a* (i.e., the same as the modern-day cello)—is used for each of instruments described therein, including the viola da spalla.²⁴ Majer adds to Mattheson’s description that the instrument (he does not specify which one) is also held between the legs

werden als auff diesem *Instrument*. Es wird mit einem Bande an der Brust befestiget, und gleichsam auff die rechte Schulter geworffen, hat also nichts, daß seinen *Resonanz* im geringsten auffhält oder verhindert.”

20. *Ibid.*, 285–86; the original German term is “grosse Bass-Geige.”

21. *Ibid.*, 283.

22. *Ibid.*, 284.

23. Joseph Friedrich Bernhard Caspar Majer, *Neu-Eröffneter theoretisch- und praktischer Music-Saal* (Halle: G. M. Majer, 1732; facsimile edition, Michaelstein: Kultur- und Forschungsstätte, 1991); Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musikalisches Lexicon oder musikalische Bibliothek* (Leipzig: Wolfgang Deer, 1732; facsimile edition, ed. Richard Schaal, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1953); and Johann Philipp Eisel, *Musicus Autodidaktos: oder der sich selbst informirende Musicus* (Erfurt: J. M. Funcken, 1738; facsimile, Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der Deutsche Demokratische Republik, 1976).

24. Walther, *Musikalisches Lexicon*, 637.

by many performers.²⁵ We may therefore infer that the distinction between violoncello and viola da spalla is, according to German sources, probably a matter of how the instrument is held; violoncello, viola da spalla, and bassa viola are otherwise synonyms. In fact, a few decades later yet another German writer, Jacob Adlung, explicitly equates the viola di spala [*sic*] with the violoncello.²⁶

To summarize the evidence discussed thus far, several points begin to clarify the relationship between the violoncello da spalla, viola da spalla, and violoncello. First, Bismantova furnishes a unique reference to the violoncello da spalla, and the fingering technique that he gives for this instrument differs significantly from that used for the modern violoncello. Second, in late-Seicento usage *da spalla* and *da braccio* were not interchangeable modifiers meaning “violin family”; instead, these terms denoted different sizes of violin-family instrument when used in conjunction with viola—viola da spalla signified a bass instrument whereas viola da braccio indicated an alto or tenor instrument. Third, the viola da spalla appears to have been synonymous with the violoncello or at least one version of it: according to Mattheson and other German sources, the viola da spalla was in fact defined as a shoulder-held equivalent of the violoncello—precisely as Cowling asserts on the basis of sixteenth-century evidence. Later, in the mid-eighteenth century, Adlung explicitly states that violoncello and viola da spalla were indeed two names for the same instrument.

The violoncello da spalla was therefore a shoulder-held instrument of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, a novelty in 1677 when Bismantova characterized it as “alla moderna.” Undoubtedly, the violoncello da spalla is the same instrument as that which was known as the viola da spalla in sources from the first half of the eighteenth century; and although it was held at shoulder height as the *da spalla* modifier suggests, the violoncello da spalla (or viola da spalla) was also known simply as a violoncello. There is little evidence in Italian or German sources to suggest that the physical characteristics of the shoulder-held instrument

25. Majer, *Music-Saal*, 99: “Es wird mit einem Band an der Brust befestiget, und gleichsam auf die rechte Schulter geworffen, von vielen aber wird sie zwischen beiden Beinen gehalten” [It is attached by a band to the chest and thrown at the same time on the right shoulder, but by many it is held between the two legs].

26. Jacob Adlung, *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit* (Erfurt: J. D. Jungnicol, 1758; facsimile edition, ed. Hans Joachim Moser, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1953), 599: “Violoncello hieß auch *Viola di Spala*.”

differed in any way from the modern violoncello; the distinction between the two instruments seems to lie only in the manner of holding them.

Iconographic Evidence

At this point, we may turn to the evidence that will furnish images to complement the descriptions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers about music. Figures 2 through 10 show various depictions of shoulder-held “cellos” from the latter half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth. Figure 2, a fresco by Gian Giacomo Barbelli from 1641, immediately contradicts the modern method of holding and playing the violoncello.²⁷ Although the instrument is not quite at shoulder height, it is played in roughly violin- or guitar-fashion with the neck of the instrument pointing down and away from the player’s head. We may also note that the bow is drawn from the instrument’s treble side, as occurs in playing the violin or viola.

An illustration that explicitly links a shoulder-held instrument with the term “violoncello” is found in Giuseppe Torelli’s *Concertino per Camera*, Op. 4 (1687) (figs. 3–6).²⁸ Torelli’s publication is unusual for its time because it is engraved rather than printed from moveable type as was the case with the vast majority of late-Seicento prints of music. Significantly, Carlo Buffagnotti, the engraver whose name is seen at the bottom right-hand corner of each of the two pages of music shown in figs. 3–4, was also a violoncellist: the membership records of the Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna show that he was admitted in 1695 at the rank of *suonatore*, and that his instrument was the “violoncello.”²⁹

27. This fresco by Barbelli decorates a corner just below the ceiling of the church of S. Maria delle Grazie in the Lombard town of Crema. It is reproduced with other seventeenth-century representations of musicians in an article by Elena Ferrari-Barassi, “Il ‘Far Musica’ in Alcune Raffigurazioni,” in *Seicento Inesplorato: Atti del III Convegno Internazionale sulla Musica in Area Lombardo-Padana del Secolo XVII*, ed. Alberto Colzani, Andrea Luppi, and Maurizio Padoan (Como: Antiquae Musicae Italicae Studiosi, 1993), 97–125.

