

*Journal of the
American Musical
Instrument Society*

VOLUME XXVI • 2000



Copyright by the [American Musical Instrument Society](#).
Content may be used in accordance with the principles of fair
use under [Section 107 of the United States Copyright Act](#).
Content may not be reproduced for commercial purposes.

discussed elsewhere. Among the few slips is “Jarart” for “Jadart” (p. 392). The importance of this book lies in its emphasis on meaning; Corbin shows why village bells mattered so deeply, and he reveals a world organized by sound to an extent that we can scarcely imagine.

LAURENCE LIBIN

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Alfred Planyavsky. *The Baroque Double Bass Violone*. Translated by James Barket. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998. xvi, 197 pp.: 58 figures, 2 tables. ISBN: 0-8108-3448-0. \$55.00 (cloth).

In the past, the history of the double bass has been called a mystery. Perhaps for this reason, only a small number of scholars have attempted to sort out the instrument's complex development. Even fewer have dedicated themselves to rediscovering its history as a means of encouraging performers and ensemble directors, as well as music editors and publishers, to give more authentic performances of early music. Alfred Planyavsky, in *The Baroque Double Bass Violone*, has committed himself to doing precisely that, arguing that the largest of stringed instruments was not simply a doubling instrument used strictly for orchestral purposes but a welcome participant in chamber music settings as well. Examining the earlier incarnations of the double bass as a late Renaissance and Baroque instrument, Planyavsky approaches the problem with careful consideration of primary sources in addition to drawing on his experience as a baroque violone player. The result is a lively—although at times unfocused—discussion that is bound to have an effect on the reception of early stringed bass instruments in performance.

The Baroque Double Bass Violone is a translation of Planyavsky's *Der Barockkontrabaß Violone* (Vienna: Kontrabaßarchiv, 1989), itself an elaboration on the early chapters of his colossal *Die Geschichte des Kontrabasses* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1970; 2nd edition, 1984). With the exception of a few articles translated and published in the *Journal of the International Society of Double Bassists*, Planyavsky's work has rarely been encountered by the English-speaking world, thus James Barket's efforts in preparing this serviceable translation are to be applauded.

From the title itself, it appears that Planyavsky's goal is to prove that the violone was an earlier version of the double bass. For those who may outright disagree with his premise—that the violone is the predecessor

of the double bass and in no way contributed to the development of the violoncello—reading this book may be a painful experience. With little room for compromise, Planyavsky rejects the etymological argument that the Italian diminutive suffix ‘cello’ appended to ‘violone’ makes a ‘small violone.’ In essence, he views the violoncello as an enlarged viola da spalla (see Gregory Barnett, “The Violoncello da Spalla: Shouldering the Cello in the Baroque Era,” this JOURNAL 24 [1998]: 81–106), while he suggests that the modern double bass is an enlarged violone or a *violone grosso*. Although one may question his logic in this matter (particularly regarding the history of the violoncello), his book merits a thorough reading.

One strength of *The Baroque Double Bass Violone* stands out in particular: the sheer amount of evidence that Planyavsky incorporates into his argument, including organology, iconography, archival records, treatises, tutors, manuscript scores, parts, and title pages—all of which are cited in his extensive bibliography. While his use of primary source material may be commendable, his reference to secondary literature is often distracting in that he constantly argues with those who have come to different conclusions on the meaning of ‘violone.’ Although Planyavsky may be justified in criticizing the work of some scholars, such dialogue would probably have been better relegated to footnotes rather than allowed to steal the spotlight within the body of the text, where he cites and censures secondary sources at length. Consequently, *The Baroque Double Bass Violone* often appears to be more a critique of previous scholarship, music editions, and performances than a convincing argument showing the evolution of the violone to our modern double bass.

Understanding from the outset what Planyavsky means by ‘double bass’ is essential. Readers should not—in fact must not—picture the modern double bass every time the term ‘double bass’ appears in the text. After sorting through all twenty-three of Planyavsky’s essays (strung together in series in the original German version but organized somewhat arbitrarily into ten chapters in this translation) one realizes that several types of large stringed bass instruments are included under the term *Kontrabass*, which Barket appropriately translates as ‘double bass.’ Planyavsky’s concept of ‘double bass’ is defined by these criteria: (1) sub-bass range, i.e., any instrument with at least one string below the violoncello’s deepest string; (2) tuning in fourths or a combination of fourths and thirds; (3) standing playing position with use of a short end pin; and (4) size of the instrument, which is usually “human-sized.” By this

definition, however, at least five instruments could be considered double basses, distinguishable by their idiomatic tunings and, quite often, variance in size. In modern terminology, these include two six-stringed *violoni*, one large (tuned DD/GG/C/E/A/d) and one less large (GG/C/F/A/ d/g); a couple of five-stringed *violoni* tuned most frequently in two configurations (DD or CC/EE/AA/D/G and FF/AA/D/F#/a); as well as the four-stringed configuration most common today (EE or FF or GG/AA/D/G). In addition, Planyavsky considers Praetorius's *Groß Quint-Baß*, also known as the *Bas-Geig de bracio* (with the five-stringed tuning FF/C/G/d/a) "a misguided attempt to provide the violin family with a double-bass instrument" (p. 38). While lumping together all these instruments under the term 'double bass' may suit Planyavsky's thesis, in doing so he ignores the idiosyncrasies that lie behind each type of large stringed bass instrument. More dangerously, he seems to be advocating the use of any one of these instruments in any context where the term 'violone' is used.

