THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY BASSE DE VIOLON: FACT OR FICTION?

IDENTIFICATION OF THE BASS VIOLIN (1535-1635)

Gyongy Iren Erodi

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APPROVED:

Bernardo Illari, Major Professor
Paul Berry, Minor Professor
Lyle Nordstrom, Committee Member
Eileen M. Hays, Interim Chair of the Division of Music History, Theory and Ethnomusicology
Graham H. Phipps, Director of Graduate Studies
James C. Scott, Dean of the College of Music
Michael Monticino, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Research on the origins of the violoncello reveals considerable dispute concerning the existence and identity of its ancestor, the bass violin. This study focuses on the classification of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century bass violin by means of the following criteria: construction, early history and development, role due the social status of builders and players, use within the violin band, performing positions, and defining terminology.

Accounts of inventories, organological treatises, music theoretical writings, lists of households and royal courts, descriptions of feasts, reports of choreographies and iconographical examples confirm the bass violin’s presence in the late sixteenth century and beyond. Three of the earliest unchanged extant organological examples embody, complement and corroborate the bass violin’s identification, and conclude the essay.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

The origins and history of the bass member of the violin family now called “violoncello” have been a source of heated debate for decades. Although the first documented appearance of the actual term *violoncello* occurs in Giulio Cesare Arresti’s collection *Sonate a due e a tre* from 1665, there are many surviving instruments built prior to that date that are labeled as violoncellos from as early as 1538. However, they were not originally built as violoncellos but rather as bass members of the violin family, and were altered and cut in size later in history, to accommodate the standard violoncello’s size.

Since authors of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries referred to the bass member of the violin family as “bass violin,” this essay proposes that these instruments should be designated with this term, historically more appropriate along with its direct translations—such as *basse de violon*, *Bassgeige* or *basso de viola da braccio*, in French, in German and in Italian, respectively. No single study has been dedicated to discussing the sixteenth-century bass violin in a clear and comprehensive way.

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2 See for example the so-called “King,” labeled as violoncello by Andrea Amati, now in the Shrine Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota. Although the instrument is dated 1538 in the museum, recent research suggests a later date (1572), for its creation.

3 The terminology for the smaller sized bass violin is more complex. Its historically appropriate labeling is discussed in chapter 1.
The goal of this thesis is to provide such a discussion and propose a typology for the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century bass violin, including construction, sizes, tunings, functions, terminology, early history, and the social status of its builders and players. This description is based on three extant bass violins, two of which remain in their original condition of 1594 by virtue of their elevated placement within the Freiberg Cathedral and subsequent removal from any influence for more than four hundred years. Another exemplar, built by Dorigo Spilman, also survived in its original condition of 1590 with only minor changes. These three instruments are the earliest existing bass violins, since no other example is known to have survived without reduction in dimensions.

My methodology differs from previous organological studies concerning sixteenth-century instruments in that, although the discussion is partly based on extant instruments, they do not serve as exclusive and absolute proofs. Instead, they confirm, complement, and develop the general discussion of the origins and transformation of the bass violin (chapter 2). The description of the bass violin is accomplished through the examination of a wealth of sources. In addition to the instrument, this study incorporates various documentary facts: iconography, organological treatises, dance and social writings, royal and domestic instrument inventories, reports of royal entertainments, and descriptions of choreography. This thesis first examines documentary evidence and then confirms and develops it by means of the three extant instruments.

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4 The survival of the Spilman bass violin is due most likely to the fact that its builder’s name was little known, hence carrying little value, and also to his social status lower than that of the more famous and respected violin makers, such as Andrea Amati, Gasparo da Salò or Caspar Tieffenbrucker. Instruments of these well-known builders were highly valued and collected; but were also altered, sold and copied in the nineteenth century. Because of the high price of the instruments, most of them vanished later in history or ended in private collections, where they are inaccessible for research.
Two basic approaches are used in the individual chapters of this study. The first method, used in chapter 2, considers only the iconography, organological treatises, inventories, and theoretical writings on music of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but not the existing instruments from the period. The chapter construes an ideal model of the bass violin on the basis of several specific pieces of evidence, and then introduces the two different sizes that the instrument assumed, together with their specific tunings. Chapters 3 and 4 operate differently: they concentrate on the two Freiberg bass violins and the Spilman bass violin, respectively, to complement, confirm and finalize the general identification presented in chapter 2.

The Freiberg instruments serve as extant organological evidence for the smaller sized and higher tuned bass violins. They were built as practical instruments but survived due to their condition of artworks. The Spilman instrument, in contrast, represents the larger bass violin model, and remains an example of actual music-making. Both chapters share the same approach. They start on a specific level, examining the origin and construction of the actual exemplars. Certain specific details evoke other features of bass violin construction, use, or function in the sixteenth century, which are discussed next, with reference to the appropriate documentary evidence.

There are no instruments of well-known violin builders in the sixteenth century that qualify for solicitous inquiry. Andrea Amati, Gasparo da Saló, and Francesco de Macchetti Linarol, from Cremona, Brescia, and Venice, respectively, are the earliest reputable violin makers in the sixteenth century.\(^5\) Yet, only bass viols and no bass violins survive by Gasparo da

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Saló and by Francesco Linarol. Andrea Amati is known to have built all sizes of violins. Five of his bass violins still exist, yet, they are labeled as violoncellos because they all have been severely cut in size. Three exemplars are in private collections and are presently inaccessible; one instrument’s location is unknown. The fifth instrument, widely known as the “King violoncello,” is now part of the Shrine National Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota. The body of this instrument has been reduced not only around the edges, but also in the middle of the top and back plates. Since none of the Andrea Amati instruments are appropriate to aid the identification of the sixteenth-century bass violin, this thesis is based on the three basically unaltered bass violins that survive today.

The bass violin most likely appeared in the 1530s. Except for dimensions, tuning, and playing positions, it shared construction details with the later model violoncello model. In contrast to the later violoncello, the bass violin was available in two basic sizes and tunings. Bass violinists held their instrument in a variety of customary positions and the bass violin had a different function in society as compared to the mid-seventeenth-century violoncello.

The early type of bass violin underwent changes in construction between the 1530s and 1580s, as did all stringed instruments in the sixteenth century; however, by the last third of the century, the basic model was fully developed and used in violin bands all over Europe. This model had four strings tuned in fifths, F-shaped sound holes, rounded upper and lower shoulders, and a short and fretless fingerboard. The bass violin bow was played either by an overhand or by an underhand grip. The bass violin existed in two different sizes that shared the same construction features, a smaller one and a larger one, corresponding to two different tunings.

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6 Ibid., 487-8.
7 Ibid., 491.
Although the existence of the bass violin in the sixteenth century is accepted as a matter of fact, scholars construe from the same evidence various nomenclature, including bass viol, double bass violone, violoncello and tenor violin. As an example taken from iconography, an instrument that is part of the miniature painted by Hans Mielich in 1570 has been identified in several different ways. This picture occupies a page of approximately 56 cm in the Mielich-Codex, one of the most exquisitely decorated handwritten musical scores of the Munich court and the late sixteenth century.

The illustration shows all musicians employed at the Bavarian Court Ensemble under Orlando di Lasso, along with their instruments.\(^8\) The bass stringed instrument is depicted as part of the violin band, and it is shown behind the bass viol player, at the left lower part of the miniature (Fig. 1.1, middle left, placed on the corner of the table).

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The instrument is smaller than the bulky bass viol, but larger than the middle or alto members of the family. Barra Boydell labels it as a tenor violin (tenor Geige) or a viola da spalla. Nicole Schwindt identifies it either as a “large tenor violin or tenor fiddle (grosse

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"Tenorgeige),” or a “small bass violin or bass fiddle (kleine Bassgeige),”\textsuperscript{10} while Herbert W. Myers argues for its classification as a “viola da brazzo.”\textsuperscript{11}

Similarly, a large stringed bass instrument that is part of another illustration is defined as a “bass violin” by Peter Holman.\textsuperscript{12} This instrument is depicted in a drawing by Nicolaus Solis, near the organ player (Fig. 1.2, middle right). Peter Holman named the image \textit{The Wedding Banquet at the Munich Castle (22\textsuperscript{nd} February 1568)}, since it does not bear an official title.\textsuperscript{13} In disagreement with Holman, Alfred Planyavsky names the instrument a “human-sized double bass.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Schwindt, op. cit., 56.

\textsuperscript{11} Myers, “When is a Violino not a Viola da Braccio?,” op. cit., 338.

\textsuperscript{12} Holman, “The English Royal Violin Consort,” op. cit., 55.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 57.

Besides nomenclatural discrepancies in consideration of iconography, scholars also interpret written evidence in diverse ways. Ludovico Zacconi’s term, *tenore da viola da braccio*, taken from his treatise *Prattica di Musica*, has received various interpretations by different scholars. Agnes Kory identifies the idiom “tenor violin,” while four other scholars argue for a different label. These scholars agree on the designation “bass violin” with slightly distinct

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changes. Ephraim Segermann suggests the labels “Italian” or “small bass violin;”\textsuperscript{16} Herbert W. Myers references it as a small bass violin.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly to Myers, both David Boyden and Peter Holman argue for its identification as a bass violin of a smaller size.\textsuperscript{18} The choice among these options seems to depend on the scholar’s own instrumental preference, by means of different interpretation of the same evidence.\textsuperscript{19} Accordingly, defining the bass violin in the sixteenth century is not a straightforward issue by any means.

The identification of the sixteenth-century bass violin poses a serious challenge to the scholar for many reasons. There is a lack of surviving instruments in their original condition built prior to 1590, as previously described.\textsuperscript{20} In contrast to bass viols that have been carefully preserved in great numbers because they belonged to the milieu of the aristocracy and represented works of art, bass violins were played on an almost daily basis to provide everyday living to their players.\textsuperscript{21} Hence, they were not handled with similar care. Bass violins had to be functional, and were not often showcased for their aesthetic value.

Furthermore, most extant bass violins do not provide enough information about construction characteristics for various reasons. They have been cut down in size repeatedly to correspond to the modern violoncello, just as in the case of the instruments by Andrea Amati.\textsuperscript{22} Often, bass violins have been converted to bass viols or vice versa, i.e. bass viols have been


\textsuperscript{17} Myers, “When is a Violino not a Viola da Braccio?,” op. cit., 337.

\textsuperscript{18} Holman, “The English Royal Violin Consort,” op. cit., 58.

\textsuperscript{19} There is a specific discussion of this particular issue in chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{20} Jonathan Wainwright and Peter Holman, “From Renaissance to Baroque,” op. cit., 242.

\textsuperscript{21} Violinists were professionals in opposition to viol players who were mostly amateurs, see details later.

reconstructed as violoncellos. Instruments such as the Amati bass violins were rebuilt as cellos and were also labeled “violoncellos,” which mars these instruments’ identities as bass violins.\(^{23}\)

Frequently, builders of bass violins adopted viol features such as frets or C-shaped sound holes, and as a result, viol characteristics appeared on violins. Consequently, these hybrids do not provide definitive evidence about bass violins (or about viols, for that matter). In addition, both types continued to change and develop side by side during most of the century. Consequently, it is nearly impossible to experience the authentic sound of the sixteenth-century bass violin. The timbre represents the most distinctive quality of any musical instrument, and this essential feature of the bass violin is lost.

Several other factors make the identification of bass violins problematic as well. Above all, sixteenth-century terminology is not straightforward. Although organological treatises deal in detail with bass violin tunings prior to 1635, they fail to provide illustrations of the instrument or to describe its construction features in a clear and comprehensive way.

As with all stringed instruments, there was no standard concerning exact measurements and building materials of bass violins until the early eighteenth century, since sizes, building materials and minor construction details differed from region to region and builders usually did not have access to material imported from elsewhere. Moreover, the bass member of the violin family encompassed more varied forms than the soprano or alto violin, both in sizes and tunings. Therefore, more than a single extant organological example is needed to account as evidence for bass violins.

Finally, sixteenth-century iconography rarely includes bass violins, perhaps because of the low social status of its players as compared to the bass viol players. Furthermore, there was a

\(^{23}\) I refer to the five surviving bass violins.
general lack of interest in representing images of rural life and it was in such a bucolic setting that the violins first emerged. Painters preferred to showcase the aristocratic milieu and urban life.\textsuperscript{24} Out of more than 500 sixteenth- and seventeenth-century images examined for this essay, about eighty percent illustrate viols rather than violins.

Problems of Terminology

The difficulty of sixteenth-century bass violin terminology lies in the lack of a single, unified classification system applicable to all stringed instruments in use. Since rational classification came to be favored only in the seventeenth-century and afterward, sixteenth-century categorization is not necessarily systematic.\textsuperscript{25} It is sometimes based on analogies and can often include overlapping categories. This issue is aggravated by the fact that more than 400 years have passed and our classification systems have changed radically.

Besides the obvious linguistic discrepancies, a further confusing factor is the use of one general term for many different instruments. Often distinct instruments are categorized under the same terms, and plural forms occur more often than singular, in what could be a consequence of the general preference for ensembles or instrumental consorts over solo performance in the sixteenth century (see chapter 3).

The terms \textit{viola}, \textit{violone} and \textit{Geige} were most frequently used in a general sense, referring to both viol and violin.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, “viola” in Italy could indicate any stringed

\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, since all iconographical representations of instruments are works of art that involve the imaginative freedom of their creators, these images cannot serve as definite proofs.


\textsuperscript{26} Wainwright and Holman, “From Renaissance to Baroque,” op. cit., 19.
instrument in use, such as a viol, violin, lira, rebec or a double bass viol.\(^{27}\) As Ludovico Zacconi expresses it, the term “viola” refers to two types of “musical instruments [...] : it [either designates] the viola *da braccio* or [...] the viola *da gamba*.”\(^{28}\)

Similarly, *Geige* in German-speaking countries refers to rebecs, viols, fiddles and violins.\(^{29}\) The Italian word *viole*, is the plural form of viola, while in France it refers to a single viol.\(^{30}\) The idiom *violón* is used for viol in Spain, but, spelled without an accent, it designates the violin in France.\(^{31}\) At the same time, Jambe de Fer says that “Italians called the violin either *violon da braccia* or *violone*.”\(^{32}\) Vincenzo Galilei confirms this usage in labeling the violin as *violone*.\(^{33}\) Therefore, the plural term *violoni* might refer to both violins and viols. It is not until the end of the sixteenth-century that the label *violone* designates a bass stringed instrument only, either a bass violin or a bass viol.\(^{34}\)

The distinction between a bass viol and a bass violin in the sixteenth century is clarified through adjectives or additional words, according to performance position, tuning, presence or absence of frets, or size. The addition for viol-family instruments can be *de/da/di la gamba*, referring to the instrument being held between the legs, whereas for the violin family, the additional terms can be *da praz/prazo/brazo/braccio/brazzio, de braz* or *da brazo* because they

\(^{27}\) Planyavsky, op. cit., 16-17.