28. Sartori, *Bibliografia*, post. al 1687. Although the print of Torelli’s Op. 4 bears no date, Sartori places it sometime after 1687 on the basis of Torelli’s preceding three publications, dated 1686, 1686, and 1687, respectively. Richard E. Norton, “The Chamber Music of Giuseppe Torelli” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1967), 36, has ascertained a date of 1687 for the composition of Torelli’s Op. 4 on the basis of a letter written by Giacomo Perti, a Bolognese colleague of Torelli.

29. Laura Callegari-Hill, *L’Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna, 1666–1800: Statuti, indici degli aggregati e catalogo degli esperimenti d’esame nell’archivio, con un’introduzione storica* (Bologna: Antiquae Musicae Italicae Studiosi, 1991), 183–335, contains membership lists of the Accademia Filarmonica. The record of Buffagnotti’s admittance into the academy appears on p. 195.

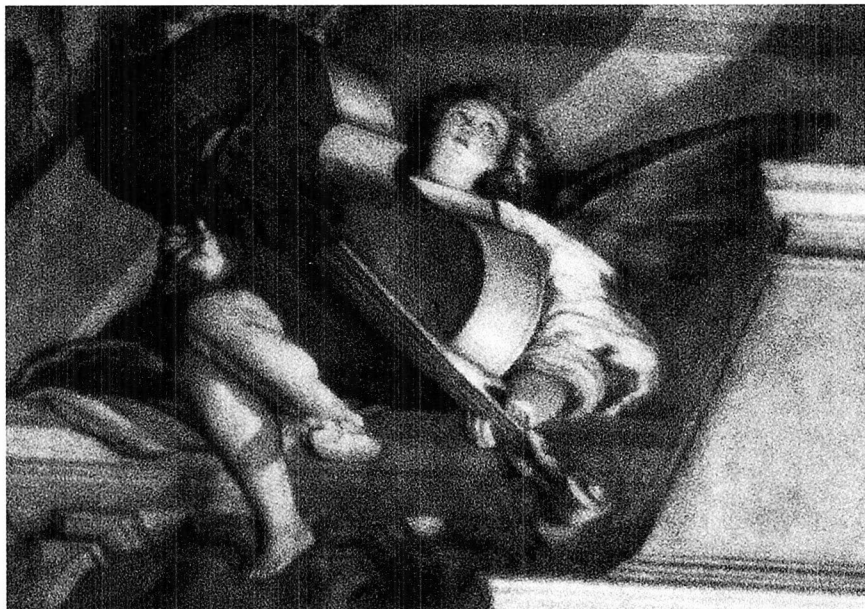


FIGURE 2. Detail from Gian Giacomo Barbelli, *Glorificazione di Maria*, 1641, Crema (Cremona), S. Maria delle Grazie.

Figures 3 and 4 show the first page of music for each of the two part-books of Torelli's Op. 4, one for *Violino* and one for *Violoncello*, respectively. In fig. 3, the first page of violin music, the decorated *P* for *Preludio* includes the figure of a violinist (see the enlargement in fig. 5). In fig. 4, the first page of violoncello music, the corresponding initial also includes the figure of a musician, who logic would suggest to be playing a violoncello. In fact, as may be seen more clearly in an enlargement (fig. 6) the "violoncellist" is shown playing an instrument resembling an oversized viola, whose lower end rests on his right shoulder while its scroll points diagonally toward the ground to the player's left. We cannot claim ignorance on the engraver's part because we know that he himself was a *suonatore di violoncello*. Rather, Buffagnotti's portrayal of a violoncellist corroborates both Bismantova's appellation *violoncello da spalla* and the descriptions of its equivalent, the *viola da spalla*, given in German sources.

Further evidence comes from a sketch by Giovanni Pistocchi (fig. 7) that was recently discovered by Michael Talbot³⁰ in the *Violino primo* part of

30. Michael Talbot, "Pistocchi Sketches Corelli (and Others)," *Studi Corelliani: Atti del Quinto Congresso Internazionale, Quaderni della Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* 33 (1996): 441–43.

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation. At the top left, there is a large, ornate initial letter 'P' containing a small illustration of a figure. To the right of this initial, the word 'Violino' is written in a cursive hand. The music is written on several staves, with various notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'p' and 'f'. A 'Presto' marking is visible at the top right. At the bottom right of the page, the signature 'Ces. Biffignoni fecit' is written.

FIGURE 3. Torelli, Op. 4, violin partbook, page 1.

Giovanni Maria Bononcini's Op. 3 (1669).³¹ Pistocchi himself was a violinist in the Bolognese church of San Petronio during the latter part of the

31. G. M. Bononcini, *Varii Fiori del Giardino Musicale, ovvero Sonate da Camera a 2. 3. e 4. col suo Basso Continuo*, Op. 3 (Bologna: Monti, 1669); Sartori, *Bibliografia*, 1669g.

FIGURE 4. Torelli, Op. 4, violoncello partbook, page 1.

seventeenth century;³² and, as Talbot points out, the sketch is most noteworthy because it includes a figure labeled “Archangelo” and shown with a violin, who must be Arcangelo Corelli.³³ In the context of this study, however, the “Bononcini” figure of the right-hand side of the sketch—

32. Talbot, “Pistocchi Sketches Corelli,” 441.

33. *Ibid.*, 443.

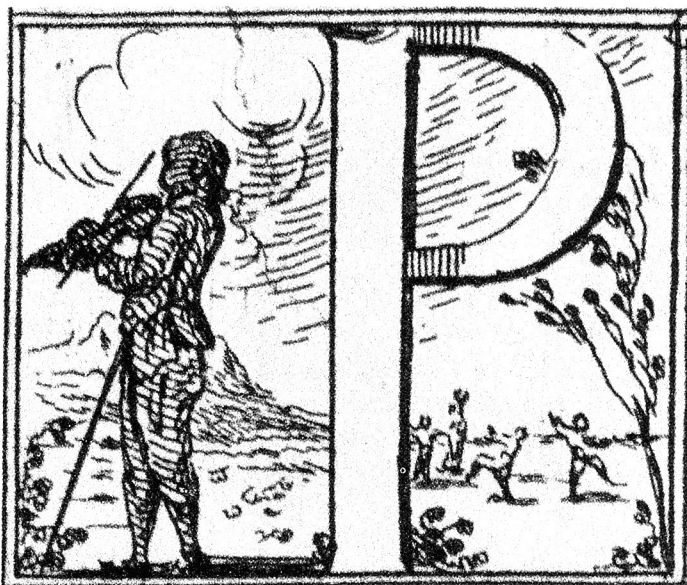


FIGURE 5. Torelli, Op. 4, detail from violin partbook, page 1.

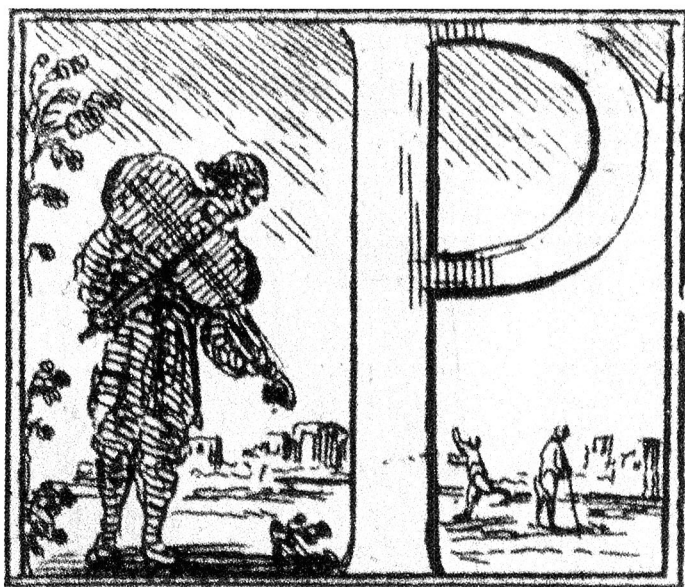


FIGURE 6. Torelli, Op. 4, detail from violoncello partbook, page 1.

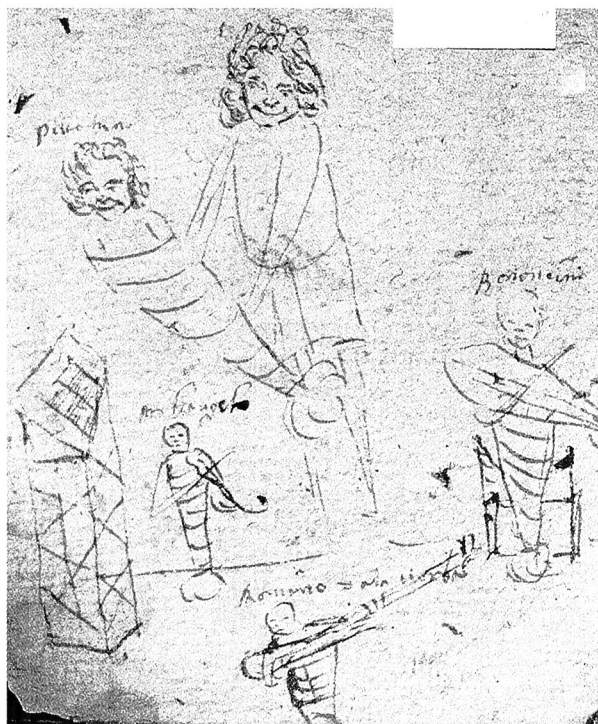


FIGURE 7. Sketch by Giovanni Pistocchi, c. 1669, in *violino primo* partbook of G. M. Bononcini, Op. 3 (copy in Bologna, Civico museo bibliografico musicale, shelf-mark X.111).

undoubtedly Giovanni Maria Bononcini, as Talbot also points out—stands apart as particularly illuminating. Talbot describes the “Bononcini” figure in the sketch as playing a violin (Bononcini was, after all, a violinist).³⁴ Nevertheless, on the basis of the documentary and iconographic evidence discussed so far, it is more plausible that the instrument Pistocchi drew with the “Bononcini” figure is a violoncello da spalla.

This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the other players, “Archangelo” and “Romano,”³⁵ appear to have instruments that are the

34. Ibid. In a communication of April 28, 1997, in response to my interpretation of the Pistocchi sketch, Professor Talbot agreed that the “Bononcini” figure was most likely not holding a violin. Specifically, Talbot noted that the instrument extends beyond Bononcini’s right shoulder rather than being held on his left shoulder, as would be the case with a violin.

35. Talbot, “Pistocchi Sketches Corelli,” 443, identifies “Romano” as Giovanni Battista Bonini, a theorist who was active in Bologna during the latter half of the seventeenth century.

correct size in relation to their bodies whereas Bononcini would not if he were holding a violin or a viola. In addition, Pistocchi, however unskilled he may have been as a pictorial artist, was himself a violinist who would have known his musical instruments and how they were to be held; he clearly intended something other than a violin or viola in his depiction of such a large instrument. Speculating even further, the ensemble shown in fig. 7 would make best sense if Bononcini were indeed playing a violoncello da spalla, that is, some form of bass violin instead of an alto or tenor. The instrumentalists depicted in the sketch would then comprise violinist, violoncellist, and theorbist—a violin and violoncello duet with continuo accompaniment played on the theorbo. Such an ensemble is common in late-Seicento instrumental music³⁶ whereas the combination of violin, viola (alto or tenor), and continuo does not exist, as a perusal of Sartori's *Bibliografia* will confirm.

Still more iconographic evidence—originating in Bolognese musical practice as do the previous illustrations—demonstrates the continued existence of the shoulder-held violoncello well into the eighteenth century. Figures 8 and 9 are taken from the collection of "Insignia degli Anziani di Bologna," which depict specific events in Bolognese history during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.³⁷ In the two illustrations provided here, instrumentalists performing at ceremonies dated 1705 and 1747,³⁸ respectively, include violoncellists who held their instruments across their shoulders.

A final piece of iconographic evidence presented here (fig. 10) dates from c. 1752–54 and incontestably links the image of an instrument held across the torso with a known violoncellist.³⁹ The performer shown in this

36. Bononcini's own Op. 3, a copy of which bears the Pistocchi sketch, begins with four *Gighe* written for violin, violone (i.e., some type of bass violin), and continuo.

37. I would like to thank Elita Maule for having brought this series of illustrations to my attention. Dr. Maule herself has published articles on the evidence of Bolognese musical and theatrical performance practice afforded by the Insignia degli Anziani: "La 'Festa della Porchetta' a Bologna nel Seicento: Indagine su una festa barocca," *Il Carobbio* 7 (1980): 251–62 and "Momenti di festa musicale sacra a Bologna nelle 'Insignia' degli Anziani (1666–1751)," *Il Carobbio* 13 (1987): 255–66.

38. The specific ceremonies can be ascertained from the Insignia themselves: the 1705 painting shows the March 25 celebration of the Annunciation; that of 1747 depicts the inauguration of Egano Lambertini, nephew of Pope Benedict XIV, as *gonfaloniere*.

39. I am indebted to Dr. Thomas MacCracken for bringing this illustration to my attention. This same engraving was previously used by Janet K. Page in her article, "The hautboy in London's musical life, 1730–1770," *Early Music* 16 (1988): 361, where she writes that the engraving's location today is unknown. The other musicians shown in this illustration are, from left to right, Domenico Scarlatti, Giuseppe Tartini, Giuseppe Sammartini, and Pietro Locatelli.

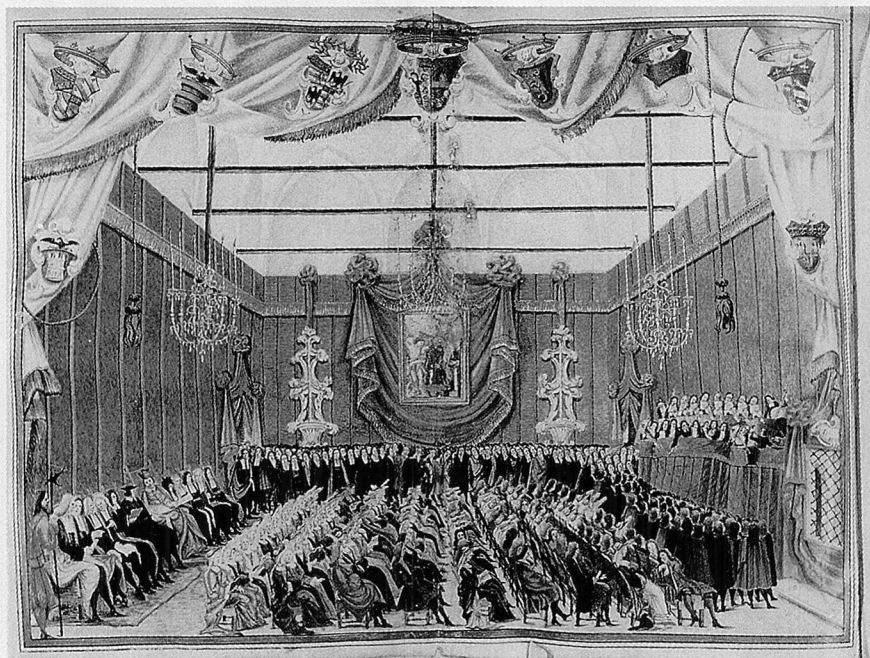


FIGURE 8A. *Insignia degli Anziani*, vol. 9, ff. 105b–106a, II bimestre 1705.