It is of vital importance to the performer to ascertain whether a particular composer or group of composers intended an 8-foot or 16-foot pitch when 'violone' was specified. Planyavsky avoids this issue when he claims "This characteristic [i.e., 8- versus 16-foot sound] is irrelevant, however, when considered alongside the practice of individually used bass instruments which predominate in the sixteenth century. This designation becomes significant with the practice of bass-line doubling along with an 8-foot instrument" (p. 40). But such a conclusion, based on performance practices of the 1500s, is not necessarily applicable to music in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Moreover, by viewing the question only in a general sense, Planyavsky over-simplifies elements of bass instrumentation pertinent to performance practice, possibly leading some to believe that in all times, regions, and types of music, any type of double bass could have been intended by the term 'violone.' On the other hand, the author does recognize that the indication 'violone' does not necessarily mean that other instruments were not also suitable for playing from the violone part: "The term *violone* was so anchored in the conscience of the musicians, that it was used temporarily for many unusual instruments that perhaps could not be found in the lexicography. Therefore, violone parts could have been played by string bass instruments that, according to known instrumental systems, were no longer *violoni*. Perhaps the term was used in this way so often that it, in certain instances, gradually degenerated to a general designation for the bass part" (p. 75).

Planyavsky returns frequently to a specific type of violone: a smaller six-stringed instrument with a contra-G string tuned a fourth below the violoncello's C string. (Indeed, Planyavsky's arguments seem generally more plausible if one recalls that this instrument is, at least to the author, also a 'double bass.') In chapter 5 Planyavsky shows (in a way no previous author has done) that this particular violone in GG went by a number of different names in the seventeenth century: the *Basso di Viola da gamba* (Zacconi, 1592), the *Violone da gamba* (Banchieri, 1609), the *Klein Baß-Viol de Gamba* and, on one occasion, the *Groß Baßviol de Gamba* (Praetorius, 1619), the *Violone da gamba* (Doni, 1635/40), the *Basso di viola* (Prinner, 1677), the *Violon* (Falck, 1688), the *Baß-Geige* (Merck, 1695), and finally the *Bass-Violon*, *Violone*, or *Violon* (Speer, 1687/97) (p. 82). Clearly exhibiting characteristics of the viola da gamba—sloping shoulders, flat back, and strings tuned in combinations of fourths and thirds—this instrument falls somewhere between the modern violoncello and double bass in size. In an interesting side-by-side comparison of iconographic and organological examples in figures 5–8, Planyavsky provides examples of this smaller six-stringed bass instrument, featuring a reproduction of the violone cut out from the famous picture of Orlando di Lasso and the Munich Hofkapelle (ca. 1570), the sketched violone from Tafel VI of Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum* (1619), an instrument made by Merten Weber (Dresden, 1597), and the famous 'Dolmetsch' Maggini in the Horniman Museum, London (ca. 1630).

Unfortunately, Planyavsky never argues in more practical terms why the violone in GG might have been chosen over the seemingly more nimble violoncello, or the more voluminous violone in DD (also known as the *violone in contrabasso* [Banchieri, 1609]). It would have substantially aided his argument had he included musical examples from early chamber music works emanating from Italy or Germany to demonstrate the smaller violone's versatility. In fact, this is the book's greatest shortcoming: without musical examples from any specific repertoire, Planyavsky seems to overlook the fact that, beyond availability in any given geographical region, the musician's choice of instrument and, consequently, the luthier's choice of design could well have had something to do with the music being performed.

The advantages of the violone in GG, at which Planyavsky only vaguely hints, are: (1) as the sole bass instrument in an intimate setting it could play the bass part at pitch, sounding in the same range as smaller stringed bass instruments, with the option of transposing to the 16-foot octave (at least to GG) when a darker tone was desired; in this

context the instrument provides a rich sonority unmatched by smaller instruments such as the violoncello or bass viol; and (2) in a larger setting it could double the bass-line, sounding in the 16-foot range (using primarily the lower strings and reading an octave below written pitch), or it could maintain an 8-foot pitch, providing a different tone color to complement another 8-foot bass instrument. Therefore, because of its great versatility, the violone in GG could well be the instrument that composers intended in many situations when 'violone' was specified. But this is only the beginning of an argument; here, as elsewhere in the book, Planyavsky has primarily laid the groundwork, leaving it to future scholars to focus on more detailed aspects of performance practice.

Thus Planyavsky's book—which now, thanks to translator James Barket, is accessible to those who were unable to read his earlier works in German—should lead the way to future studies in early bass instrumentation. Even more, it is hoped that *The Baroque Double Bass Violone* will stimulate further specific research concerning the various types of large stringed bass instruments, not just in scholarly circles but also in early music performances, recordings, and editions of music.

SHANON P. ZUSMAN

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA