

This paper is a revised version of my article ‘Towards a more consistent and more historical view of Bach’s *Violoncello*’, published in *Chelys* Vol. 32 (2004), p. 49.

N.B. at the end of this document readers can download the music examples.

## **Towards a different, possibly more historical view of Bach’s *Violoncello***

Was Bach's *Violoncello* a small CGda Violoncello “*played like a violin*”  
(as Bach’s Weimar colleague Johann Gottfried Walther 1708 stated)?

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N.B. In this paper 18<sup>th</sup>-century terms are in *italics*.

### **Introduction**

Bias and acquired preferences sometimes cloud people’s views. Modern musicians’ fondness of their own instruments sometimes obstructs a clear view of the history of each single instrument. Some instrumentalists want to defend the territory of their own instrument or to enlarge<sup>1</sup> it. However, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century specialization in one instrument, as is the custom today, was unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Names of instruments in modern ‘Urtext’ editions can be misleading: in the Neue Bach Ausgabe the *due Fiauti d’ Echo* in Bach’s score of *Concerto 4<sup>to</sup>* (BWV 1049) are interpreted as ‘Flauto dolce’ (=recorder, Blockflöte, flûte à bec), whereas a *Fiauto d’ Echo* was actually a kind of double recorder, consisting of two recorders, one loud and one soft. (see internet and *Bachs Orchestermusik* by S. Rampe & D. Sackmann, p. 279-280).

<sup>1</sup> The bassoon specialist Konrad Brandt, however, argues against the habit of introducing a bassoon in every movement in Bach’s church music where oboes are played (the theory ‘wo Oboen, da auch Fagott’) *Bach-Jahrbuch* '68.

<sup>2</sup> Quantz and Telemann learned to play many instruments: Quantz studied '*Zinck, Posaunen, Waldhorn, Flöte a bec, Fagott, deutsche Baßgeige, Violoncell, Viola da Gamba*'; Telemann devoted himself to: '*dem Hoboe, der Traversen, dem Schalümo, der Gambe usw. biß auf den Contrebaß und die Quint-posaune.*'

Still in 1780 Ignaz Franz Xaver Kärtzinger (*Getreuer Unterricht zum Singen mit Manieren und die Violin zu spielen*) wrote: “to the Thumerkunst (=the art of professional musicians) belong the following instruments: “Violin, Viola d’amore, Viola da Gamba, Viola da Spala, Englisch Violet, Alto Viola, Violoncello, der große Contraviolon, Trompeten, Waldhorn, Flautten, Flauto Traverso, Oboe, Fagotto, Dolcian, Bombardo, Englische Horn, Clarinetten, Cembalo, Barydon, Zinken, Cornetto, und alle drey Posaunen.”

At Bach's death his property (see Bach Dokumente II, 492-493 for the 'Spezifikation der Hinterlassenschaft') included:

1. Lauten Werck	30	-	
1. <i>dito</i>	30	-	
1. Bassettgen	6	-	
1. <i>Violoncello</i>	6	-	
1. <i>dito</i>	-	16	
1. Laute		21	-
	rthl.	gr.	(value in Reichstaler and Groschen).

'*Lauten Werck*' and '*Laute*' are different instruments; Bach's two *Violoncelli* differ from his '*Bassetgen*'. We do not, however, know exactly what the differences were. Bach's terms *Violoncello* and *Violoncello piccolo* are just as ambiguous as the terms *Lauten Werck*, *Laute*, *Fiauti d' Echo*. Was his *Bassetgen* identical to the *Violoncello piccolo* in BWV (5) 180, 115, 41, 6, 85, 183, 68, 175, 49, 199, 234?

Headings of Bach's original performance parts can also be misleading; the part inscribed '*Violoncello* plus the later addition *e l'Organo*' in the sources of BWV 162, [Nr 8(12) in which JS Bach figured movements 1-5] was originally a choir pitch *Violoncello* part; later (after the addition of figures) it was used as an organ part.

The history of the part of cantata 23 inscribed '*Baßono* plus the later addition *è Cembalo*' (No. 24) is even more complicated; the sequence of events may possibly have been as follows.

Bach, wanting a copy in B minor of the Bc part originally in C minor, asked his scribe Kuhnau to copy the notes from the C minor autograph *Violoncello* part (No. 10); then Bach decided to give this part to a bassoon player and wrote the middle heading ***Baßono***; then, for some unknown reason, Kuhnau wrote, just after ***Baßono***, '*Violoncello*'; Bach cancelled this indication and wrote – with lighter ink – : '*è Cembalo*', just above Kuhnau's '~~*Violoncello*~~'.

At some later point Bach wanted a choir pitch organ part in B flat minor to be played with the other instruments playing in chamber pitch C minor: for that purpose he changed the accidentals and adapted the figures. This '*Baßono* /~~*Violoncello*~~ | *è Cembalo*' part in B minor therefore ended up as an organ part in B flat minor. Bach did not cross out the indication '*Baßono* | *è Cembalo*'!

It is clear that Bach's instrument indications can be puzzling.

### **Bach's *Violoncello***

The many wonderful performances of Bach's suites for violoncello, played on modern or 'baroque' cello, tend to confirm the impression that the meaning of Bach's term *Violoncello* is quite unambiguous. It is assumed without question that Bach's *Violoncello* was an instrument the same size as a bass viol and played in a similar way, i.e. held between the knees, resting on the calves. If this method of playing is used, it is possible to reach all the notes right to the end of the fingerboard.

In both French and German viol music, notes more than an octave higher than the highest pitched open string can in fact be found at an early stage. For example, there is a *g''* in Marin Marais (1656-1728), *Deuxième Livre*, no. 83 bar 3, and Buxtehude included an *a''* in his 'Jubilate Domino'. It was not until later that cellists were prepared to venture into higher regions: the cellist Boccherini (1743-1805) climbs very high.

In spite of the length of the strings many cellists find it easier, whether playing a modern or a 'baroque' cello, to realize the figurations across three strings in bars 45-58 of the Prelude of Bach's third cello suite without using the thumb to stop strings.<sup>3</sup>

The possibilities offered by this thumb technique for increasing the compass of the cello and reaching notes in the highest registers are in fact not exploited anywhere in the first five cello suites. The *d''* in Prelude I, bar 34, calls for the most extreme hand position, while the note with the highest pitch in Suites I-V is *g'*, a seventh above the open A-string. Playing high notes was possible and normal on bass instruments that are held between the legs. If Bach had known the possibilities of the thumb technique, he certainly would have asked for that technique, just as he used new things like the oboe d'amore, the oboe da caccia and the low  $\text{}_{1A}$  string of the bass viola da gamba.

Bach nearly always respected the bottom and top limits of the instruments he wrote for and he exploited the compass of each instrument.

On the face of it, there is therefore an inherent contradiction in Bach's oeuvre for cello solo. But there are other factors involved: the 'pre-history' of the present-day cello

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<sup>3</sup> For Mark Mervyn Smith 'all of Bach's Suites I to V are easily manageable, technically and stylistically, without the use of the thumb, and including the greatest stretches demanded of the music', as he wrote to me 23-9-03.

and other bass stringed instruments, like the early history of many instruments, is veiled in mystery.

### **Ambiguous and contradictory information in lexicons and manuals**

Sometimes the information found in sources which are generally considered to be important is quite obscure. Take for instance the illustrations of stringed instruments, complete with their respective tunings, in *Iconismus VIII*, fol. 487 of A. Kircher's *Musurgia Universalis* (1650).<sup>4</sup> The instruments include the *Violone* or *Chelys maior*, the *Chelys hexachorda* and the *Lyra dodecachorda*. If we may believe the notes in the musical notation the tuning of Kircher's *Violone / Chelys maior* was *G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup>*.

Then there are the illustrations in Bonanni's *Gabinetto Armonico* (1723), a book of prints which was reprinted in 1776 under the title *Descrizione degl' istromenti armonici d'ogni genere*. The 'Viola' in Bonanni's print LVIII looks like what we now call a cello.