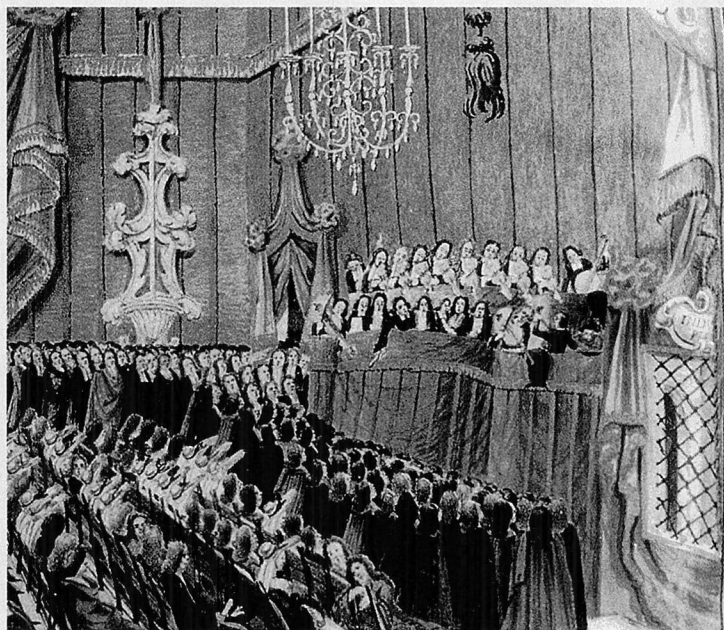


FIGURE 8B. Detail of fig. 8a.

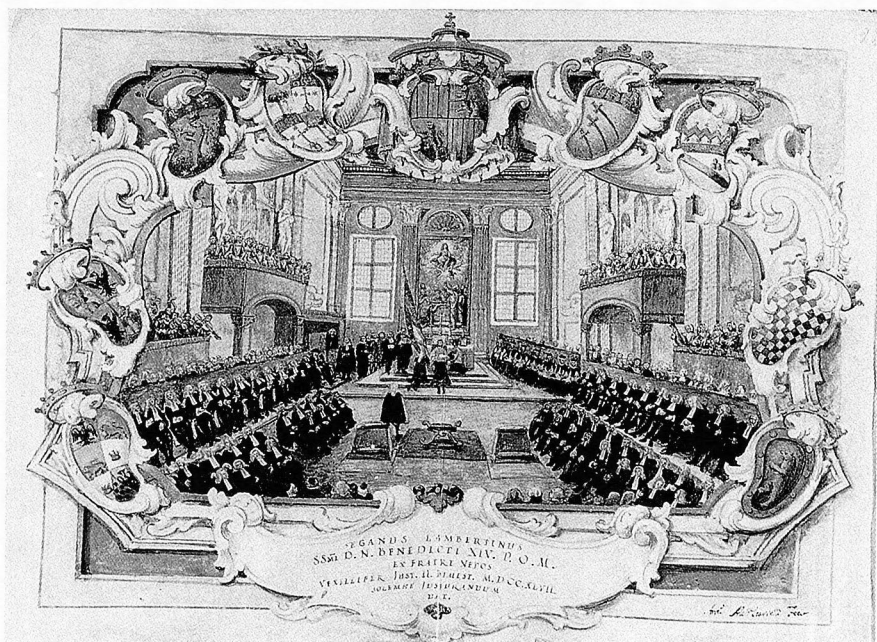


FIGURE 9A. Insignia degli Anziani, vol.14, ff. 23b–24a, II bimestre 1747.

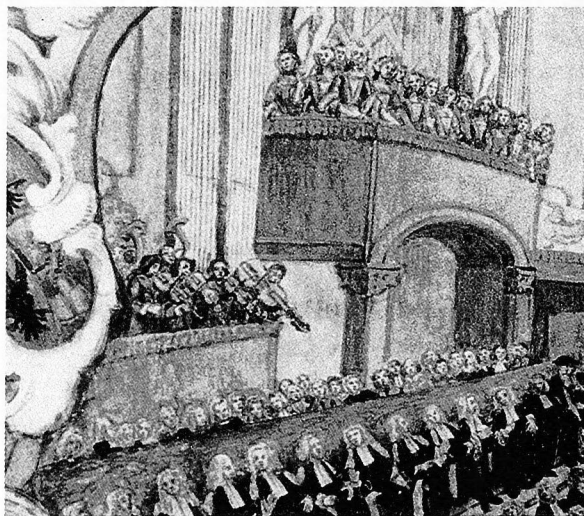


FIGURE 9B. Detail of fig. 9a.

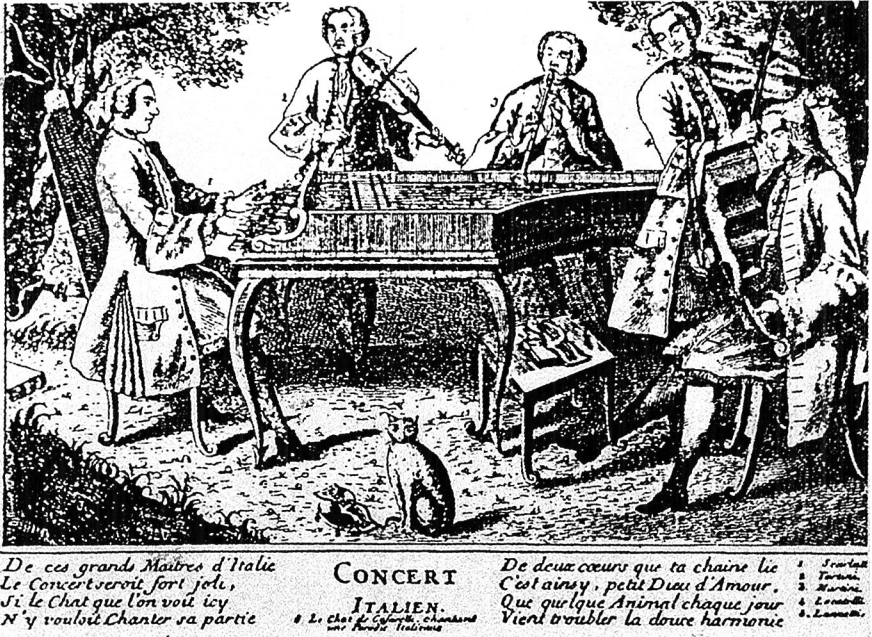


FIGURE 10. Anonymous engraving, "Concert Italien," Paris, c. 1752–54, showing Scarlatti, Tartini, Sammartini, Locatelli, and Lanzetti.

engraving is a well-known cellist from the mid-eighteenth century, Salvatore Lanzetti (c. 1710–c. 1780), who spent a large part of his career in London and whose activities were known to the music historian, Charles Burney.⁴⁰ Although the violoncello da spalla of the engraving appears to be slightly undersized in comparison to the modern cello, the playing position is unmistakable: the instrument is held horizontally as in the previous illustrations, although here it appears to rest without a strap on the performer's stomach as he is seated.

Examined individually, the iconographic sources shown here could well be interpreted as fanciful or even uninformed representations of a

40. Charles Burney, *A General History of Music, From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (1789), 2 vols., with critical and historical notes by Frank Mercer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 2:1005, refers to Lanzetti as one of several Italian performers in England who had "brought the violoncello into favour, and made us nice judges of that instrument." Lanzetti (sometimes also spelled Lancetti) published a few collections of sonatas for the violoncello and a left-hand fingering method for the instrument, *Principes ou l'application de violoncelle par tous les tons de la manière la plus facile* (Amsterdam: Johann Julius Hummel, c. 1770).

non-existent stringed instrument. Taken together with the testimony of various Italian and German theorists, however, these illustrations make a persuasive case for the existence of a large stringed instrument that played parts written in bass clef and was held across the shoulders, probably with the aid of a strap, as Mattheson specified.⁴¹ In the late *Seicento*, Bismantova called this instrument the violoncello da spalla whereas later sources, Tevo and Mattheson in particular, refer to it as the viola da spalla. Judging from the evidence provided here, the minimum span of time during which a shoulder-held violoncello was in use covers more than a century, from 1641 through the early 1750s.

Advantages of the Violoncello da Spalla

Two characteristics of the violoncello da spalla further strengthen the case for its use during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: first is the logic of completing the violin family with a bass instrument held like a violin; second is the portability of the violoncello da spalla. Regarding the former, the existence of a shoulder-held violoncello completes the violin family in a significant way: just as the viol family of instruments, from pardessus down to bass viol, consists of different sizes of the same basic instrument requiring the same basic playing position and technique, the violin family, with the addition of the violoncello da spalla, would similarly comprise different-sized instruments requiring the same basic technique for holding and playing each member. The significance of this arrangement is that it greatly facilitates a performer's ability to play upon any of the violin-family instruments; that is, a musician trained as a violinist could play bass lines on the violoncello da spalla as easily as he could perform inner parts on the viola.

This is precisely the evidence presented to us in the Pistocchi sketch: G. M. Bononcini, whom we know as a violinist, is shown playing what is most likely a violoncello da spalla. Along similar lines, another composer of the period, Tomaso Motta, describes himself as “musicò di violino e di

41. One additional source provides further evidence of alternative playing techniques applied to instruments that we would recognize as violoncellos: John Spitzer, “The Birth of the Orchestra in Rome—an Iconographic Study,” *Early Music* 19 (1991): 9–27, includes as his fig. 3 an illustration in pen and ink with watercolor by Pierre Paul Sevin, c. 1660, that contains several standing “cellists” whose instruments are held in various suspended positions.

violone” on the title page of his first publication in 1681.⁴² (At that time, “violone” in Italian usage was the generic term for various forms of bass violin.⁴³) Were Motta primarily a violinist, no doubt he would have been most comfortable doubling on a shoulder-held bass violin because of the similar position in which the two instruments were held.

The second advantage of the violoncello da spalla mentioned above, that of portability, requires additional speculation as to how string instruments were used during the Baroque era. Elizabeth Cowling notes that the violoncello da spalla could have been useful in processions and serenades.⁴⁴ Ephraim Segerman, in a brief essay on the tenor violin, speculates that decorum in former times may have required musicians to stand while performing for their socially-superior employers.⁴⁵ To this end, collections of music that date to the late seventeenth century offer useful evidence: a significant number of prints and manuscripts from northern Italy contain music written specifically for violin and violoncello duet without continuo accompaniment.

For example, we may add to Torelli’s Op. 4—discussed earlier for its engraved illustrations—two collections of compositions that were written specifically for the violin and violoncello without continuo accompaniment, which were also engraved by Buffagnotti: the *Sonate per Camera a Violino e Violoncello di Vari Autori*; and the *Sonate à Violino e Violoncello di Vari Autori*.⁴⁶ In addition to the Buffagnotti engravings, other Bolognese

42. Sartori, *Bibliografia*, 1681d, gives a full bibliographic listing for this print. The title page reads: “*Armonia capricciosa di Suonate musicali da Camera, . . . Opera Prima di Tomaso Motta Milanese, Maestro di Ballo all’Italiana & [sic] alla Francese, Suonatore di Chitarra Spagnola, Musico Liutista, e di Violino e Violone.*” Given how he describes himself, Motta was indeed a versatile musician.

43. This earlier meaning of “violone” contrasts with that of Bach’s time, when the term signified a larger instrument, playing in the contrabass, or 16-foot, range. See Bonta, “From Violone to Violoncello,” 77–81.

44. Cowling, *The Cello*, 45.

45. Ephraim Segerman, “The Name ‘Tenor Violin,’” *Galpin Society Journal* 48 (1995): 182.

46. The former print was engraved by Buffagnotti some time during the 1690s—see Sartori, *Bibliografia*, 1690 o 1700? for a listing of this print—and it bears the engraver’s name in several places. The engraver of the latter print is less certain because it bears no signature. Sartori, 1680 circa, attributes the engraving of this anthology to Buffagnotti, but gives no explanation for this attribution or for the date of 1680. It too was probably engraved by Buffagnotti in Bologna, but most likely during the 1690s, a date based on the activities of the composers contained in this anthology. The evidence to support the identity of the engraver as Buffagnotti is the similarity between this print and known Buffagnotti engravings. In addition, a page from each partbook of this print bears the initials “C B R.” This latter evidence is somewhat enigmatic, possibly indicating C[arlo] B[uffagnotti] and then some synonym of *incisore* (engraver) that begins with the letter “R.”

and Modenese publications call for unaccompanied violin and bass violin: Bartolomeo Laurenti, *Suonate per Camera à Violino, e Violoncello*; Attilio Ottavio Ariosti, *Divertimenti da Camera à Violino, e Violoncello*; and Tomaso Pegolotti, *Trattenimenti Armonici da Camera à Violino solo, e Violoncello*.⁴⁷ To this array of prints we may also add the unpublished *Trattenimento sopra il Violoncello a solo* by the violoncellist Domenico Galli and the *Sonate a Violino e Violoncello* by the violinist Tomaso Antonio Vitali from the collection of manuscripts once owned by the Estense family in Modena.⁴⁸

All of these collections make no mention of the *spinetta*, *tiorba*, or *clavicembalo*, and instead call for the unaccompanied violin and bass violin duet. All of these collections, moreover, comprise dances, and it is therefore feasible that this music constitutes a repertoire of chamber pieces intended for portable instruments, similar to modern ensembles of “strolling strings.” Certainly an ensemble of strings that covered the complete range of parts, from bass to treble, and was also entirely mobile, would have constituted an ideal in terms of flexibility for performing venues and convenience for the performers themselves. Notably, none of these works features a particularly challenging part for the violoncello. If these pieces without continuo do comprise a repertoire intended for the violoncello da spalla, then its advantages appear to lie mostly in its portability; the violoncello da spalla flourished as an instrument for courtly entertainment and not for virtuosic display.

Organology and Evolution

Given both the evidence for its existence and the practical advantages offered by the violoncello da spalla, one question that remains is how it fits into the evolution of the violoncello during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From studies by Stephen Bonta and others we know that both the terminology and the physical characteristics of the bass violin were in flux throughout most of the seventeenth century.⁴⁹ To summarize Bonta’s work briefly, he views the various bass violins in

47. The listings for these prints in Sartori’s *Bibliografia* are as follows: Laurenti, 1691d; Ariosti, 1695f; and Pegolotti, 1698f.