\(^{29}\) In treatises by Sebastian Virdung (1512), Hans Gerle (1532), and Martin Agricola (1528 and 1545).

\(^{30}\) Wainwright and Holman, “From Renaissance to Baroque,” op. cit., 19.

\(^{31}\) Philibert Jambe de Fer, “*Epitome Musicalis 1556,*” Annales Musicologiques: Moyen-Age et Renaissance, 6 (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Société de Musique d’Autrefois, 1958), 61-64.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 63.


\(^{34}\) Wainwright and Holman, op. cit., 18.
are held on the arm. The expression *da braccio*, nonetheless, refers not only to the playing position, but also to the tuning in fifths specific to the bass violin and violins in general.\(^{35}\) This differentiation could point to the discant members of each family; however, since the bass violin can be played in *da gamba* position as well as on the arm, this terminology turns out to be confusing rather than clarifying.

Another distinction concerns the frets, represented by the terms *da tasti* or *senza tasti*. Viols usually have frets, whereas violins do not. In some instances, frets were added to violins for educational purposes, but they normally remain fretless.\(^{36}\) Additional adjectives distinguish the sizes of different instruments. This principle, used mostly in the German-speaking parts of Europe, produces labels of a viol as a *große Geige* (large fiddle) and a violin as a *kleine Geige* (small fiddle).\(^{37}\) This method of differentiation proves to be less effective for bass violins and bass viols, since they are among the largest members of each family.\(^{38}\) German theorists also distinguish the violin from the viol by their place of origin. Agricola and Praetorius call the viol the Italian fiddle (*Welsche Geige*)\(^{39}\) and similarly, they designate the violin as the Polish fiddle (*polische Geige*).\(^{40}\) However, the earliest known images of both the bass violin and the violin are of Italian origin.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{35}\) Kory, op. cit., 125.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 127.


\(^{38}\) The only other bass stringed instrument to reach the large dimensions of bass violins was the double bass violone in the sixteenth century.

\(^{39}\) The adjective “welsch” denoted “Italian” in most German-speaking territories until the eighteenth century: Agricola, op. cit., 95.


Even though the terminology for bass violins remains problematic, there are relatively unequivocal terms for the violin in the sixteenth century, such as “violon, violan, violen, violette, vyalyn, vyolan, vyolen” or “vyolon.” 42 The same principle is valid for the viol family and its variants (“vial, violdegamba, violle, violl, voyall, vyole, vyal, vyol, vyall, vyal, wyall, wyoll”). 43 The Italian term violino is usually used for the whole violin family, 44 yet sometimes for the soprano and alto members only. 45 The term violon, which is one of the clearest designations, originates from the French language, so it makes sense that two Frenchmen provide us with the earliest unambiguous descriptions of violins of all sizes. 46

Jambe de Fer is the first to mention the bas de violon or bass violin (1556), 47 and the earliest illustration of a bass violin is by his compatriot Marin Mersenne (1635). Most sixteenth-century authors did not provide a straightforward answer to the ambiguity of terminology concerning viols and violins. Consequently, it is no surprise that opinions of present-day scholars greatly diverge about this topic as well.

Organological Treatises

At first sight, it would seem a simple task to identify the sixteenth-century bass violin according to contemporary organological treatises. This process, however, proves to be

42 Ibid., 8, 22-4.
44 Aurelio Virgiliano, Il dolcimelo, Bologna, 1600, Reprint (Firenze: Studio Per Edizioni Scelte, 1974), 47.
45 Boyden, op. cit., 23.
46 Michael Praetorius describes and illustrate violins, but does not provide an image of the four-stringed bass violin.
47 Giovanni Maria Lanfranco, Hans Gerle, Martin Agricola and Silvestro Ganassi mention bass violins as well, but they use ambiguous terminology. Therefore, Jambe de Fer’s account counts as the first definite description of the clear term ‘bas de violon’ as a reference to the bass violin.
extremely problematic. Points of contention include the terminological confusion, the existence of descriptions and depictions that do not match each other, the general lack of comprehensive discussions of violins, and, above all, the absolute lack of an illustration of the four-stringed bass violin in a treatise prior to 1635.

No sixteenth-century treatise provides an illustration of a bass violin that matches Gaudenzio Ferrari’s image (Saronno Cathedral, 1535), which is the earliest known iconographical representation of the instrument. Sebastian Virdung, Giovanni Maria Lanfranco, Ludovico Zacconi, and Silvestro Ganassi do not depict bass violins. Hans Gerle describes bass violins but illustrates rebecs.\footnote{Hans Gerle, \textit{Musica Teusch 1532}, Trans. Gordon J. Kinney (M.I. King Library, Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1977), text-fiche, Plate vi.} Martin Agricola discusses a bass violin with four strings but draws a fiddle with three strings.\footnote{Agricola, op. cit., 51-2 and 108-9.} Michael Praetorius introduces the four-stringed bass violin in writing, but shows a five-stringed instrument only.\footnote{Praetorius, op. cit., Plate xxi.} Aurelio Virgiliano’s \textit{Il Dolcimelo} in 1600 represents the best example of these confusing and imprecise illustrations of bass violins. The author draws a bass violin as the member of the \textit{violini}, but the illustration is identical to that of his bass viol.\footnote{Virgiliano, op. cit., 47.}

Writers also distinguish the types by their different roles in society rather than by their construction only. Jambe de Fer, our first reliable source for the distinction between viols and violins, reports on the different construction of the two types. However, he gives a single illustration for both viols and violins (Fig. 2.6).\footnote{See chapter 1.} He states that “the violin resembles the viol—
point for point,” except that the viol is played by the aristocrats and the violin by the common folk only.\textsuperscript{53}

For the same reason, other sixteenth-century music theorists also fail to show interest in discussing violins in detail. In contrast to viol players, violinists belonged to the lower social strata of society, which was, characteristic instruments included, seemingly unworthy of serious discussion. Sebastian Virdung calls the rebecs and possibly early violins “unprofitable or useless (\textit{onnütze})” instruments.\textsuperscript{54} Jambe de Fer states that the violin is commonly used for entertainment and dance, but only by professionals and craftsmen, in contrast to the viol, which is played by amateurs of the higher social level, such as “gentlemen, merchants and other persons of culture.”\textsuperscript{55}

Consorts of violins and viols carried the same social differentiation as the individual instruments. Violin bands consisted of professionals who earned their living by performing, in contrast to viol consorts that included amateurs who made music for pleasure as part of an intellectual fulfillment and musical instruction. Singing and playing on the viol, on the lute, or on a keyboard instrument belonged to the obligatory artistic education of noblemen and noblewomen in the sixteenth century.

Castiglione’s \textit{Book of the Courtier} in 1528 states that the only ensemble music suitable to aristocratic amateurs was “the musike of a sette of Violes [which] doth no lesse delite a man, for it is very sweete and artificiall.”\textsuperscript{56} In 1622, Henry Peacham describes in \textit{The Compleat}


\textsuperscript{54} Sebastian Virdung, \textit{Musica getutscht} (Strassbourg: 1511), 104.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., Jambe de Fer, 61.

Gentleman, that it is required of a lord “to sing [his] part sure, and at the first sight, withal, to play the same upon [his] Violl, or the exercise of the Lute, privately to [him] selfe.” In 1592 Ludovico Zacconi confirms that viols served for the homes, and violins for the streets.\textsuperscript{57} The distinct function of viol and violin consorts is also represented on the canvas \textit{The Memorial Portrait of Sir Henry Unton c.1596}, by an unknown artist. The viol consort, shown in the left upper corner, performs in a private chamber, separated from both the dinner table, and the rest of the house (Fig. 1.3).

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 122-3.

\textsuperscript{58} Gerhard Singer, op. cit., 101.
Players of three possibly different sizes of violins, on the other hand, are shown outside the dinner room, on what appears to be a balcony, performing in a broken consort. Even though the actual instruments cannot definitely be classified in the ensembles, the location of the ensemble, the consort’s occupation, along with the holding positions of the instruments, and the appearance of the players may identify the bands.

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59 Some scholars identify the alto violin (player with his back to the examiner) as a bandore.
The viol consort consists of amateur gentlemen, because they play in a private location, open exclusively to the Unton family and to aristocratic friends, so their art seems a privilege of their strata. The players might be all members of the Unton family, since the two highest viols are performed by players of a young age. The role of their music making appears to be private enjoyment and recreation. All instruments are held *da gamba* fashion, which strengthens their identification as viols.

In contrast, the violinists perform in a broken consort together with a flute, a lute, and a cittern in a public hall, where they can be heard in the neighboring dining chamber as well. The location suggests that the band was engaged and paid to entertain the Unton family during the dinner banquet. It was a usual custom in the English court to place the professional musicians in a different but nearby room during meals. As Lupold of Wedel, a German traveler describes it in 1585:

> Her musicians were also in the apartment and discoursed excellent music. But the players may normally have played from the public Presence Chamber while Elizabeth dined [...] in the adjacent Privy Chamber.\(^{60}\)

Furthermore, all violins are held on the arm on the canvas, even the bulky bass violin. This holding position is a distinctive violin feature. Finally, the viol players wear hats in opposition to the violinists who do not. Lupold of Wedel reports that the presence and lack of hats during social gatherings designated people of distinct social strata. Even gentlemen, generally wearing hats, were not allowed to put them on in the court.

> No one, however exalted his rank, may put on his hat in the Queen’s chamber, whether she be present or not.\(^{61}\)

\(^{60}\) Monson, op. cit., 322.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 319.
Accordingly, the lack of hats represents the violinists’ low social status compared to their employers, and also their occupation as professionals on the painting. In summary, both written accounts and iconography confirm the low social status of violin players.

Violinists belonged to the common folk—“sonatori da balli are loved and favored by the common people,” as Vincenzo Galilei portrays them. Since the bass violin was a commonplace instrument, it seemed unnecessary for writers and scholars “to describe it more thoroughly and precisely,” as Praetorius explains in 1618. Even Mersenne, who in fact provides the first detailed illustration of the bass violin, does not discuss it in writing since the engraving “is so well done that there is no need to pause for its description.”

Furthermore, sixteenth-century theorists found it difficult to account for violins, because of their lack of frets and the ensuing technical complexity of playing them. In 1511, Sebastian Virdung says:

The early violins are not suited to the formulation of rules and the writing out [of intabulations] from [which] to learn them. For [with these instruments, learning] has to come about much more from a great deal of practice, [than] it does by means of rules [that are] written out. Therefore, I shall write the very least about these instruments.

Martin Agricola states that because the violins “are made without frets, it is considered somewhat more difficult to apply the fingers to them and to move the fingers between the strings. But there is nothing so difficult on earth that one cannot attain by diligence.”

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62 Galilei, op. cit., 352.  
63 Praetorius, op. cit., 56.  
65 Virdung, op. cit., 104. Virdung possibly refers to rebecs, or to rebecs as well as to early violins. Rebecs were the direct ancestors of the early violin.  
66 Agricola, op. cit., 103.
that “everyone now wants to occupy himself with it, but few understand the neck, on which the
correct foundation is concealed.”

Gerle and Agricola introduce the addition of frets for learning purposes, but both suggest
their removal with a knife after one has mastered the art of intonation. Furthermore, writers
suggest that the player should mark the fingerboard with signs at the proper places for notes, and
for fingers by numbers or letters. Nevertheless, Gerle concludes that it does not matter whether
the violins “do or do not suffer frets, so long as one knows how to fiddle on them.”

Despite lacking comprehensive specific descriptions of the bass violin, these treatises
contain valuable information on violins in general and bass violins in particular. Treatises
written after the middle of the sixteenth century agree on the tuning in fifths, the four strings, and
the fretless fingerboard of the bass violin, in addition to its distinctions from the bass viol in
construction, sound quality, usage, social status and holding positions.

As if difficulties with terminology, incomplete description of the treatises, and preference
for depicting viols rather than violins were not problematic enough, many present-day scholars
continue to contribute to the general misunderstanding by the simple identification of bass
violins as bass viols or double basses. First, they misinterpret the general usage of the terms
viola and violone, as discussed above. Secondly, since the bass violin was held between the
player’s legs, in da gamba fashion as well as in other holding positions (see chapter 4), the

67 Ibid., 105.
68 Ibid., 58.
69 Gerle, op. cit., 73.
70 Hans Gerle, Maria Lanfranco and Martin Agricola state some of those distinct qualities of the bass violin
in 1533, 1532 and 1546, respectively.
71 Planyavsky, op. cit., 1-3, 72, 93-4.
instrument simply is identified as either a bass member of the *viola da gamba* family or even as an early exemplar of a double bass.\textsuperscript{72}

Since some extant organological exemplars might carry construction details of both viols and violins, scholars misidentify the instruments based on arguments for one selected type, without considering other important factors that may involve social status or holding position. The borrowed features, however, do not change the basic types and are not sufficient enough to identify a violin as a viol or vice versa. In many cases, the reason for misinterpretations may be the lack of knowledge about the bass violin. For example, just because a bass stringed instrument possesses frets or C-shaped sound holes, it is not necessary a bass viol. Yet, in opposition to scholarship focusing only on single features, the goal of this thesis is to propose clarification about the bass violin based on numerous aspects.

Outline of the Essay

The discussion begins with a general report of the distinct construction features of viols and violins, to establish a common understanding about their different nature, which knowledge is necessary to appreciate the rest of the paper. Following is a survey about the early bass violin and bass viol, along with their separate development, including a comparison of their distinct sound quality. Next is a description of the basic construction details of the evolved bass violin at the end of the sixteenth century. The final sections of chapter 2 introduce the two basic sizes and tunings of the bass violin, along with the first official illustration of the instrument in Marin Mersenne’s treatise of 1635.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 118.
Chapter 3 focuses on two extant organological examples of the smaller sized bass violin model, built in 1594, found recently in the Freiberg Cathedral. After a short introduction, the examination of the label provides a background of the patrons and the builders of the instruments in Saxony in general. The construction of the Freiberg instruments verifies their identity as bass violins, and a description of the surviving bass violin bow supplies information about the common performance practice of the bass violin. Following, the small size and distinct tuning of the bass violins suggests the instruments’ possible use in church. The appearance of five violins in Freiberg provides evidence of the Renaissance principle of consorts. The location and creation of the violins as an embodiment of Saxon royal pomp proposes the violin band’s employment at court. Beaujoyeulx’s account and illustration of the *Le Balet Comique de la Royne* and Bealieu’s score confirm that a probable small bass violin was a significant part of the festivity. Finally, the physical characteristics of the end block of the Freiberg bass violins furnish evidence for the holding positions of the instruments.

Chapter 4 discusses the larger model through an examination of a bass violin built by Dovigo Spilman in 1590, now part of the Collection of Ancient Musical Instruments (Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente) in Vienna. Historical background of the Obizzi collection and a study of the bass violin’s label introduce the builder’s origin. A description of the Spilman instrument’s construction details compared to the Freiberg bass violins and to the later violoncello model confirms its identity of the larger sized bass violin. The instrument’s string lengths verify its low tuning in C or in Bb. The Spilman *pochette* violin and the builder’s name propose his various occupations, introducing him as an example of a Renaissance minstrel and his instrument as a case of live music making. The existence of a pin and the thin lower bouts of
the Spilman bass violin evidence the instrument’s two main possible holding positions. Finally, a conclusion section summarizes the reached goals, results and afterthoughts of this research.

Conventions Used in This Essay

Tunings of instruments and individual pitches are designated with pitch-transpositions of Helmholtz’s convention, in which middle c is indicated as c’. Unless otherwise stated in the footnote references, the translations are mine. Iconographical examples are listed in the “Iconographical Sources” within the Bibliography section of this essay, and are not cited with a footnote reference within the body of the paper.
CHAPTER 2

ORIGIN AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE BASS VIOLIN

Construction Differences between the Violin and Viol Families

The distinction between viols and violins is a controversial topic and is heatedly discussed by both sixteenth-century writers and present-day scholars. Accordingly, the identification of the sixteenth-century bass violin needs to begin with a general discussion of the differences between the viol and violin families. The guidelines established in this chapter will provide a basis for the ensuing classification and identification of the three extant unaltered bass members of the violin family.

As is well known, there are fundamental differences in construction between a viol and a violin. The violin has four strings, no frets, rounded upper and lower shoulders, F-shaped sound holes, a tuning in fifths; and its bow is played with an overhand bow grip. The back plate of the violin is flat with a slight arching in the middle, and it creates a ninety-degree angle with the upper ribs at a constant depth. The indentation created by the ribs on either side of the body is much deeper than on the viol. The violin possesses protrusive corner blocks on either side of the ribs in the middle of its body, surrounding the center bouts. The ribs do not connect to the top and back plates evenly, but the edges project beyond, overhanging the ribs slightly.\footnote{Boyden, \textit{The Violin Family}, op. cit., 5.} The violin has a short and narrow fingerboard and usually a higher bridge than the viol (Fig. 2.1).
The belly of the violin is built from soft wood, typically from European spruce. The back plate and the ribs are made of hardwood, generally maple, similarly to the peg box and tailpiece, and occasionally to the fingerboard and the neck. Both plates may be constructed from one piece of wood, or sometimes of two pieces joined.\(^7^5\)

\(^7^4\) The size of the pictures have been modified for a better comparison. However, the proportions have been kept in Praetorius' original version.

\(^7^5\) Boyden, *The Violin Family*, op.cit., 5.
In contrast, the viol has six strings, frets, strongly downward sloping shoulders, C-shaped sound holes, a tuning in fourths with a third in the middle; and it is played with an underhand bow grip.\textsuperscript{76} The back usually has a sloped upper part, so that the instrument has a reduced depth at the upper shoulders.\textsuperscript{77} Both curves on the ribs of the viol are not predominantly shaped inward; the corners of the curves are flatter than in violins, and there are no corner blocks. The belly and the back plate of the viol are flush with the ribs,\textsuperscript{78} in other words, the ribs and the plates are connected evenly.\textsuperscript{79} The viol has a wide fingerboard and a wider and flatter bridge than the violin (Fig. 2.1).\textsuperscript{80} The sound of the viol is omnidirectional. It is darker and less various in color than the sound of the violin; thus it has more overtones than the violin.\textsuperscript{81}

The construction of the viol requires thinner wood for better resonance. The violin is usually built more robustly from thicker and stronger wood, as described above. The neck of the viol is broader than that of the violin; and because the viol strings are thinner, the tension of the strings is lower.\textsuperscript{82} The top plate of the viol might be constructed from one piece of wood similarly to the violin, or of two pieces joined. Yet, the back plate of the viol is rarely built from one piece of wood, in contrast to the violin. The early viol and violin types of the mid-sixteenth century differ in some details from the later, more standard ones, to be discussed at the end of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., Boyden, 5.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 12-3.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., Boettcher and Pape, 13.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 13.
However, some features are shared by sixteenth-century viols and violins. These characteristics include a peg box that is not in straight alignment with the neck but is slightly arched backwards. The bellies of both viols and violins might have an arching in the center, although violins usually have an arched back plate, while back plates of viols are generally flat. Furthermore, both types possess an end button on the lower bouts of the instrument to which the tailpiece is fixed by a gut loop or wire. Various sixteenth-century specimens combine features from both types.

This phenomenon, of borrowing characteristics from both types of construction, may be attributed to the fact that instrument makers and players were constantly seeking to perfect the models of the viol and the violin. In addition, the violin type became rapidly the more stable and favored model in construction, perhaps due to its more direct sound projection. This kind of experimentation, however, did not undermine the identity of the types, because each of them was associated with a different social rank of players, and social boundaries of the performers would not be crossed until much later in history.

Development of Viols and Violins in the Sixteenth Century

Early Types until the Middle of the Century

There is considerable dissention regarding which characteristics constitute the bass violin and so, its early distinction from the bass viol has been repeatedly called into question. The viol and violin families were recognizably different since the time of the violin’s very first appearance at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and they witnessed parallel developments
throughout their history.\textsuperscript{83} Bass members of both families were present and in simultaneous use during the sixteenth-century because of their distinct roles and functions in society. Even though both instruments continued to evolve until the 1570s, the main differences in construction between the two families have existed at least since 1529.

This separation is well documented by two canvases from that year. The painter Hans Baldung Grien presents a viol, which shows all viol characteristics discussed above (Fig. 2.2). For comparison, a clearly identifiable violin exemplar is portrayed on Gaudenzio Ferrari’s painting \textit{Madonna among the orange trees} (Fig. 2.3), which is one of the earliest known representations of the violin.\textsuperscript{84} The distinction between the bass members of both families probably mirrors that of the general types that were established by the late 1520s.

\textsuperscript{83} The early viol appeared just some decades before the early violin; Ian Woodfield places this date in the 1490s: see Woodfield, op. cit., 81.

\textsuperscript{84} David Boyden introduced two earlier images of the early violin: a French woodcut from 1516 and a detail of a fresco by Garofalo, 1505-8. However, the 1516 image resembles rather a rebec than a violin in its shape; and Garofalo’s depiction shows the early violin from a side angle. Therefore, the first picture to provide unambiguous evidence for the construction of an early violin is Ferrari’s one: see Boyden, op. cit., \textit{The Violin Family}, 16.
Figure 2.2. Viol, Detail from *Music*, Hans Baldung Grien 1529, Alte Pinakothek Munich.
Figure 2.3. *Madonna of the Orange Trees* by Gaudenzio Ferrari, 1529, detail.

Figure 2.4. Illustration of viols with five and six strings by Hans Gerle, *Musica Teusch*, 1532.
Given that by 1529 both types were extant, although not yet fully standardized, it is reasonable to assume that after that date they evolved side by side, maintaining their separate qualities and functions throughout the sixteenth century. The early types of viol and violin differed not only in the shapes of their bodies, as mentioned above, but also in the number of their strings and their tunings as well. By the 1530s, the early type of viol had either five strings tuned in fourths, or six strings tuned in fourths around a central third. The early violin had three strings tuned in fifths.

Treatises by Martin Agricola and Hans Gerle give tunings for both models of viols. Gerle’s illustration in 1532 shows both types of the early bass viol, with five or six strings (Fig. 2.4). Thus, the images share the same distinct viol construction characteristics as the viol on Hans Baldung Grien’s painting, except for the lack of a bridge (Fig. 2.2). The viols of Giovanni Maria Lanfranco and Silvestro Ganassi possess six strings according to the writer’s tuning charts of 1533 and 1542, respectively. Hans Gerle’s illustration does not include a viol bow, but on Ganassi’s depiction of a viol consort of three different sizes, all of the players use an underhand bow grip. Accordingly, the overhand violin grip might have been already established by mid-sixteenth century.

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85 The tuning of this model eventually became the standard (described by Lanfranco, Ganassi and Jambe de Fer).

86 Agricola, op. cit., 45-6.

87 Gerle, op. cit., 71.

88 A viol bridge is missing on Gerle’s drawing. This lack, however, does not prove the absence of a bridge of the early bass viol, since a bridge is clearly painted on both Grien’s and Ganassi’s representations, as well as by other authors. A possible reason to dismiss the bridge may have been Gerle’s preference to use the limited space to label the strings rather than to draw a bridge.


91 Ganassi, *Regula*, op. cit., Plate ii.
In comparison, by the 1530s, the early bass violin had only three strings, just like the soprano member of the family, and the fourth string was added within a very short period of time to expand the bass register.\textsuperscript{92} Both Silvestro Ganassi’s\textsuperscript{93} and Martin Agricola’s\textsuperscript{94} earlier treatise of 1528 describe a bass violin with three strings, and a tuning of F-c-g. The fourth string was possibly added very soon afterwards, since both Hans Gerle\textsuperscript{95} and Lanfranco describe the bass violin with four strings, in 1532 and 1533, respectively. Both authors make it clear that although all other violins have three strings, the bass requires four.\textsuperscript{96} The bass violin is described as a four-stringed instrument in Agricola’s revised treatise of 1545 as well.\textsuperscript{97} Even though the fourth string was not added everywhere in Europe at the same time, the bass violin was possibly the first member of the violin family to systematically receive an extension of its register.

The earliest known representation of the bass violin by Gaudenzio Ferrari in 1535 includes other physical features of the early bass violin (Fig.2.5).\textsuperscript{98} The image is part of the ceiling fresco of the Saronno Cathedral (Lombardy region in Northern Italy). There are two basic points that advance the identity of the depicted instrument as a bass violin.

The construction details of Ferrari’s bass instrument resemble those of the violin type and not those of the viol. Furthermore, it is the lowest member of the violin family, because it is placed between the two other violin players on the fresco, as the bass member of a small violin

\textsuperscript{92} The extension of the bass register of lutes, theorbs, organs and harpsichords was a general phenomenon during and after the mid-sixteenth century and it was practiced on all stringed bass instruments as well.

\textsuperscript{93} Silvestro Ganassi, \textit{Lettione Seconda pur della Pratica di sonare il Violone d’Arco da Tasti} (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1543), Capitolo xxiii.

\textsuperscript{94} Agricola, op. cit., 51.

\textsuperscript{95} Gerle, op. cit., 78.

\textsuperscript{96} Lanfranco, op. cit., 137.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., Agricola, 108.

\textsuperscript{98} Boettcher and Pape, op. cit., 9.
band of three different sizes. Ferrari’s instrument carries distinctive violin features. It has slightly rounded shoulders, a short fingerboard, protrusive corner blocks around the C-bouts, overhanging edges of the belly over the sides, a high arch in the middle of the top plate, a wide bridge and F-shaped sound holes in a reverse shape (Fig. 2.5).

Figure 2.5. Gaudenzio Ferrari, Angelic Consort, Saronno Cathedral, 1535, detail.
The instrument possesses frets, which might serve some scholars as a case to argue against the classification of this instrument as a violin. Yet this feature is not enough to refute the identification proposed here. Occasionally, frets were added to the bass member of the violin family for educational purposes, namely to achieve a better orientation and intonation (see above). The addition of frets to violoncellos, the later bass members of the violin family, is described by Quantz as late as 1752, as a possibility in case the performer used them as viol players did.\footnote{Ibid., 13.} Because of the age and lack of clarity of the fresco, the number of the strings of the bass violin cannot be definitely assessed; however, three pegs are visible. The existence of three pegs implies the presence of three strings only, verifying the accounts of Gerle, Agricola and Ganassi, about the early bass violin.

In contrast to Gerle’s viols, a bow is depicted with Ferrari’s bass violin. The bow is held with an overhand grip, although only the index and middle fingers rest on the bow stick from above, while the thumb, ring and little fingers touch the stick from below. Moreover, the hair of the bow is fixed by a string or wire, possibly strengthened by wax, to the bow stick at three different places: at both ends of the stick and at the frog. The angel’s thumb, ring and little fingers touch the bow at the two fixed points at the frog. Most likely, the performer grabs the frog both for holding and for balancing reasons. This bow grip suggests that the frog was either an unmovable frog or a “slot-notch frog,” which is described as the following.

An unmovable frog held the bow hair at fixed tension and usually had a horn-like shape.\footnote{Boyden, \textit{The Violin Family}, op. cit., 203-7.} The clip-in model, otherwise called the “slot-in frog” had a wedge inserted into a notch at the lower end of the bow. This model, also designated as “slot-notch frog” was itself movable, therefore, with its aid the performer was able to use different tensions of the bow hair. The horn-
shaped unmovable frog and the clip-in frog both represent early- and mid-sixteenth-century bow mechanisms.  

Models from 1550 to 1600

Due to the general pan-European practice of extending instrumental ranges by mid-sixteenth-century, both the early violin with three strings and the early viol with five or six strings were replaced with the types of four and six strings, respectively. The addition of strings was due to the general practice of extending the range of all instruments. The earliest clear description of the newer types corresponds to Jambe de Fer’s treatise *Epitome Musical* (1556). The different number of strings and their tunings are described as the primary distinctions in construction between the two types. He describes the violin with four strings tuned in fifths; and the viol with five strings tuned in fourths, or six strings in fourths around a central third.  

The violin is very different from the viol. First: it has only four strings, which are tuned at a fifth from one to the other, and each of the said strings has four pitches in such wise that it has on four strings as many pitches as the viol has on five. [...] The viol at use in France has only five strings, and that in Italy has six.  