The information given in Brossard's *Dictionnaire* (1703) does not make things much clearer:

'VIOLONCELLO, this is properly speaking our *Quinte de Violon* or a small bass violin with five or six strings'.<sup>5</sup> On p. 219 it turns out that his *Quinte de Violon* is a viola.

Mattheson (1713) copies certain elements of Brossard's text: 'The excellent *Violoncello*, the *Bassa Viola* and *Viola di Spala* are small bass violins in comparison with the bigger ones, with 5 or even 6 strings, on which all manner of rapid things, variations and ornaments can be played with less effort than on the large instruments. The *Viola di Spala* or shoulder viola in particular is very effective in accompanying, because it is penetrating and can produce the notes clearly. A bass can never be brought out more distinctly and clearly than on this instrument. It is attached to the chest with a strap and as it were slung on to the right shoulder so that there is nothing whatsoever to stop or hinder its resonance'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia Universalis*, Rome, 1650/R1970.

<sup>5</sup> 'VIOLONCELLO, C'est proprement nôtre *Quinte de Violon* ou une *petite Basse de Violon* à cinq ou six chordes'. Sébastien de Brossard, *Dictionnaire de Musique*, 1703/R1965, Hilversum, 221.

<sup>6</sup> 'Der hervorragende Violoncello, die Bassa Viola und Viola di Spala, sind kleine Bass-Geigen/ in Vergleichung der grössern/ mit 5 auch wol 6. Sayten/ worauff man mit leichter Arbeit als auff den grossen Maschinen allerhand geschwinde Sachen /

Later German lexicographers reproduced most of Mattheson's text literally, sometimes with a few modifications. Walther (1732) cites Mattheson's text almost literally, but adds: 'The four-stringed ones are tuned like a viola, *C-G-d-a*, and go up to *a*<sup>1</sup>'.<sup>7</sup>

Majer (1732) also states that the *Violoncello* was 'commonly strung with four strings' and that 'many held them between their legs'. He goes on to give the 'normal' cello tuning in musical notation and – in spite of the *da gamba* position which seems to imply a larger instrument - the diatonic fingering system (the system used for the violin),<sup>8</sup> which was also recommended by Bismantova (1694).<sup>9</sup> Majer then writes: 'a bassoon violin was held on the arm and played like a viola, the tuning is also the same, except that it is a full octave lower, so that stronger strings are used. The range and the fingering are just like those of the French bass violin or *Violoncello*'.<sup>10</sup>

Mattheson seems to have regarded the *Viola da spalla* as a distinct and particularly effective bass instrument; however, Eisel wrote the following about the *Violoncello*, *Bassa Viola* and *Viola di Spala*: 'All three [terms] can be used indiscriminately: for all three are small bass violins.'<sup>11</sup> In general, the German sources do not draw clear distinctions, as

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Variationes und Mannieren machen kan / insonderheit hat die Viola di Spala, oder **Schulter**-Viola einen grossen Effect bey dem Accompagnement, weil sie starck durchschneiden/ und die Tohne (*sic!*) rein exprimiren kan. Ein Bass kan nimmer distincter und deutlicher herausgebracht 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 Resonantz im geringsten aufhält oder verhindert'. J. Mattheson, *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre*, Hamburg, 1713/R1964, 285-286.

<sup>7</sup> 'Die viersäitigten werden wie eine Viola, C.G.d.a. gestimmt und gehen bis ins *ā*'. J.G. Walther, *Musikalisches Lexicon*, 1732; facsimile edition Kassel, 1953, 637.

<sup>8</sup> '...gemeinlich mit 4 starken Saiten bezogen [...] von vielen aber wird sie zwischen beeden Beinen gehalten'. J. Majer, *Museum Musicum*, 1732/R1954, 79.

<sup>9</sup> In his *Compendio Musicale* (1694), Bismantova also gives the same fingering for the *violoncello da spalla alla moderna*: namely, the fingering 0-1-2-3-4 for the pitch series a-b-c'-d'-e'. B. Bismantova, *Compendio Musicale* (MS, Ferrara, 1677; facsimile edition, Florence, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> 'Eine Fagott-Geige wird auf dem Arm gehalten, und wie eine Viola tractirt, auch ist die Stimmung also eingerichtet, nur daß sie durchaus um eine volle Octav tieffer, u. dieserhalben die Saiten alle stärker darzu genommen werden. Deren Ambitus u. Application der Finger und Buchst. ist wie bey der Französ. Baß-Geige oder Violon cello'. J. Majer, *Museum Musicum*, 1732/R1954, 80.

<sup>11</sup> 'Wir wollen alle drey in eine Brühe werffen: Denn alles dreyes sind kleine Bass-Geigen'. Johann Philipp Eisel, *Musicus autodidaktos*, Erfurt, 1738 /R1976, 44.

Gregory Barnett noted in his important article on the *Viola da spalla*.<sup>12</sup> As late as 1758, Adlung wrote about the cello simply that a ‘violoncello is also called a shoulder viola’.<sup>13</sup>

Note 53 of Gregory Barnett’s article reads: ‘[...] 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): 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.’<sup>14</sup>

Nearly all of the many 5-string cellos depicted in 17th-century paintings from the Low Countries are so large that the length of their strings would have precluded their top string being tuned to *e*<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps they were tuned *C-G-d-a-d*<sup>1</sup>, a tuning given by Laborde in his *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* (1780).

Six-string cellos remain a mystery; from Brossard to Zedler (1747), this element of six strings is repeated. Leopold Mozart (1756) is the first to drop the mysterious sixth Violoncello string; in his *Violinschule* he wrote: ‘Formerly it had 5 strings; now it is played only with four’.<sup>15</sup>

It is impossible to construct a clear picture of ‘the’ historical *Violoncello* from the information offered by all these lexicographic and pictorial sources.

However, there is a very clear text deriving from Bach's direct environment, in *Praecepta der Musicalischen Composition* by Johann Gottfried Walther, dated 13 March 1708. In this

<sup>12</sup> ‘Jacob Adlung, explicitly equates the viola di spala [*sic*] with the violoncello. [...]. 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. [...] Later, in the mid-eighteenth century, Adlung explicitly states that violoncello and viola da spalla were indeed two names for the same instrument.’ Gregory Barnett, ‘The Violoncello da Spalla: Shouldering the Cello in the Baroque Era’, *JAMIS XXIV*, 1998, 90.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Violoncello heiß auch viola di spala’. J. Adlung, *Anleitung zu der Musikalische Gelahrheit*, Erfurt, 1758/R1953, 599. Barnett’s correction ‘**hieß**’ is a mistake! Adlung’s word ‘*heiß*’ has been changed in the 1783 reprint, a corrected edition by J.A. Hiller, which reads: **heißt**.

<sup>14</sup> G. Barnett, 1998, note 53.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Vor Zeiten hatte es 5. Seyten; itzt geigt man es nur mit vieren’. Leopold Mozart, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, Augsburg, 1756/R1976, 3, enlarged 1787/R1956, 3.

work Walther, who was court musician in Weimar (where in July of that same year, 1708, Bach was to become court musician and organist) defines the *Violoncello* of Bach's time and environment unequivocally: 'The Violoncello is an Italian bass instrument resembling a Viol; it is played like a violin, i.e. it is partly supported by the left hand and the strings are stopped by the fingers of the left hand, partly however, owing to its weight, it is attached to the button of the frockcoat [...] It is tuned like a Viola'.<sup>16</sup>

This source is chronologically very close to the performance on 4 February 1708 in Mühlhausen of BWV 71, Bach's '*Mottetto. diviso in quattuor Chori*'. The fourth *Chorus* of this cantata consists of two recorders and a *Violoncello*. The *Violoncello* part<sup>17</sup> is unique, and quite exceptional, in that its range is from *G* to  $e_b^2$ ; wherever the basso continuo in the other bass voices goes lower than the *G*, the *Violoncello* plays those notes one octave higher. Christine Fröde, who edited this work in the NBA, says in her preface: 'With respect to the *Violoncello*, which serves as a bass instrument of the flute choir, it seems evident that a smaller instrument tuned *G d a e<sup>1</sup>* was used, because the cello part goes up to  $e_b^2$  and pitches below *G* are avoided.'<sup>18</sup> If a small *Gdae<sup>1</sup> Violoncello* (attached to the chest with a strap) is held like a violin, the notes, particularly in the 6th movement, suggest very obvious fingerings. To illustrate this, the final bars, 40-43, and bars 17-22, are shown in Examples 1 and 2. Click below.

The notes (particularly bars 17-22) of the 6th movement, which Bach himself wrote out in the orchestral part, constitute a version which can be played more efficiently than the somewhat awkward figures going up to  $f^2$  which he had originally written in the score;

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<sup>16</sup> '*Violoncello ist ein Italiaenisches einer Violadigamba nicht ungleiches Bass-Instrument, wird fast tractiret wie eine Violin, neml. es wird mit der lincken Hand theils gehalten, und die Griffè formiret, theils aber wird es wegen der Schwere an des Rockes Knopff gehänget [...] Wird gestimmt wie eine Viola*'.

Johann Gottfried Walther, *Praecepta der Musicalischen Composition*, Weimar, den 13 *Marty Anno* 1708; repr. in *Jenaer Beiträge zur Musikforschung*, Band 2 (Leipzig 1955), 56. NB: We can take it for granted that the *Violoncello*, as a bass instrument, was tuned one octave lower than a *Viola*.

<sup>17</sup> This *Violoncello* part by Bach is the only cello part that was printed during Bach's life.

<sup>18</sup> 'Für das Violoncello als Baßinstrument des Flötenchores stand offenbar ein kleineres Instrument mit der Stimmung *G d a e<sup>1</sup>* zur Verfügung, denn der Cellopart ist zum es<sup>1</sup> hinaufgeführt und die Baßtöne unterhalb des *G* sind ausgespart.' Neue Bach Ausgabe, Serie I, Band 32, 1, Vorwort, VI.

throughout the whole of the 6th movement they inspire the player to use very natural fingerings. For comparison, the version of bars 17-22 in the score is shown in Example 3. Later, when composing his ‘*Sechs Suonaten pour le Viola de Basso*’.<sup>19</sup> (tuned *CGda* for suites 1- 4, tuned *CGdg* for Suite no. 5 in C minor and tuned *C-G-d-a-e*’ for the 6<sup>th</sup> suite), Bach took the same practical and instrument-oriented approach he had taken to the *G-d-a-e*’ *Violoncello* in this cantata.

### **Bach’s notes for *Violoncello* viewed in the dim light of old manuals.**

Perhaps a more reliable picture may emerge if we focus on certain details in the most authentic source of all: the actual music written by Bach for his various *Violoncelli*. There is a certain relationship between string length and the way an instrument is held on the one hand, and possible or impossible fingerings and available pitches on the other. Take the technical solution for the figurations in bars 45-56 of the Prelude of Suite III, as shown in Example 4. In the 1824 Paris edition the biggest 4-1 stretch, *b-c*’ in bar 49, was changed to *a-c*’! The result destroys Bach's sequential structure in bars 47-48, 49-50 and 50-51. We might then be struck by the similarity of this fingering to the equally obvious fingering for bars 11-15 of the first movement of the violin sonata BWV 1023 (Example 5).

While playing on a **small** Violoncello da braccio<sup>20</sup> (tuned *CGda*, attached to the chest with a strap and too small to bring it into a playing position on top of **the right shoulder**), we would find out for ourselves that the little finger can scarcely reach further than halfway up the string (i.e. one octave higher than the open string), because the wrist comes up against the base of the neck. Holding the instrument in this way prevents the hand from going on top of the cello.

<sup>19</sup> This was how Kellner referred to the suites on the title page of the oldest manuscript (1726) in which the suites BWV 1007-1012 have survived.

<sup>20</sup> Small bass bowed instruments, when held more or less ‘horizontally’, were sometimes called: **violone da braccio**.

For example Giovanni Battista Vitali styles himself in the prints of his Opera I-V (1666-1690) as ‘*Sonatore di violone da braccio*’ and ‘*Musico di violone da braccio*’. See Michaelsteiner Konferenzbericht 64, p 57-74. Small instruments that cannot be ‘slung on to the right **shoulder**’ should not be called ‘Viola da **spalla**’.

In Suites I-V,  $g^1$  is the highest note and the highest hand position is the  $d^1$  in Prelude I, bar 34. We would thus discover in practice that when in 1732 J. G. Walther gave  $a^1$  as the absolute upper limit for the *Violoncello* of those days, he was quite right.<sup>21</sup>

In his sixth suite Bach did go higher, to  $g^2$ ; but this was after his friend and fellow townsman, the famous violin maker Johann Christian Hoffmann, had made a small five-stringed bass violin at his request in 1724. The surviving instruments of this type can be seen as *piccolo* versions of the *Violoncello* of Bach's time: smaller and higher-pitched instruments, like other *piccolos*.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Bach perhaps called his own invention 'Viola Pomposa' by nature of a joke. Anyone who plays a Hoffmann type *CGdae* <sup>1</sup> *Violoncello piccolo* will observe that it is virtually impossible for the little finger of the left hand to stop the  $e^1$ -string higher than the  $g^2$ , the highest note in '*Suite 6.me à cinq acordes*'.

We would find that the number of unavoidable shifts of position is limited, even in Suite IV. This composer, who had two *Violoncelli* and a *Bassettgen* of his own - as we know from the list of possessions made after his death - managed to avoid position changes within groups of slurred notes in his music for *Violoncello*, even in the remotest keys. Take for example Prelude IV, bars 80-81: Example 6.

There are many legato passages in which Bach seems to take the use of Bismantova's and Majer's diatonic fingering for granted: Prelude V, bars 17, 65, 116, 166-170 (click Example 7), 184, 186; Allemande V, bar 16; Courante II, bars 29-31 (click Example 8). If played on a larger instrument, these passages – and in fact all six suites – seem to force the player to display the 19<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon of constant shifting which inspires us all with enormous respect for unblemished cello playing.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> It may well be significant that the outer limits of the range of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Violoncello* (from C to a<sup>1</sup>) are nearly always identical to those in Basso Continuo music by German composers from Schütz (1585-1672) to Bach.

<sup>22</sup> Surviving instruments which can be associated with the terms *Viola Pomposa* and *Violoncello piccolo* have been discussed by Ulrich Drüner and Mark M. Smith. U. Drüner, 'Violoncello piccolo und Viola Pomposa bei Johann Sebastian Bach: Zu Fragen von Identität und Spielweise dieser Instrumente', *Bach-Jahrbuch* 1987, 85-112. M.M. Smith, 'Joh. Seb. Bachs Violoncello piccolo: Neue Aspekte - offene Fragen', *Bach-Jahrbuch* 1998, 63-81.

<sup>23</sup> In an article 'On the rise and progress of the violoncello' on p. 353 of the *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* of 1824, a cello enthusiast observed, even a hundred years

(see Examples 7, 8)

The composer seems to take the extra short strings of the little five-stringed Hoffmann type *CGdae*<sup>1</sup> *Violoncello piccolo* into account; after all, he had invented it himself. In Suite VI he entrusts very few notes to the C string. In Suite VI the bow touches the C string during only < 1.7% of the whole duration of the piece; in Suites I-V there are percentages of <4 to <6.

While in bars 47-57 of Prelude III many cellists feel compelled to use the thumb technique, Bach made no use of the possibilities offered by this technique. There is no evidence that the thumb technique, which opens up the entire range of pitches above *g*<sup>1</sup> and was later fully developed by the Duport brothers and Boccherini, was already being used in Bach's environment. The first text that describes thumb technique is to be found in M. Corrette's 1741 'Methode pour le Violoncelle.'

#### **A more historic and more consistent view of Bach's Violoncello?**

On the basis of the demystifying sketch of 18<sup>th</sup>-century cello playing presented above, we might consider the following hypothesis.