48. The Biblioteca Estense (*I-Moe*) catalogue numbers of these pieces are Vitali, Mus. E. 246 and Galli, Mus. C. 81.

49. The term “bass violin” connotes a non-transposing bass instrument. The octave-transposing contrabass instrument, the double bass of the modern orchestra, does not enter into this context.

terms of roughly two distinct sizes, small and large, both of which were held vertically between a performer's legs.⁵⁰ However, Bonta's study of the terminology also reveals that there are forms of bass violin (or diminutive violone) whose size still cannot be determined: indeed, seventeenth-century terms for a small violone such as "violoncello," "violone piccolo," "violoncino," "violonlino," and "bassetto" as well as various appellations for a "bass viola" strongly indicate the lack of standardization of both the bass violin and the terminology applied to it.⁵¹

With regard to the physical characteristics of string instruments that play in the bass range, two conflicting exigencies were involved in their development: on the one hand, bass sonority necessitated a larger instrument with a longer vibrating string length; on the other hand, ease of playability required a shorter string length and therefore a smaller instrument.⁵² In particular, the lowest string on the various bass violins was especially problematic; but, as Bonta points out, the invention of overspun strings made possible a lowest string of increased density so that a shorter string length could be used with no sacrifice in bass sonority.⁵³ Thus, with the advent of wirewound strings, an ideal solution was found for the bass violin in terms of both the size of the instrument and its sonority. According to Bonta, the term "violoncello" was applied to such a solution—that is, a smaller size of bass violin that used a wirewound string for the lowest of its strings.⁵⁴

The illustrations presented here and the descriptions by Bismantova, Tevo, and Mattheson, however, all suggest not so much a physical variant of the bass violin as an alternative playing technique that fits into the overall picture of violoncello history as an abandoned method, not as an abandoned instrument. Given the evidence, we have every reason to

50. Bonta, "From Violone to Violoncello," 84–87.

51. Bonta, "Terminology for the Bass Violin," 41, summarizes his findings concerning the various seventeenth-century terms for the bass violin and their specific meanings.

52. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

53. This is the main thesis of Bonta, "From Violone to Violoncello"; see 91–99 for his discussion of the physics involved in using silver wire to increase string density and of the evidence pertaining to the first uses of overspun strings in Bologna. Bonta posits the date of the Bolognese invention of overspun strings as sometime during the 1660s (*ibid.*, 98). We may recall Bismantova's suggestion that the lowest string of the violoncello da spalla be tuned to D (and to C only when necessary) (see n. 5): this suggests that even a wire-wound low string could benefit from a higher tuning on the violoncello da spalla because this smaller size of bass violin had such a short string length.

54. Bonta, "From Violone to Violoncello," 96.

suppose that the smaller category of bass violin made it possible for players to hold their instrument horizontally at shoulder height. This instrument, the violoncello da spalla, would have been suited to violin-style playing; that is, it was played quite literally after the manner of a violin in terms of technique. Noting Bismantova's fingering charts for the violin and the violoncello da spalla (exs. 1 and 2), we may see that not only the manner of holding the violoncello da spalla, but also the left-hand technique, approximate techniques used for the violin. Violoncello da spalla and its equivalent viola da spalla thus present not so much a unique instrument among the various smaller bass violins, but rather specific terms applied to a particular playing technique. In other words, the violoncello da spalla was distinguished from the violoncello by virtue of the fact that it was held across the torso as high as the player's shoulders.

If the violoncello da spalla appears to complicate the already intricate history of the violoncello, it significantly aids our understanding of how the playing technique for various bass violins developed in the Baroque era: in short, the violoncello da spalla demonstrates a long-lasting, violin-oriented technique among various approaches to the early violoncello, one that was especially suited to the accompaniment of court dancing. Other approaches combined various viol-family (or *da gamba*) and violin-family (or *da braccio*) precedents. Figure 1 shows such an alternative approach, one that incorporates more viol techniques in comparison with the technique used to play the violoncello da spalla: the instrumentalist in fig. 1 is shown not only holding the instrument vertically between his legs as one would a bass viol, but also holding the bow with an underhand grip, again as one would playing a viol.⁵⁵ Most significant, however, is that the experiment in playing technique represented by the violoncello da spalla outlasted the evolution of the violoncello itself by more than half a century: if the violoncello in its present form came to exist during the latter part of the seventeenth century, the technique for playing such an instrument—whether oriented more toward viol technique or more toward violin technique—was still very much in flux.

55. Mark Smith, "The Cello Bow Held the Viol-Way; Once Common, but Now Almost Forgotten," *Cheyls* 24 (1995): 47–61, finds more iconographic evidence from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries showing the underhand (viol-style) grip than showing the overhand (violin-style) grip. We may therefore infer that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cello occupied a position much like that of the modern double bass, one in which the instrument or its playing technique evinces characteristics that derive from both families of bowed string instruments, viol and violin.

Even if for a limited period of time, a shoulder-held bass violin did exist—known first as the violoncello da spalla and then as the viola da spalla. Its use in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries necessitates extra caution on the part of modern scholars when studying music and musical practice from this period: it is possible that some of the inexplicable passages apparently written for what we might mistake as our own cello were instead written for an instrument that we no longer recognize or a playing technique that we have long since forgotten. Certainly we must be wary when studying a period of history in which “viola” often meant a bass instrument and “violoncellists” sometimes stood up and shouldered their instruments.