The French viol is tuned at a fourth from string without any exception. That of Italy is tuned exactly like the lute, to wit: fourths and a third.  

Italian instruments were highly sought after and employed in all parts of Europe, and the newcomer viols with six strings and a wider range were considered more desirable than their five-stringed counterparts. This preference for six-stringed viols rather than their five stringed

101 Ibid., 207.
102 Apparently, the sixth-stringed viol was not yet used at that time in Lyon, only the early type with five strings. Accordingly, the four-stringed violin became the standard possibly earlier than the six-stringed viol.
104 Ibid., 41.
counterparts is verified in treatises by Giovanni Maria Lanfranco and Silvestro Ganassi.\(^{105}\) Even so, the number of strings of viols and their exact tunings differed from region to region, due to the lack of a standard model.

In contrast, violins seemed to have reached the standard four strings and a tuning in fifths, already by mid-century. Jambe de Fer presents two diverse tunings for the viols, one in fourths and one in fourths and a third, in direct opposition to the fifth-tuning of the violin, which coincides with current standards. In addition, he states that the “French violin differs in nothing from the Italian in reference to the [construction of the] instrument.”\(^{106}\)

Except for the different number of strings and distinction in tuning, Jambe de Fer does not mention any dissimilarity in construction between viols and violins. Rather than drawing two separate types (Fig. 2.6), he depicts one compound instrument that bears construction features of both viols and violins. The instrument in this image possesses five strings but only four pegs, which possibly refers to both the five-stringed viols and to the four-stringed violins. Jambe de Fer’s instrument has frets and the C-shaped sound holes of the viols, but it includes the rounded shoulders and the lower bouts of the violins. Other features are common to both families.


\(^{106}\) Jambe de Fer, *Epitome*, transl., op. cit., 43.
Figure 2.6. Jambe de Fer’s illustration of viol and violin, *Epitome musical* 1556.

Jambe de Fer’s illustration shows features of both instruments in one image. Shared characteristics include the existence of frets, the arched peg box, and the tailpiece by which the strings are held. Although the tailpiece, otherwise called the string holder of the violin is more
ornate than that of the viol, it seems tightly fixed to the end button by a gut loop on both instruments.¹⁰⁷

The distinct construction of viols and violins is unequivocally documented in 1585, some fifty years after the first iconographic representation of the early violins.¹⁰⁸ Jacques Cellier’s drawing _Violle et Violon_ represents the earliest known picture that provides a direct comparison between the two families (Fig. 2.7).¹⁰⁹

Figure 2.7. _Violle et Violon_, Jacques Cellier 1585, Bibliothéque Nationale de France, Paris.¹¹⁰

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¹⁰⁷ According to Kolneder (15), it is in modern times affixed by a wire.

¹⁰⁸ All distinct construction features are visible on the drawing, except that the viol’s top plate does not have true sloping upper shoulders, but they build a ninety-degree angle to the neck. However, the back plate of the viol obviously is more sloped and the violin’s shoulders are, in comparison, definitely more rounded and curved than that of the viol.


¹¹⁰ Ibid., 234.
The viol, pictured on the left, and the violin, on the right, are strikingly different. The illustration both emphasizes and complements Jambe de Fer’s narrative. The viol has six strings—although only five pegs are visible—while the violin clearly shows four strings and four pegs. The existence of both types is further confirmed a few years later in Ludovico Zacconi’s treatise (1592), in which the author clearly states that violins have four strings and viols, six.\(^\text{111}\)

Cellier agrees with Jambe de Fer’s observation about the different tuning of the instruments. A caption underneath the illustrations presents the tuning of both families: “the viol only differs from the violin in that it is tuned in fourths [and] the violin is tuned in fifths” (“la violle differ seulement du violon en ce qu’elle s’accorde a la quarte [...] Le violon s’accorde à la quinte”).\(^\text{112}\) Furthermore, both writers agree on the form and size of the instruments.

Jambe de Fer states that the violin “is smaller and flatter in form” than the viols; moreover, “it has no frets because the fingers almost touch each other from pitch to pitch.”\(^\text{113}\) The drawings and the remarks of Jacques Cellier correspond to Jambe de Fer’s point, adding that “the belly of the viol is more arched than the one of the violin.”\(^\text{114}\)

Cellier clearly differentiates the body construction of the violin from that of the viol in his drawing. The diverse building material or wood quality of the viol and violin are represented by the distinct wood-grain pattern of the ribs of the two instruments. The ribs of the viol show the rings in the veined wood as straight lines. In contrast, the ribs of the violin do not show any curls, as they are called by violin makers. This suggests that different materials were used to build the

\(^{111}\) Gerhard Singer, op. cit., 51.

\(^{112}\) Otterstedt and Reiners, op. cit., 234.

\(^{113}\) Jambe de Fer, Epitome, transl., op. cit., 43.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., Otterstedt and Reiners, 234.
two different types of instruments. This detail substantiates the fact that different woods had been employed to build viols and violins, as stated in the beginning of this chapter.\textsuperscript{115}

A bow is drawn behind each instrument. The viol bow is depicted with its hair on the top and the stick on the bottom; the violin bow, on the other hand, has the stick on the top and the hair on the bottom. This feature represents the style of bowing proper to each instrument. Thereby, Cellier implies that an overhand grip was used for violins, while the underhand grip was appropriate for viols.

\textbf{Sound Differentiation}

By the last third of the sixteenth century, authors and painters clearly established the difference in construction between viols and violins. The diverse sound quality of both families is also much discussed in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, during which writers describe the sound of a violin in a twofold manner. The timbre of the violin is either considered sweet, pure, artful and lovely in resonance as it imitates the voice, or it is assessed as clear, penetrating, harsh and loud. Comparatively, the sound of the viols is soft and richer in overtones than the violin sound, but it is less direct and projecting. Martin Agricola compares the sound of violins to the viols at some length in 1545:

\begin{quote}
In my opinion they [the violins] sound quite pure and are much more refined, artful and lovely in resonance than the [viols]. Anyone may recognize by himself what I mean by "refined," […] for what is soft dampens the sound, and what is hard makes the music clearer.\textsuperscript{116}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{115} It is also possible, however, that the straight curls represent how the wood was cut. If the wood was cut radially on the quarter, the ribs of the viol might have a pattern of continuous lines: see Boyden, \textit{The Violin Family}, op.cit., 5-6.

\textsuperscript{116} Agricola, op. cit., 103.
Agricola recognizes that the specific sound quality of violins is direct, projecting and has a brighter and louder timbre than that of the viols. Jambe de Fer underscores this idea by stating that the violin is very “harsh in sound… and it is easy to tune- [since] the fifth [is] sweeter to the ear than the fourth.” Complementing this information with a more positive appraisal, Virdung compares the sound of violins to the human voice. He explains that if one wants to grasp the timbre of the [rebecs or early violins], the knowledge “has to come […] from the understanding of song.”

Mersenne describes the sound of the violin as “ravishing and powerful,” and states that its tone is “more vigorous and more noticeable” than the timbre of the lute or other stringed instruments because of the greater tension of its strings and their higher sounds. He adds that if one wishes to assign a particular character or affection to the violin and the viol, then the violin could be called gay and joyous and the viol sad and languishing.

The most specific feature of violin playing is adding vibrato during performing. The addition of vibrato creates a distinctly warm sound of the instrument. The vibrato also attracted the early writers’ attention. “One also produces vibrato freely to make the melody sound sweeter than it will be on the [viols]” explains Agricola. Mersenne prescribes that “the strings must be softened by some quavering which ought to be done by the finger […] so that the string may be nursed,” thus, a vibrato is produced.

117 Jambe de Fer, Epitome, transl., op. cit., 43.
118 Musica getutscht 1511 by Sebastian Virdung is the earliest organological treatise in the German language.
119 Sebastian Virdung, Musica getutscht (Strassbourg: 1511), 104.
120 Mersenne, op. cit., 235-8.
121 Agricola, op. cit., 103.
122 Mersenne, op. cit., 241.
In addition, the violin sound possesses more colors than the one special timbre that is created by the vibrato. As Mersenne states in the early seventeenth century:

The violin is capable of all the genres and all the species of music, and that one can play the enharmonic, and each species of the diatonic and chromatic upon it. [...] It imitates and counterfeits all sorts of instruments, such as the voice, the organ, the hurdy-gurdy, the bagpipe, [and] the fife.

In summary, by the late sixteenth century, the distinctive nature of viols and violins is clearly stated in treatises and other documented evidence, both in terms of construction details and sound quality.

The Construction of the Bass Violin in the Late 1500s

After discussing the difference between viol and violin types in construction and sound and charting some of the steps that their evolution undertook, the sixteenth-century bass violin can be considered in further detail. The construction of the sixteenth-century bass violin clearly resembled that of the soprano member of the family. It had four strings, a short fingerboard, rounded shoulders, protrusive corner blocks, overhanging edges of the top plate over the sides, F-shaped sound holes, and a peg box that was arched backwards. Tuned in fifths, it could carry frets or be free of them. The bass violin’s holding style also differed from the violin because of its bulkier dimensions.

Unlike the violin, the bass member of the family was played with both an underhand and overhand grip. Iconography by Gaudenzio Ferrari (Fig. 2.5), Jacques Cellier (Fig. 2.7),

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123 Ibid., 239.
124 Ibid., 242.
125 The diverse bow grips are due the bass violin’s alternative holding positions.
discussed above, and Bernardino Lanino (Fig. 2.9) below, provide examples of the overhand grip. The basic model of a late-sixteenth-century bass violin with an underhand bow grip is shown both on a drawing by Lanino or his workshop in the 1560’s (Fig. 2.10) and on a canvas by Alonso Vázquez and Juan de Uceda painted in 1598-1602 (Fig. 2.8).

![Figure 2.8. Apotheosis of Saint Hermenegildo, by Alonso Vázquez and Juan de Ucida, 1602, detail.](image)

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126 Similarly, the double bass of today also uses both German and French bowing techniques in an underhand and overhand fashion, respectively.

The instrument in the painting can be clearly identified as a bass violin of small size, since it bears all of the salient construction features of that late-sixteenth-century type. It has rounded shoulders, protrusive corner blocks, F-shaped sound holes, four strings, a short fingerboard without frets, overhanging edges of the top plate over the sides, and a peg box that is arched backwards. The bass violin also shows clear purflings on the belly. A purfling is a line that runs just inside the outer edges of both plates on a violin, clearly painted on the instrument by Vazquez.128

A bridge cannot be seen; however, this feature does not disprove its nomenclature as a bass violin. The lack of a bridge is due to the angel’s right leg covering a large part of the bass violin’s lower bouts, where the bridge might have been placed, instead of between the sound holes. This particular positioning of the bridge is shown on previously mentioned images by Jambe de Fer (Fig. 2.6), Jacques Cellier (Fig. 2.7), and Bernardino Lanino, which will be discussed later in this chapter (Fig. 2.9).

The bow grip of the angel on Vazquez and Uceda’s painting is not overhand but underhand. This method of holding the bow may have been more comfortable because of the positioning of the instrument, which is on the left inner thigh of the performer. Thus, the painting provides an example of a fully evolved bass violin at the end of the sixteenth century, and a corresponding bow with an underhand grip. In consideration of this conclusive iconographic evidence for the existence and identification of this instrument as a bass violin, it is now possible to discuss the basic sizes and tunings of the bass violin.

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The Two Basic Sizes and Tunings of the Bass Violin

The bass violin emerged in two basic sizes in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Iconography, contemporary inventories of musical instruments, and, most importantly, tuning charts of treatises suggest that the bass violin has existed in two basic sizes since its appearance, i.e. a smaller and a larger size. Bass violins of two separate sizes are documented on the basis of iconographical evidence during the mid sixteenth-century and at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The small sized bass violin is represented in the painting *Madonna and Child enthroned with Saints and Donors* by Bernardino Lanino in 1552. The instrument is held as it leans against the angel’s left leg in a seated position and rests in front of the player on the ground (Fig. 2.9). The larger bass violin can be seen on the drawing *Standing Angel Playing a Bass [Violin]* in 1560 by the same artist’s workshop (Fig. 2.10).  

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Figure 2.9. *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Donors*, oil on panel by Bernardino Lanino, 1552, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, detail.
Figure 2.10. *Standing Angel Playing a Bass [Violin]*, 1560s, New York, Private Collection.
The larger instrument, as depicted, stands upright as it is played and rests on the left inner thigh of the performer. This bass violin is radically larger than the instrument in Lanino’s painting. Features of both small and larger instruments correspond to the violin family. They possess rounded shoulders, protrusive corner blocks with overhanging edges of the top plate, F-shaped sound holes, a flat, short and fretless fingerboard, and a peg box that is arched backwards. The smaller model has four strings, an overhand bow grip and a clear arching in the middle of the belly. The number of strings of the larger bass violin cannot be definitely assessed; however, four strings are shown at the bridge of the instrument. The larger instrument is played with an underhand bow grip. There is a slight arching detectable on the left side of the belly of the bulkier instrument. The small bass violin (Fig. 2.9) has a clear purfling line on the belly, similarly to the instrument painted by Vazquez (Fig. 2.8).

The fact that the same artist depicted identically constructed bass violins of different sizes suggests that he was familiar with two separate sized bass members of the violin family. One late sixteenth-century inventory of musical instruments confirms this description. In 1596, the Ruhelust inventory mentions “fiddles, to be used for dancing, six pieces, a large bass, a small bass, three tenors, one discant” (“Viole, zum tanz zu gebrauchen, 6 stuckh, als ain grossen pasz, ain clain pasz, 3 tenor, ain discant”). Since the violin band was the primary string consort to accompany dancers, it is reasonable to suggest that this entry of the inventory refers exclusively to members of the violin family. Accordingly, the report describes two distinct sized bass violins, a small and a larger model.

The presence of a larger and smaller model implies the existence of two different tunings; a higher and a lower one, since only radically diverse string lengths, associated with distinct

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body dimensions, would produce two tunings of a fifth apart. The higher tuning corresponds to the smaller model, since shorter strings produce higher pitches. The larger sized bass violin possessed longer strings and as a result it had a lower tuning than the smaller size.

Two relatively late treatises by Ludovico Zacconi (1592) and by Michael Praetorius (1618) introduce the two bass violin tunings. Other treatises, however, give one of the two in isolation. The higher tuning is either G-d-a-e’ or F-c-g-d’; while the lower is either Bb-F-c-g or C-G-d-a. The following table summarizes the tunings given in organological treatises from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the mid seventeenth-century for all members of the violin family (Table 2.1). It serves as a comprehensive overview for the subsequent discussion.132

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131 This table is inspired by Agnes Kory and Nicole Schwindt, but the information summarized is taken directly from the primary sources.

132 Giovanni Maria Lanfranco does not state actual pitches, but indicates them. The tunings are specified and added by his translator Cerone in 1613.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR &amp; YEAR OF TREATISE</th>
<th>TERMINOLOGY FOR VIOLINS</th>
<th>VOICE TYPE</th>
<th>TUNING/PITCHES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martin Agricola I (1528)</td>
<td>Kleine Geigen one bünde</td>
<td>Discant</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenor/Alt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>c-g-d'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F-c-g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans Gerle (1532)</td>
<td>Kleine Geiglein</td>
<td>Discant</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenor/Alto</td>
<td>c-g-d'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>C-g-d-a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni Maria Lanfranco (1533)</td>
<td>Violetta da braccio</td>
<td>Cantus</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenor/Contralto</td>
<td>c-g-d'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>Bb-F-c-g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvestro Ganassi (1543)</td>
<td>Viole da brazo senza tasti</td>
<td>Canto/Soprano</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenor/Alto</td>
<td>c-g-d'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>F-c-g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Agricola II (1545)</td>
<td>Kleine Geigen</td>
<td>Discant</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenor/Alt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>F-G-d-a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F-c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jambe de Fer (1556)</td>
<td>Violons</td>
<td>Dessus</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taille/Hautecontre</td>
<td>c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bas</td>
<td>Bb-F-c-g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludovico Zacconi (1592)</td>
<td>Viole da braccio</td>
<td>Violini</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Soprano da viola da braccio</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenore da viola da braccio</td>
<td>c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Basso da viola da braccio</td>
<td>F-c-g-d'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adriano Banchieri (1609)</td>
<td>Violini da braccio</td>
<td>Canto</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenore/Alto</td>
<td>c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>G-d-a-e'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Praetorius (1618)</td>
<td>Geigen</td>
<td>Discant (ordinary)</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenor-Geig</td>
<td>c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bas-Geig de bracio</td>
<td>F-c-g-d'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marin Mersenne (1635)</td>
<td>Violons</td>
<td>Dessus</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quinte/Cinquesme</td>
<td>c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Haute-contre</td>
<td>c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taille</td>
<td>Bb-F-c-g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athanasius Kircher (1650)</td>
<td>No general term for violins as a family</td>
<td>Violini/Chelys minor</td>
<td>g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alto</td>
<td>c-g-d'-a'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Basso di viola/Violone</td>
<td>G-d-a-e'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1. Table of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century violin tunings in treatises.
In 1592, Zacconi lists four different tunings for the members of the violin family, which he equates to the human voices. He calls the two high members violini, in a soprano and an alto range, respectively. The two lowest members are labeled tenore da viola da braccio and basso da viola da braccio, and are tuned F-c-g-d’ and Bb-f-c-g’, which Agnes Kory interpreted as evidence for the existence of the tenor violin in F. Kory underlines her argument with further appearances of the term “tenor violin” in the 1613 inventory of the Kassel court, and also in the instrumental treatise of Daniel Hitzler from 1628.

However, upon detailed examination of Kory’s evidence, in addition to sixteenth and seventeenth-century-writings discussed by twentieth and twenty-first-century scholars, another interpretation is conceivable. Zacconi’s classification stands in the absolute minority within the ensemble of sixteenth-century organological treatises. All other writers of the sixteenth century distinguish among three basic members and tunings of the violin family; a soprano, an alto/tenor, and a bass. The soprano member of the family (also called discant, discantus or dessus) corresponds in approximate size and exact tuning to the present-day violin, tuned in fifths based on g’. The two middle members, alto and tenor, employ but a single tuning that matches that of our “modern” viola. It is unclear if they refer to a single instrument that could cover both voices, or to instruments of different size that nevertheless shared the same tuning. Hans Gerle and Marin Mersenne are the only authors to comment on this topic in 1532 and in 1635, respectively.

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134 Kory, op. cit., 125-6.
135 The theorists Lanfranco, Agricola, Jambe de Fer, Gerle and Ganassi describe the two middle members as alto (contralto, altus) or tenor (Jambe de Fer labels them as taille and haute-contre).
Gerle states that the alto and tenor ought to be the same size, and lie at the same pitch.\textsuperscript{136} Mersenne, in contrast, states “that the parts of the middle, that is to say, the alto, the fifth part and the contra-tenor are of different sizes, even though they are in unison.”\textsuperscript{137} Since more than one hundred years elapsed between Gerle’s and Mersenne’ statements, it seems possible that middle members started out with one size and most likely developed into many somewhat different sizes during the course of the sixteenth century. As a result, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, they appeared in various sizes but with the same tuning. This hypothesis is confirmed by surviving examples of the alto/tenor violin, built in slightly distinct dimensions by well-known sixteenth-century violin makers such as Andrea Amati, Gasparo da Salò and Giovanni Paolo Maggini.\textsuperscript{138}

Yet no matter whether middle members of diverse size or one size were used, the fact is that the middle members are continuously designated with the same tuning c-g-d’-a’.

Accordingly, tunings of the two higher family members remain constant in all treatises, in contrast to the bass members. These pieces of evidence and the use of three basic members of the violin family in organological treatises are further verified by a musical instrument inventory from Italy.

A 1593 inventory from Verona lists “un violon, un tenor da brazzo et un violino.”\textsuperscript{139} As Stephen Bonta rightly points out, the entry appears to refer to members of the violin family that are separated from the viols on the list. Therefore, the word violon designates a bass violin.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{136} Gerle, op. cit., 78.
\textsuperscript{137} Mersenne, op. cit., 238.
\textsuperscript{138} Schwindt, op. cit., 55.
Since the *violino* clearly points to a soprano member of the family, the middle member is labeled tenor. The term “tenor” more likely refers to a voice type or to the middle member of the family, rather than to a fourth member of the violins; especially, since the nomenclature “alto” is missing from the entry. Accordingly, the inventory designates a bass violin, a middle member (alto/tenor violin), and a soprano violin.

Agnes Kory’s evidence, the 1613 inventory of musical instruments of the Kassel court, lists a “large tenor violin with four strings, tuned upwards from low G or F” ("*eine grosse Tenorgeige, aus dem G oder F unden gestimmet*").\(^{141}\) This entry alone suggests the existence of a tenor violin.

Thus, examination of other family members, presented within the list, might provide a different explanation. The next two entries of the account describe “four Italian *Tenor Geigen* with four strings” and “four *violini di brazzio*.\(^ {142}\) The last term undoubtedly indicates violins, namely the soprano members. The account clearly separates viols from violins; and numbers 43, 44 and 45 already mention consorts of viols built in Italy, England and Germany.\(^ {143}\) The “four Italian *Tenor Geigen* with four strings” probably refer to the middle members of the violin family that were made in Italy, due to the interchangeable use of the nomenclature “alto” and “tenor” for the middle members of the family. Accordingly, the soprano and alto members of the violin family are reported.

Number 49 of the inventory describes “seven large *bassgeigen* of different sizes [viz.:] three with six strings, two with five strings, and two with four.” The separation of the seven large *bassgeigen* from the soprano and alto members of the violin family could be due to the fact

\(^{141}\) Kory, op. cit., 125.


\(^{143}\) Ibid., 33.
that bass members had more various tunings than the higher members. Since the bass violin had four strings, the listed bassgeigen with five and six strings may have designated double bass viols. Double bass viols did not properly belong to the viol consort or to the violin consort, because they possessed hybrid construction features, and, as a result, may have been listed separately. The remaining bass stringed instrument with four strings seems to have been essentially a bass violin, tuned in fifths.

This identical organization of violin-family members is also confirmed by Daniel Hitzler’s treatise. Hitzler’s 1628 account suggests tunings for the instruments presented in the Kassel inventory. His Discant Geige is tuned as a violin and the Alt Geige is tuned as a modern viola. He lists three kinds of Bass Geigen, with four, five and six strings, respectively. Both five and six-stringed models are tuned exclusively in fourths and thirds, so that they most likely designate a bass viol rather than a bass violin. The four-stringed Bass Geige, however, is pitched in fifths and a lower fourth.¹⁴⁴ This C-F-c-g tuning probably refers to a bass violin, because of the presence of four strings only and the predominance of the fifth-tuning.

Hitzler’s remaining Tenor Geige in the F-c-g-d’ tuning could as easily be labeled a small bass violin as a tenor violin, just as within the Kassel inventory, since the alto member is mentioned separately in both instances. Nicole Schwindt confirms this argument by stating that the violin based on F could perform both a tenor and a bass function within the violin ensemble.¹⁴⁵

Returning to Kory’s original evidence regarding Zacconi’s term “tenore da viola da braccio” or “tenor violin,” Herbert W. Myers rightly points out that Ludovico Zacconi probably refers to a family of violins in four sizes. Like other Italian writers, however, he was flexible in

¹⁴⁴ Kory, op. cit., 126.
¹⁴⁵ Schwindt, op. cit., 57.
his terminology, and his labeling was somewhat unusual in that he called the next-largest size a tenor rather than a small bass. Ephraim Segermann agrees that Zacconi’s term “tenor violin” usually was called *basso*, because it performed the bass function in professional violin bands. David Boyden confirms that this F-c-g-d’ tuned instrument used to play the lowest part of sixteenth-century string consort music. Furthermore, Peter Holman describes that both surviving music and theoretical sources suggest that the violin based on F was properly a small bass.

Finally, even Agnes Kory proposes in her own essay that the “in-effect-tenor violin was a small bass violin.” Accordingly, I propose that Zacconi’s label, *tenore da viola da braccio*, refers to the small bass violin with the F-c-g-d’ tuning and that his expression *basso da viola da braccio* designates the larger sized model in the lower Bb-F-c-g tuning.

Yet there could be no doubt that violins appeared in four distinct tunings and four basic sizes, although there may have been slight differences in size within a category due to the lack of an absolute standard. The model tuned in F or G tended to be known as bass violin, not without creating some confusion with the model in C or Bb. Hence, the two tunings corresponded to different versions of the bass members of the family. As introduced earlier, treatises of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century confirm this idea of assigning one or two distinct tunings to the bass violin, a higher in F or G, and a lower in Bb or C.

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146 Myers, “When is a Violino not a Viola da Braccio?,” op. cit., 337.
149 Ibid., 58.
150 Kory, op. cit., 127.
151 Martin Agricola (1528 and 1545), Silvestro Ganassi (1543), Ludovico Zacconi (1592), Adriano Banchieri (1607), Michael Praetorius (1618), Daniel Hitzler (1628), Athanasius Kircher (1650).
In 1618, Michael Praetorius brings all of the available evidence together in a convincing way. His *Tenor-Geig* is tuned c-g-d’-a’, the usual tuning for the alto/tenor members of the family according to other writers. The author describes both tunings F-c-g-d’ and C-G-d-a as different pitches of the *Bass-Viol de Braccio* or also spelled as *Bas-Geig de bracio*.¹⁵³ Yet with different labeling, Zacconi, Praetorius and Hitzler all confirm both tunings of the bass violin in their accounts. Accordingly, the bass violin employed two basic tunings in the sixteenth century; a higher and a lower one.

The tuning of the higher-pitched bass violin seems to have been either F-c-g-d’ or G-d-a-e’. It was designated *Bassus* of the *Polnische Geigen* by Agricola, *basso da viola da brazo senza tasti* by Ganassi,¹⁵⁴ *tenore da viola da braccio* by Zacconi, *primo violino per il basso* by Adriano Banchieri, *Bas-Geig de bracio* by Praetorius, *Tenor Geige* by Daniel Hitzler,¹⁵⁵ and *basso di viola* or *violone* by Athanasius Kircher (Table 2.1).¹⁵⁶ Martin Agricola provides the tuning F-G-d-a for the bass violin, yet states that some players like to tune the bass a fifth under the middle member.¹⁵⁷ Since the lowest string of the tenor/alto is marked C, this tuning would be F-c-g-d’. The F-tuning is restated by Zacconi in 1592,¹⁵⁸ Praetorius in 1618¹⁵⁹ and Hitzler in 1623.¹⁶⁰ An

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¹⁵² Hans Gerle (1532), Giovanni Maria Lanfranco (1533), Jambe de Fer (1556), Ludovico Zacconi (1592), Daniel Hitzler (1628), Marin Mersenne (1635).

¹⁵³ Praetorius, op. cit., 39 and plate xxi.


¹⁵⁵ Kory, op. cit., 126.


¹⁵⁷ Agricola, op. cit., 107-8.

¹⁵⁸ Gerhard Singer, op. cit., 171.

¹⁵⁹ Praetorius, op. cit., 39.

¹⁶⁰ Kory, op. cit., 126.
alternative tuning G-d-a-e’ is provided by Adriano Banchieri in 1609\textsuperscript{161} and Athanasius Kircher in 1650.\textsuperscript{162}

The lower-pitched bass violin was tuned either Bb-F-c-g or C-G-d-a. The Bb-F-c-g tuning is specified by Lanfranco,\textsuperscript{163} Jambe de Fer,\textsuperscript{164} Zacconi,\textsuperscript{165} Praetorius\textsuperscript{166} and Mersenne.\textsuperscript{167} Gerle\textsuperscript{168} and Praetorius described the C-G-d-a tuning. Hitzler’s C-F-c-g tuning represents a lower tuned bass violin, based on C instead of a Bb.\textsuperscript{169} Authors label the low bass violin by placing the voice type “bass” in front of the general terms for “violin,” such as \textit{basso violetta da braccio & da arco} (Lanfranco), \textit{kleine bass geyge} (Gerle) \textit{bas de violon} (Jambe de Fer), \textit{basso da viola da braccio} (Zacconi), \textit{Bas-Geig de bracio} (Praetorius), \textit{Bass Geige} (Hitzler),\textsuperscript{170} and \textit{basse de violon} (Mersenne).\textsuperscript{171} In this way, the diminutive words “klein” or “violetta” do not directly indicate sizes of bass violins, but represent a generic nomenclature for violins.

It is most likely that the early bass violin with three strings was tuned F-c-g, as stated by both Silvestro Ganassi\textsuperscript{172} and within Martin Agricola’s first account from 1528.\textsuperscript{173}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[162] Kircher, op. cit., 487.
\item[163] Lanfranco, op. cit., 137.
\item[164] Jambe de Fer, “\textit{Epitome Musical 1556},” op. cit., 62.
\item[165] Zacconi, op. cit., 171.
\item[166] Praetorius, op. cit., 39.
\item[167] Mersenne, op. cit., 243.
\item[169] Schwindt, op. cit., 56.
\item[170] Kory, op. cit., 126.
\item[171] Mersenne, op. cit., 243.
\item[172] Ganassi, \textit{Lettione Seconda}, op. cit., Capitolo xxiii.
\item[173] Agricola, op. cit., 51.
\end{footnotes}
later treatise (1545) describes an early four-stringed model tuned F-G-d-a.\textsuperscript{174} This in-between model and the original F-c-g tuning might have served as generic types, which possibly created the basic tunings F-c-g or G-d-a, respectively. Accordingly, the bass violin began its career with three strings at least in some regions of Europe, and the fourth string was added within a few years. The early bass violin with three strings might have been a starting point from which the four-stringed distinct sized models probably evolved. These two basic tunings gradually became the pitches of two different sizes of bass violins.

Around mid-century, the generic tuning F-c-g or G-d-a was extended with an extra string, which created the two basic tunings of the four-stringed-bass violin. If the fourth string was added to the higher register of the early three-stringed model it would have produced the tunings F-c-g-d’ and G-d-a-e’, the higher tuning of bass violins just discussed. If the additional string was added to the lower register, so as to amplify the lower range, it yielded to the Bb-F-c-g or C-G-d-a tunings, pitches that of the lower bass violin models. In summary, the bass violin most likely started out with three strings in the late 1520s, and with the acquisition of the fourth string, it appeared in two distinct sizes accommodating a lower and a higher tuning.

Epilogue According to Mersenne

By the 1550s, nearly all pieces of evidence suggest that the four-stringed bass violin was used throughout Europe. There was no standard pitch across the continent, and organ pitches, which usually determined the pitch in use for their province, varied by as much as a third or

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 108.
fourth from one region to the next and by a minor third even within the same city. Yet the two bass violin tunings discussed above remain constant in all organological treatises, coinciding with the presence of two models of different size. By the end of the century, music theorists such as Zacconi and Praetorius describe both tunings of the bass violin in the same treatises, suggesting the clear existence of both sizes and tunings. Nomenclature for the larger model is straightforward: the majority of the labels are direct translations of the term “bass violin” in different languages. As for the higher pitched instrument, some authors designated it as “tenor” for its higher register; nevertheless, most available evidence suggests that it should be regarded as a small “bass violin.”

Due to terminological discrepancies, the classification of the smaller sized instrument proves to be complex. The identification of the larger sized bass violin is more straightforward because of its more consistent labeling with the term “bass violin,” and its direct translations. Undoubtedly, Marin Mersenne introduces the most unambiguous classification of the large bass violin. It is for this reason that he always refers to the bass violin with the same term basse de violon and also provides a picture of it. An image of the lower tuned bass violin from 1635 represents the earliest illustration of the bass violin with four strings within an organological treatise (Fig. 2.11).

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Figure 2.11. *Basse de Violon* in Marin Mersenne’s *Harmonie Universelle*, 1635.

The drawing that appears in his treatise *Harmonie Universelle* not only depicts the larger sized bass violin but clearly informs as to its tuning as well. The pitches are Bb-F-c-g, corresponding to the larger sized model discussed above. These pitches are depicted on the left side of the “*basse de violon*” in the drawing. The picture provides an unambiguous representation of an early-seventeenth-century bass violin.
Mersenne’s portrayal confirms all construction characteristics of the sixteenth-century bass violin discussed above. The instrument matches Lanino’s drawing of the larger instrument and it shows such a strong resemblance with all of the images represented as bass violins in this chapter that there is little doubt about its identity as an early seventeenth-century bass violin, even without Mersenne’s label “basse de violon.” The instrument possesses all bass violin features that are discussed throughout this chapter, and in comparison with Gaudenzio Ferrari’s image (Fig. 2.5), the change from the early bass violin to the fully evolved type becomes apparent.

The large bass violin has rounded shoulders and rounded lower bouts, F-shaped sound holes, four strings, a fretless and short fingerboard, and a functional rather than ornamental tailpiece. The indentation created by the ribs on either side of the body is deep. The instrument possesses the characteristic protrusive corner blocks on either side of the ribs in the middle of its body, surrounding the center bouts. The ribs have overhanging edges around the top and back plates that are higher than the ribs. The bass violin has an end button on the lower ribs of the instrument, to which the tailpiece is connected by a gut loop. Differences between Ferrari’s early type and Mersenne’s bass violin can be summarized as follows.

Ferrari’s instrument has three strings and frets, while Mersenne’s model clearly has four strings and no frets. The bass violin by Ferrari possesses F-formed sound holes in a reverse profile, an ornamented string holder, a peg box that is arched backwards, and a simply constructed bow. Mersenne’s bass violin, on the other hand, has F-shaped sound holes in the angle known today on all violins, a peg box in a straight alignment with the neck, and a bow built in a more sophisticated way than Ferrari’s bow. The belly of Ferrari’s bass violin is arched in the middle, and so is the top plate of Mersenne’s instrument. The early type possesses an
ornamental string holder, while Mersenne’s tailpiece is rather functional, and has a simpler shape. Mersenne’s bass violin also possesses clear purflings in contrast to the early type by Ferrari. Clear lines of purfling are also depicted on the bass violin by Alonso Vazquez (Fig. 2.8) and by Bernardino Lanino (Fig. 2.9).

Mersenne’s bow shows a more advanced construction technique as compared to that of the early bass violin bow by Ferrari. The hair of the bow is not fixed to the stick by a string, wire, wax or by an unmovable frog or by a clip-in frog, but with a more sophisticated mechanism. The hair is fastened to the tip by a small wooden wedge that is inserted into a recess in the tip. The bow hair is further secured by the frog, which is attached to the bow stick at the lower end of the stick by a slide-screw mechanism that adjusts the tension. This screwed-in-frog system represents the basic bow construction of every stringed instrument until the present day.

The first hundred years (1535-1635) of the development of the bass violin concludes with Mersenne’s account. Authors and music theorists usually describe and illustrate facts that do not only exist at the time of the writings, but are established and present for a period of time prior to their classification. Due to this well known phenomenon of the delay of written accounts behind practice, it is almost certain that Mersenne’s illustration refers to a bass violin which was in existence long before the description.

This chapter establishes the ideal model of the sixteenth-century bass violin as of construction, size and tuning, on the basis of documentary sources. This model serves as a basis for the discussion and identification of three of the earliest unaltered bass instruments of the violin family in the following chapters.

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177 Ibid., 207-9.
CHAPTER 3
THE FREIBERG BASS VIOLINS

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to describe two extant late sixteenth-century bass stringed instruments, as confirmation of the existence of the smaller sized bass violins, tuned according to diverse systems. After a short introduction relaying the historical background of the Saxon princes and their burial chapel, the instruments held sequestered within provide the material evidence. The sixteenth-century bass violin emerges and materializes in the form of these instruments, the construction details of which bear the salient features of its type according to the builders. Through a study of the construction details of the instruments themselves, the identity of the small bass violin is confirmed. A description of the surviving bass violin bow supplies information about the common performance practice of the bass violin. The distinct sizes of the bass violins, along with the reports of Michael Praetorius and Adriano Banchieri propose the instruments’ tunings and their possible use in church. Following, the presence of the violin band in Freiberg provides evidence of the Renaissance preference for consorts rather than individual instruments. The function of the violins as works of art and the account of violins within the Saxon inventories suggest the violin band’s probable employment at the Saxon court and at other royal courts. Balthasar Beaujoyeulx’s account of the Le Balet Comique de la Royne and Sieur Lambert de Bealieus’s score verify the bass violin’s tuning, small size and involvement during the spectacle. Finally, the end block of the Freiberg bass violins, supported by Beaujoyeulx’s depiction further identifies the possible holding positions of the Freiberg instruments.
The Freiberg bass violins were discovered during a restoration project in 2002, in a burial chapel of the Freiberg Cathedral, Lower Saxony. Thirty instruments were found, of which only nine are mockups; the remaining twenty-one are real instruments, constructed for actual music making. Although the bass violins were built as true musical instruments, they survived as pieces of artwork based on their aesthetic value, and they have remained untouched since the 1590s. The instruments include four citterns, four lutes, three harps, two straight cornets, three shawms and five violins. Among the latter, there are two bass instruments that patiently awaited a researcher for more than four centuries.

Historical Background and Label of the Instruments

Within the Freiberg Cathedral, the instruments were placed in an elevated position in the burial chapel of the Wettiner family, held in the hands of angel statues. The chapel was founded in 1541 to serve as a family grave for the princes of Saxony. The main monument in the chapel was built between 1553 and 1563 for the Elector-Count Moritz (1521-1553), one of Saxony’s most influential dukes of the sixteenth-century. He was the first one with this socially respectable title in his family, who in spite of his short life became a national hero in Saxony due to his achievements in the fields of finances and war. In addition, he fought for the

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178 Even though it is not known for sure whether they have been played before they were placed into the Freiberg Cathedral, it is very likely that they have not been used for performance at all, since it was not their primary function.


181 Ibid., 28.
new Lutheran religion. His tomb in the Freiberg burial chapel has been seen and admired by contemporary- and present-day visitors as one of the most magnificent monuments of its kind.\textsuperscript{182} In 1593, as part of a reconstruction project of the chapel that started in 1585, forty-seven angels were placed over the tomb, high at the top of the upper pilasters of the chapel.\textsuperscript{183} To complete the restoration of the chapel, thirty-eight real musical instruments were placed into the hands of angels.\textsuperscript{184}

The angels are part of a dramatic representation of the Last Judgment, which features Christ and the Archangel Michael in the middle of the vault of the chapel, as if they were waiting for the deceased. The angel musicians symbolize \textit{musica coelestis}, or heavenly music.\textsuperscript{185} The theme of angelic choirs and instrumental groups is by no means uncommon in the religious iconography of the times, but the use of actual instruments as part of the decoration is extremely rare, if not unique.

The Freiberg bowed string instruments belong to a single violin band that consists of five members: a small treble, a treble, an alto/ tenor, a smaller bass (probably tuned G-d-a-e’) and a larger bass (possibly pitched F-c-g-d’). All members of the violin band of the Freiberg Cathedral differ in size, yet, they all show violin characteristics in their construction details.

Some of the instruments even possess labels surviving in the original condition that include the signatures and locations of the instrument builders. The bass violins do not have labels; the only member of the violin band to possess one is the tenor instrument. It reads: “Baul

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 34-5.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 39.
Klemmes/ Zu ran deck G” (Fig. 3.1), which can be translated as “built by Paul Klemm from Randeck”, a small town in Saxony, near Freiberg.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 3.1. Label of the *Freiberg Alto/Tenor Violin*, built before 1594.

In addition to the original label of the alto/tenor violin, the similar features, building methods and materials that were used in constructing all violins suggest that the builder of the bass violins was also Paul Klemm, sometime before 1594. However, three of the lutes bear a different label, assigning their construction to “Jorge Klem zu ranecke” (Georg Klemm from Randeck). This phenomenon is in no way surprising, since the Klemm family had been sharing workshops since the middle of the sixteenth century and a violinmaker generally built both lutes and other stringed instruments. The two makers were contemporaries and relatives; Paul lived between 1552 and 1623, and Georg between 1549 and 1628. Therefore, it is most likely that the bass violins were built in that family workshop, either by Paul or by Georg, or under their supervision.

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186 Ibid., 82.
187 Fontana and Heller, op. cit., 78.
The workshops of Georg and Paul Klemm continued to flourish until the end of the seventeenth century with success, as evidenced by the family’s purchases, not the least of which included a house, workshop, land and, for a while, an oil mill as well. The family Klemm of Randeck represents one luthier family that amassed enough revenue to become landowners because of its experienced craftsmanship in instrument building in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\(^{188}\)

The Klemms ascent from artisans to landowners through the exercise of their profession and trade was not an isolated incident in the Saxony of their day. The development of an important Saxon school for violin making rested on the economic stimulus that began in the fifteenth century. First came the discovery of great amounts of silver in the Erz mountains; in turn, this find transformed the underdeveloped Saxon lands into a region of commercial towns, with a growing class of patricians and a thriving urban culture. Leipzig was one of the towns to which Emperor Maximilian I accorded trade privileges (called *Ius emporii* in Latin) in 1507. This decree affected instrument makers from small villages in a radius of fifteen miles from Leipzig in a way that, in order to sell their instruments outside the local market, they had to deliver them to a town that owned the privilege of trade.\(^ {189}\)

Freiberg and the nearby villages such as Annaberg, Helbingsdorf and Randeck, which housed prominent instrument builders, fell under that regulation. As a consequence, even country artisans had to produce instruments on a level high enough to meet the standards of the city. In addition, the makers had to provide a diverse assortment of products, as compared to the

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189 Ibid., 52.
less elaborate set of instruments used in a village. Furthermore, they would be more likely to succeed in selling them if they had a variety of instruments.\textsuperscript{190}

The thriving musical tradition and the need for instrument builders and their broadening market in Saxonian villages at the end and turn of the sixteenth century is documented first at the beginning of the seventeenth century. As is well known, however, writers often state facts and events that have been existent some time prior to their description. Accordingly, reports of the first decades of the seventeenth century may very likely provide evidence of an earlier practice as well as contemporary customs. In his \textit{Newer lieblicher und zierlicher Intraden I}, Michael Altenburg gives a detailed account of the flourishing instrumental musical life in small parishes in Thuringia and Saxony. In 1620, the author describes the usage of stringed instruments and particularly fiddles as the following.

There was not a single village where vocal and instrumental music did not flourish at that time. If there was no organ, the vocal music was ornamented and adorned with at least five or six stringed instruments (\textit{Geigen}), something hardly known before this time even in the cities.\textsuperscript{191}

These small Saxonian parishes represent one of the most important early violin building centers of Germany. Between the mid sixteenth century and mid eighteen century, thirty-five violin makers are documented to have worked in the villages of Randeck and Helbingsdorf. Except for a surviving cither, the Freiberg instruments provide the only extant examples of that prosperous tradition.\textsuperscript{192}

The extensive use of violins was not limited to Saxony at the end of the sixteenth century, nor was the art of construction of violins limited to the town of Randeck or to the builders

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 52.


\textsuperscript{192} Heyde, op. cit., 51.
Violins of all sizes were built by a number of instrument makers in other parts of Europe as well, mainly in Italy and in France, but also in other regions of Germany, as in Füssen or in Mittenwald.¹⁹³

Gaspar Duifopruigcar, or Kaspar Tieffenbrucker in German was among the first generation of instrument builders to produce viols and violins. He was born in Bavaria, possibly Füssen, Germany, but worked in Lyon, France during the mid sixteenth century.¹⁹⁴ In 1562, a portrait of Tieffenbrucker depicts different sizes of viols and early violins, along with guitars, lutes, citterns, a lute case, and a harp (Fig. 3.2).¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ For more details about this particular violin building center, see chapter 5 of this thesis.
¹⁹⁵ Several lutes built by Tieffenbrucker are extant today, yet, none of his violins survive in original condition.
Figure 3.2. *Gaspar Duiffoprugcar, Lute- and Violinmaker*, by Woirot, 1562.

Four different sizes of violins can be recognized among viols and other stringed and plucked instruments. The dimensions of the instruments are slightly altered to portray all the different types that Tieffenbrucker was able to build. The modification of sizes of the instruments is a practical solution, since the print was possibly made explicitly as an
advertisement or trademark for the workshop of the violinmaker, and it had to accommodate all kinds of musical instruments within a small amount of space.

The Freiberg violin band includes two soprano members, an alto/tenor member and two small sized bass members of the violin family. As there was no standard regarding the size of violins in the sixteenth century, dimensions of members of the family differed slightly between regions. As a result, all Freiberg violins have unique proportions. The two bass violins differ somewhat in size as well because of the distinct lengths of their necks. The material that was used to make the violins originated in Saxony, as it was there that the local commerce thrived upon fine quality wood, the ideal material for building stringed instruments.

Even though all violins of the Freiberg Cathedral represent a middle-European tradition rather than an Italian violin making custom, all of them, including the bass instruments, were built after the basic viola da braccio or violin model common throughout Europe at the end of the sixteenth century (see chapter 2). In summary, the two Freiberg bass violins represent unaltered examples from the 1590s and substantiate that bass violins were constructed in the late sixteenth century.

Construction of the Bass Violins

The bodies of the two bass violins are identical in construction and in size, except for the length of the scrolls, their necks, and, consequently, their strings. Based on the discussion concerning the violin type earlier, both instruments possess violin characteristics. These features

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196 Heyde, op. cit., 51.
include rounded shoulders, four strings, sound holes carved in an F-form, no frets, a scroll instead of a head, and protrusive corner blocks around the C-bouts.

Other features shared by the two instruments include a short fingerboard and an elongated peg box. The peg box and the scroll of the smaller bass violin together are almost as long as the neck itself. In the case of both instruments, the scroll and the peg box are not in straight alignment with the neck but they are rather angled backwards (Fig. 3.3). This detail corresponds to a more archaic building style, typical of the early type of bass violin described and seen on the canvas by Gaudenzio Ferrari (Fig.2.5).197

197 Fontana and Heller, op. cit., 78.
Both body-lengths of the two bass violins are 704 mm without the necks. Both bellies were carved from two large pieces of wood. The front plates were built of pinewood, and the back plates of poplar or aspen wood. The top plates of each bass violin are arched, with the highest arching in the center. In both cases, the top plates are more arched than the back plates, which are almost flat. These are all distinct construction details of violins. The curvature of the

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plates, as well as the use of thinner, rather than thicker wood for the bellies, enables a full and resonant sound. Even though the use of thin wood is unusual, the deep and rich sound quality that it must have produced originally is indicative of the characteristic timbre of a bass violin.\textsuperscript{199}

The instruments have rounded lower bouts. The curves of the ribs form deep lateral indentations on both sides. The bass violins possess protrusive corner blocks on either side of the ribs, embracing the center bouts. The top plates possess overhanging edges over the sides, a building detail specific to violins (Fig. 3.3).\textsuperscript{200} High purflings are true violin characteristics, and those of the Freiberg instruments represent the earliest extant examples of these features.\textsuperscript{201}

Overhanging edges of the belly and lines of purflings are also depicted on bass violins in iconography, such as the instruments by Bernardino Lanino (Fig. 2.9) and Alonso Vazquez (Fig. 2.8).

The tailpieces are made of maple, the same material as the fingerboard, ribs and the neck. They are relatively long compared to the short fingerboard. The sides of the tailpieces form an ornamental combination of circles and half circles rather than a straight line (Fig. 3.4).

\textsuperscript{199} This information is based on discussions with musicians, mainly Florian Wieninger, who has performed on the modern replicas of the Freiberg bass violins on a regular basis.

\textsuperscript{200} Heyde, op. cit., 57.

\textsuperscript{201} Except the Amati bass violins, but their edges are not in their original condition due to the several alterations in size.
The shapes of the string holders’ geometrical outline are strongly reminiscent of the tailpiece of the bass violin by Gaudenzio Ferrari (Fig. 2.5). The top and bottom of the tailpiece of Ferrari’s bass violin are carved in the form of two flowers facing the top and bottom ends of the instrument, and they are connected by a circular shape in the middle. This entire profile
appears analogous to the Freiberg bass violins, with the slight distinction that the Ferrari bass violins possess simplified ornamental flowers combined with geometrical shapes.

The lower ends of both fingerboards of the Freiberg bass violins feature a wave-shaped ornamental line as well. This feature is shared with the instruments of both the Alonso Vazquez (Fig. 2.8) and Bernardino Lanino (Fig. 2.9) depictions of bass violins. In addition, both bass violins have a wide bridge and pegs that are built of soft wood, most likely of Northern-European or Scottish pine.  

The overall lengths of the instruments are different due to the divergent sizes of their necks. One instrument (Nr. 10 in the Freiberg catalogue) has a neck length of 205 mm and a scroll length of 207 mm, and the other (Nr. 24) has a neck length of 310 mm and a scroll length of 221 mm. Accommodating for the longer neck, the larger bass violin also has a slightly wider middle bout width and lower bout width — the difference here is only 6-9 mm. As a result, we have a larger and smaller bass violin, differentiated only by the lengths of their necks.

Because of the distinct lengths of the necks, the vibrations or oscillations of the strings, otherwise called string stops or diapasons, are different as well. The instrument with the shorter neck has a vibrating length of 620 mm, while the one with a longer neck has a string stop of 650-660 mm. These features, in turn, suggest that the instruments used two different tunings, a higher one for the smaller and a lower one for the larger bass violin.

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203 Ibid., no page numbers.

204 This hypothesis is based on my conversations with Florian Wieninger and Professor Eszter Fontana.

205 Fontana and Heller, op. cit., 82. The two different tunings are discussed later in this chapter.
In conclusion, the main construction details of the Freiberg instruments such as rounded shoulders and rounded lower bouts, protrusive corner blocks, purflings in alignment with the ribs on the belly, four strings with four pegs, no frets on a short fingerboard, a peg box that is angled backwards, and F-shaped sound holes are all representative of the bass violin. Additional features such as a wide bridge and ornamented string holders and fingerboard are also shared characteristics between canvases and the actual extant bass violins in Freiberg. Based on their construction, both Freiberg instruments may be identified as bass violins.

Construction of the Freiberg Bass Violin Bow

As an additional feature, one of the Freiberg bass violins survived with a bow, fixed to the left hand of the angel who holds the bass violin in his right hand. The overall length of the bow is 500 mm, and it was built using soft wood with a 12 mm-diameter.\(^{206}\) These measurements correspond to a shorter and lighter bow, compared to seventeenth-century bass violin bows in general. Seventeenth-century bows were mostly made of snake wood, a material that is denser, heavier, and stronger, but also more expensive than Scottish pine or Northern-European pine. Since Northern-European pine was local and more readily available to Saxon regional violin makers than snake wood, it makes sense that they used this material to build the bass violin bow. The stick of the bow has a convex arch, which curve verifies a stage within the development of the bow in general.

Since the first European appearance of the string bow around the tenth century, the convex stick has been gradually replaced with concave arching. This change did not occur

\(^{206}\) Müller, op. cit., 200.
everywhere at the same time, and it was not until the eighteenth century that string bows were straight or concave. The convex nature of the bow stick clearly appears in the iconography by Ferrari, Cellier, Vazquez, Lanino and Mersenne (Fig. 2.5, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, and 2.11). The stick of the Freiberg bow shows a sharper bend towards the tip than at the frog. The hair of the bow is slipped through a hole or slit close to the tip, then wrapped around the stick, fixed by a knot and additionally strengthened to the stick by wax (Fig. 3.5).

Figure 3.5. The Freiberg Bass Violin Bow, ca. 1594.

At the end of the bow stick, the hair is fixed by a “slip-in” or “slot-notch frog,” which is adjustable to different weather conditions or humidity changes. The use of a “clip-in frog” was not a modern invention in the 1590s. Since the 1530s, Gaudenzio Ferrari, Bernardino Lanino, Jacques Cellier and Alonso Vazquez, all depicted “clip-in frogs” along bass violins (see chapter 2).

The Freiberg bow was placed into the angel’s hand in a position that suggests the overhand grip. Jacques Cellier’s violin bow is depicted the same way (Fig. 2.7). The bass violin bows of Lanino (Fig. 2.9) and Ferrari (Fig. 2.5) are also played with an overhand grip. Due to the construction, the probable overhand grip, the original location of the bow in the left

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207 Boyden, The Violin Family, op. cit., 199-209.

208 In addition, because the performer himself would have touched the hair while bowing, he could change the pressure on the bow hair instantly by decreasing or increasing tension with his right hand, or with his first and middle fingers.

hand of the bass violinist angel and the presence of the “slot-notch frog,” the Freiberg bow represents an example of a true late sixteenth-century bass violin bow.

The Performance Practice of Violins

The construction features of the Freiberg bow provide valuable information about what kind of sound it could have produced, and how the bass violinist may have performed with it. The bow’s convex arch possibly allowed the performer to create crisper, lighter and shorter strokes than a concave arch, more suitable for the articulation of rhythm. The overhand grip also might have yielded strong and direct attacks, sharp articulation and an immediate projection of sound.\textsuperscript{210} Sixteenth-and early seventeenth-century writers Vincenzo Galilei, Adriano Banchieri and Marin Mersenne describe a projecting and articulated sound as the characteristic timbre of the violin.

By 1581, Vincenzo Galilei reports that the violin (viola da braccio) was played much more “pointedly,” yet more articulated than the viol (viola da gamba).\textsuperscript{211} Adriano Banchieri verifies the violin’s ability to articulate in many various ways in 1609.

The violin seeks distant and long passaggi, with scherzi, echoes and answers, short imitations, repetitions on different strings, accenti, affectations, soft bows, groppi, and varied trills.\textsuperscript{212}

Accordingly, the violin was able both to provide rhythmical structure with its expressive strokes, and to strengthen a single vocal line with its projecting sound. Due to the violin’s

\textsuperscript{210} For a detailed discussion of the distinctive sound quality of violins, see chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{211} Galilei, op. cit., 369.

\textsuperscript{212} Banchieri, Conclusions, op. cit., 59.
various possibilities to articulate, the musical function of the violin band in the sixteenth century was two fold. It either performed dance tunes or accompanied singers.

In 1635 Marin Mersenne also confirms the violin band’s dual musical role. Thus it comes that this instrument is the most proper of all [to play] for dancing as is experienced in the ballet and everywhere else. […] It can sound a Courante or many musical pieces [and it is suited to perform] airs and chansons.213

Vincenzo Galilei verifies the double role of the violin band as well. The violin band “could not have been introduced, […] before a reasonable supply of singers was found.”214 “The violoni [violins] were first used in dances, not otherwise than the pifferi [winds].”215 Violins were used to accompany singers and dancers because of their distinct construction features as well. These characteristics included their tuning in fifths and their lack of frets.

The violin’s tuning in fifths served dance tunes, songs and chansons with less effort than a tuning in fourths or in thirds. Jambe de Fer describes that the violin is used on several occasions for a good reason, a fifth being easier to tune, since a fifth is sweeter to the ear than the fourth.216 Mersenne adds that because the violin only has four strings and no frets, one has the freedom of using any kind of temperament on it, since it can be fingered as one wishes, without the strain of a fixed intonation as one has with fretted instruments.217 Finally, the 1596 Ruhelust catalogue of musical instruments lists “fiddles, for the usage of dancing, six pieces, a large bass, a small bass, three tenors, one discant.”218 This account further confirms the bass violin’s basic role to accompany dance.

214 Galilei, op. cit., 369.
215 Ibid., 370.
216 Jambe de Fer, Epitome, transl., op. cit., 44.
217 Mersenne, op. cit., 235.
218 Schlosser, op. cit., 13.
As a result, the function of the violins to perform with singers or for dancers is confirmed by both written and by organological evidence such as the Freiberg bow. The existence of two bass violins in the Freiberg Cathedral suggests various occupations of violins, with particular attention to the bass violins in the late sixteenth century.

The Possible Use of Bass Violins in the Church

The Freiberg violin band includes two bass violins of different sizes. Since the instruments differ in pitch only by a whole step, they both represent bass voices. It is very unlikely that both of them were performing at the same time within the same violin consort. The Freiberg bass violins were probably used alternatively with different pitched ensembles.219

The existence of two bass violins of diverse sizes suggests separate tunings for each instrument. The different string length of the smaller and larger bass violin would produce pitches a whole step apart. Considering the lengths of the strings of the Freiberg bass violins, they might have been tuned in F and in G. Those pitches were described by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers as alternate tunings for the smaller sized bass violin model (see chapter 2). The reports of two distinct tunings of the small bass violin type suggest a variety of possibilities about how the bass violin may have been used in the sixteenth century, in both secular and sacred settings.

The separation of pitch of the Freiberg bass violins matches Michael Praetorius’s observations about “choir-pitch” and “chamber-pitch.” Indeed, there was a division between two

219 Regarding performance practice options of the present day, many combinations are possible, but that is a subject of another essay.
tuning systems in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Germany. In 1618 Michael Praetorius gives a meticulous account of their existence and simultaneous usage:

I find very appealing the distinction drawn between choir-pitch and chamber-pitch employed at Prague and at a number of Catholic chapels elsewhere. Our normal modern pitch, to which nearly all of our organs are now tuned, is there called “chamber-pitch,” and used only for festivities and for musique de table. This is most suitable for the instrumentalists, whether they play wind or stringed instruments. “Choir-pitch,” however, which is a whole tone lower, is used only in the churches, primarily for the sake of singers; it allows their voices to hold out better, and saves them from becoming hoarse through operating at high pitch.  