Unlike cellists after the Duport brothers and Boccherini, Bach knew a great deal about his own two *Violoncelli*. According to the lexicons of his own time, they were *small* bass violins, for which violin fingerings could be used. At his death, Bach's property included two *Violoncelli* and one *Bassettgen*.<sup>24</sup> He wrote his *Viola de Basso* suites for himself or for members of his family; he was able to try out almost all his music for solo instruments, including his own cello music himself, at home, on the instruments available there.<sup>25</sup>

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after Bach's '*Viola de Basso*' suites that 'the constant shifting of the hand required in performing a piece of music, of even ordinary difficulty, renders the time as well as the proper tone of the performer, unless he is particularly careful and laborious in his practice, most uncertain'.

<sup>24</sup> See Bach Dokumente II, 492-493 for the 'Spezifikation der Hinterlassenschaft'.

<sup>25</sup> Bach Dokumente III, 288-289: apart from a few keyboard fantasies, 'he composed everything else without an instrument, but later tried it out on the instrument concerned'

Some of the obligato parts for *Violoncello piccolo* which Bach wrote for his cantatas between October 1724 and November 1726 are written out in the Leader's part; all the data taken together suggest that Bach's *Bassetgen* and his *Violoncello piccolo* are more or less identical and were played as 'Violoncello da braccio'. The obligato parts for *Violoncello piccolo*, in which the C-string is used very rarely, do not go higher than  $c^2$ , a minor sixth higher than the  $e^1$ -string. In five of the ten parts the C-string is in fact used, but to a very limited extent. This means that a musician who had to play violin and Bach's *Violoncello piccolo* in rapid succession was less likely to endanger his intonation on the violin in higher positions or to be disorientated by the five strings.

The present writer had two instruments made after original instruments by Hoffmann which are referred to in museum catalogues as '*Viola Pomposa*'. Playing these instruments has made me realise how much pleasure Bach's own invention must have afforded him when he was composing and playing the *Suite 6.me à cinq acordes*, BWV 1012, in which he made use of the entire range of pitches, from C to  $g^2$ .

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On somewhat bigger, short necked 4-string instruments (e.g. belly length 504 mm, body stop 275 mm, neck stop 172 mm), if played '*da braccio*' in front of the breast, it is hardly possible to reach  $a^1$  (the highest *Violoncello* note according to Walther). In the original **performance** *Violoncello* parts of Bach's cantatas there are hardly any Bc notes higher than  $\sharp^1$ ; I found notes above  $g^1$  in two *Violoncello* performance parts.<sup>26</sup>

a) the *Violoncello obligato* part in BWV 70,3 written on a separate sheet and ranging from C up to  $a^1$  which perhaps was written for Bach's *CGdae^1 Violoncello piccolo*; the part might have been played by the Leader (just) as the *Violoncello piccolo* parts in 1724-1726.

b) the part for a special *Violoncello* tuned *Gdae^1* in BWV 71,6 which goes up to  $e_b^2$ .

In the *Violoncello* staves of the autograph **score** of the Magnificat in D, BWV 243, in movement 10 '*Suscepit Israel*' Bach wrote some higher notes: he transposed the notes of

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(‘so hat er das übrige alles ohne Instrument componirt, jedoch nachher auf selbigem probirt’).

<sup>26</sup> The  $g^1$  in BWV 162, 5, bar 128 has been interpolated by Ulrich Bartels who wrote (Kritischer Bericht, p 30): ‘Takt 128 Vermutlich um das Ausschreiben etlicher Hilfslinien zu vermeiden, ist der Takt eine Oktave tiefer notiert. Die Oktavierung könnte durch einen waagerechten Strich über dem System kenntlich gemacht sein.’ Three ledger lines are not unusual in Bach sources!

the Violini + Viola line of the E flat version one semitone down, so that the Violoncelli go up to  $a'$  (it is, however, unknown what Bach wanted to have notated in the Violoncello performance parts).

Musicologists, organologists, cellists and others who have doubts about the arguments presented above are invited to provide proof based on historical documents that Bach used the term '*Violoncello*' to refer to the bigger instrument which was later to become so successful, and not the smaller instrument(s) he and his contemporaries knew and valued.

[Download examples 1, 2, 3](#)

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