Praetorius’s account suggests the usage of bass violins both for sacred and secular occasions. He specifies that both the lower tuned small bass violin in F and the higher pitched instrument in G could have been played with organs of different pitches. The use of a bass violin on sacred occasions is confirmed by Adriano Banchieri in the Appendix to his treatise Conclusioni nel suono dell’Organo.

The bass violin in G is discussed as primo violino per il basso in the 1609 account. Banchieri describes the exact pitches of a consort of violini da braccio to be tuned with the organ (or harpsichord), along with other instruments. He presents three tunings for the violin consort; bass, tenor/alto and soprano (canto), in that order. The bass violin is tuned G-D-a-e’. The accounts of Praetorius and Banchieri propose that both small sized bass violins in F and in G may have been played in church at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century.

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221 Adriano Banchieri, Conclusioni nel suono dell’Organo: Nouellamente tradotte, & Dilucidate, in Scrittori Musici, & Organisti Cellebri, Opera Vigesima (Bologna: Giovanni Rossi, 1609), 55.
222 Banchieri, Conclusions, op. cit., 45.
223 Ibid., Banchieri, Conclusioni, 55.
224 Sacred circumstances might have included church services and festivities inside the cathedral or processions outside, discussed in chapter 3.
The existence of two small bass violins in Freiberg tuned in F and in G suggests their alternating use with ensembles of distinct pitches, and also their possible participation in sacred occasions. The bass violin’s employment within secular occasions is implied by many other facts; which include the presence of five different sized violins in Freiberg as a consort, the function of the instruments as works of art, the report of violins in Saxon royal accounts and the existence of the end blocks on the bass violins.

The Potential Employment of Bass Violins at Court

Neither the whole set of thirty instruments, nor the twenty-one exemplars in Freiberg seem to belong to a single, identifiable ensemble: rather, the combination of wind, percussion, plucked and stringed instruments represents the late-sixteenth-century practice of mixed ensembles. As is well known, the most important principle regarding the role of any instrument in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was to be part of an ensemble, either “pure” or “broken.” The general preference for ensembles or instrumental consorts over solo performance created both the viol and violin consorts in the sixteenth century.

In 1592 Zacconi describes the following:

The [viols and violins] in particular, being instruments which not only serve individually in compositions but also serve in the company of others forming one body and one modulation, need companions. Therefore, an instrument which produces one part only, [both the viol and violin] want to have some others to complete the ensemble.225

The report of Vincenzo Galilei verifies the performance practice of violin bands. He states that the violin cannot have been introduced before the number of players necessary to

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225 Zacconi, op. cit., 104.
complete an ensemble was found. This sixteenth century taste for consorts, together with the existence of five violins in distinct sizes, suggests that the Freiberg violins were built as a true Renaissance violin consort.

As a violin band, all Freiberg violins share an identical construction detail: the material that gives them a golden shimmering color. All violins, including the bass violins, were covered with a thin layer of oil or golden coating for protection. One of the layers was made of yellow copper, the same material that was used to varnish the violinist music-making angels. The appearance of “golden color” confirms the fact that the violin band was created as part of a monument symbolizing the splendor, power and royal magnificence of the influential ducal Wettiner family, and particularly their family stem, the Albertiner. As a result, even though the violins were built as actual musical instruments, they survived as works of art for their aesthetic value rather then violins for active music making.

Nonetheless, two musical inventories of the Saxon court in Dresden suggest the use of violins in their original function, as part of an actual music making at court. Both accounts of 1593 list viols but also Geigen or instruments of the braccio family, including bass violins. Even though the reports do not specify the origin of those instruments, due to the high quality of the Freiberg violins, the nearby location of their builders to the court in Dresden; in addition to

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226 Galilei, op. cit., 370.
227 Although it is questionable whether violinists performed on all sizes of the Freiberg violins together as a five-part band, particularly because of the close tunings of the two bass violins, discussed above. Performance practice of sixteenth-century violin bands is a present area that still requires much research.
228 Müller, op. cit., 198.
229 Kunde, op. cit., 35.
230 Ibid., 30.
231 Ibid., 31-32.
232 Steude, op. cit., 40.
their employment to decorate the royal burial chapel, it is very likely that Saxon princes purchased built locally violins, such as the Freiberg examples.\footnote{Ibid., 40.}

Since the mid-sixteenth century, similar violin bands similar to the Freiberg one were officially employed at other German courts, in addition to courts of England, France, Italy, Poland, and the Low Countries. The same set of courtly practices was adopted throughout Europe. Fiddlers played at feasts such as weddings, or entertainments for any event, which included dining or banquets, games outdoors, plays, ballets or simply music-making in the chambers. Pierre Trichet verifies the majority of those activities of the violin band at court. He reports that violins were mainly used for “dances, balls, ballets, \textit{mascarades}, serenades, \textit{aubades}, feasts and other joyful pastimes, having been judged more proper for these recreational exercises than any sort of instrument.”\footnote{Margret M. McGowan, \textit{Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 78.} The participation of violinists is provided in accounts of choreographies, instructions for dancing masters or simply in reports of the feasts themselves.

In fact, the earliest instrumental music specifically dedicated to violins is the score written for the well-known feast and entertainment \textit{Le Balet Comique de la Royne}, performed on 15 October 1581. The event took place at the French court to celebrate the wedding of Monsieur le Duc de Joyeuse and the king’s daughter Mademoiselle Anne d’Arques; and it represented a blend of theater, music, dance, poetry and extravagant choreography, the spectacle of which lasted for five and a half hours.\footnote{Willi Apel, “Studien über die Frühe Violinmusik I,” \textit{Archiv für Musikwissenschaft} 30, no. 3 (1973): 157.} Balthasar de Beaujoyeulx, violinist at the French court and 

\footnote{Ibid., 40.}
\footnote{Margret M. McGowan, \textit{Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 78.}
\footnote{Willi Apel, “Studien über die Frühe Violinmusik I,” \textit{Archiv für Musikwissenschaft} 30, no. 3 (1973): 157.}
choreographer of the entire eccentric festivities in the Louvre, wrote the report to be printed in 1581 to commemorate the occasion.\textsuperscript{236}

The music was composed by Lambert de Beaulieu for a violin band lead by Jacques Salmon, \textit{maître de la musique} of the chamber at that time.\textsuperscript{237} The music was played as incidental music between the scenes of a dramatic play, and both acts closed with a Grand Ballet.\textsuperscript{238} Both ballets consist of several dances that have no text indication in contrast to other pieces that were sung by the chamber singers.\textsuperscript{239} In addition, several entries verify the performance of violinists during most of the spectacle.

The account of Balthasar Beaujoyeulx states that the joyous \textit{La Clochette}, the first ballet, was danced to the sprightly music of the violins.\textsuperscript{240} Later on, “the moving elements of the décor made a circuit of the hall to the constant music of the violins.”\textsuperscript{241} Finally, before the last lavish ballet was about to begin, “the violins changed their tone, and began to play the \textit{entrée} of the Grand Ballet.”\textsuperscript{242}

Beaujoyeulx’s account describes violins in plural. This fact and the existence of a bass voice in the score, specified for the performance of violins, make a case for the bass violin’s presence within this particular event. The range of the bass part, labeled “Bassus” in the original

\textsuperscript{236} Thomas M. Greene, “The King’s One Body in the \textit{Balet Comique de la Royne},” \textit{Yale French Studies} 86, Corps Mystique, Corps Sacré: Textual Transfigurations of the Body From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century (1994): 75.


\textsuperscript{238} Apel, op. cit., 157.


\textsuperscript{240} McGowan, op. cit., 115.

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 117.

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., Greene, 91.
score without text, gives further indication for what kind of bass violin it may have been composed. The part never goes lower than F, or higher than a, a tessitura which matches exactly that of the small bass violin in F, when played in first position. Since this position probably was the sole one used in the sixteenth century for all members of the violin family, the music strongly implies the use of a small bass violin in F. Both the description of Beaujoyeulx and his depiction of the event involve the participation of a bass violin. His drawing of the festivities depicts a lute player and a bass violinist performing on a small sized instrument, as part of the spectacle, by a fountain (Fig. 3.6).

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Figure 3.6. *Figure de la Fontaine* by B. de Beaujoyeulx, *Le Balet Comique de la Royne*, Paris, 1581, detail, Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

The narrative discloses the identity of the player of the instrument. The bass violinist is Sieur Lampert de Beaulieu, professional singer of the French chamber, and the composer of the
music itself.\textsuperscript{245} Beaulieu, who sung some of the most exposed virtuoso monodic passages during the evening, apparently was a performer of the bass violin as well.\textsuperscript{246} This is yet an additional verification for the suitable range of the bass violin part, since Beaulieu would have not composed a part that was not appropriate for his own instrument.

Examination of Beaulieu’s instrument reveals almost exclusively violin characteristics: rounded shoulders, rounded lower bouts, a short and fretless fingerboard, a wide bridge, a peg box leaned backwards, protrusive corner blocks around the C-bouts, overhanging edges of the belly, and a tailpiece, fixed by a gut loop to the end button of the lower ribs. The bow is held with an overhand grip, with a slight inside turn. The bow stick is evidently arched in a convex manner, a quality shared with the Freiberg bass violin bow.

The instrument has C-shaped sound holes, which represent the only characteristic that is not associated with violins. However, that construction element does not qualify as a negative marker, since bass violins occasionally borrowed features of bass viols. The instrument possesses four strings; however, there are five lines visible between the tailpiece and the bridge. Yet the presence of a fifth line does not disprove the instrument’s nature as a four-stringed bass violin, because the line does not correspond to a fifth string.

This middle “string” in between the two upper and two lower strings represents a probable technical aid rather than a fifth string, since it is only shown between the string holder and the bridge. Occasionally, a short piece of gut was affixed in between the bridge and the tailpiece of stringed bass instruments in order to keep the tension balanced and equal on both sides of the bridge. This piece of string was fastened by the string holder and the bridge in the

\textsuperscript{245} Balthasar de Beaujoyeulx, \textit{Balet Comique de la Royne}, Reprint, op. cit., 16.

\textsuperscript{246} Balthasar de Beaujoyeux, “\textit{La Balet Comique de la Royne 1581},” transl., op. cit., 48.
same way; it was fed through a hole and held by a large knot or a loop or both. Accordingly, the instrument possesses four strings. Based on its constructions details, the instrument drawn by Beaujoyeulx should be identified as a bass violin. Due to its small dimensions and Beaulieu’s part that fits the range of the bass violin tuned in F; it may be labeled as a smaller sized bass violin.

This method of securing the tailpiece with an additional piece of gut string was used on bass violins (and other bass stringed instruments) in Germany as well as in France. In fact, most extant instruments with this aid are of German origin, from the seventeenth century. The Spilman bass violins, however, do not possess a fifth hole in their tail pieces, so it is unlikely that they acquired this aid. Yet, they share another feature with the small bass violin of Beaulieu: its performing position. The bass violin is held on the left inner thigh of Beaulieu, placed on the floor in front of him. Certain construction details of the Freiberg bass violins suggest that they were held similarly as well.

Neither of the bass violins carries an end button on the bottom rib, of the kind generally used to secure the tailpiece to the lower end of the instrument with a thick piece of gut string or wire. A massive protrusive wooden block is used instead, which is shaped in a similar way to the string holders, in half circles (Fig. 3.7).


\footnotesize{248 Ibid., 149.}
Figure 3.7. A block of the lower ribs of the Freiberg Bass Violins.

The block is aligned with the string holder, and it remains firmly fixed by two pins or screws inserted to the bottom ribs of the instrument. It has a hole in the middle, where a gut string is slipped through to affix the entire block to the tailpiece. This block served as a holding device to put the instrument on the floor while performing, in addition to securing the top and back plates to the lower ribs.

Due to the presence of this considerably sized block, only two methods of holding were possible, in a stationary location. The bass violin was either placed in between the player’s legs or on the floor in front of the player. The former holding custom is shown on the painting by Alonso Vazquez (Fig. 2.8), and the latter position can be seen in the present drawing by

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As a result, Freiberg bass violins may have been played in a seated or in a standing position, but not by movement.

In summation, the proposed employment of the Freiberg bass violins within secular occasions is confirmed by the existence of five different sized violins in Freiberg creating a violin consort, the function of the instruments as works of art through their shared golden coating representing royal magnificence, and the account of violins in Saxon royal musical inventories. The involvement of a small bass violin within the court is verified in the score of Le Balet Comique de la Royne 1581 by the author’s description and by his illustration. The identification of the bass violinist as Lambert de Beaulieu, the actual composer of the music and the range of his bass part authenticate the F tuning of the instrument. The presence of the end blocks on the Freiberg bass violins together with Beaujoyeulx’s illustration suggest two possible holding positions for the small bass violin in a fixed location.

Conclusion

The Freiberg bass violins are final pieces of evidence in service to the claim that the instruments described in chapter 2 are indeed small sized bass violins. Their construction details, tunings in F and in G, and small dimensions undoubtedly confirm that they indeed belong to the small bass violin model. Similarly, the corresponding extant bass violin bow in Freiberg verifies all construction features and mechanisms stated previously about sixteenth century bass violin bows.

\footnote{Further holding traditions are discussed in chapter 3 in detail.}

\footnote{For other depictions of the bass violin within courtly settings see chapter 4.}
Based on specific characteristics of the Freiberg instruments, it becomes clear that they represent a local violin building tradition that is based on a widespread violin model in late sixteenth-century Europe. The diverse tunings of the Freiberg bass violins, their role as embodiment of Saxon royal pomp and certain features of the bow, supply information about the performance practice of the bass violins, their possible use in church and at court, and, as a member of a violin band. Finally, the presence of a massive end block and a matching depiction of the bass violin in the account of *Le Balet Comique de la Royne* 1581 provide possible holding options for the Freiberg instruments and verify the instrument’s involvement in the event. As a result; the construction, size, tunings and uses of the Freiberg bass violins, and possibly the smaller sized bass violin of the sixteenth century, are clearly established, along with their function as a work of art and probable playing positions in a stationary location.
CHAPTER 4
THE SPILMAN BASS VIOLIN

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to classify a bass stringed instrument of 1590 built by Dorigo Spilman as organological evidence of the lower pitched and larger sized bass violin type. A short historical background of the Obizzi collection, to which the instrument belongs, together with a study of the bass violin’s label confirm the identity of the builder. A description of the Spilman instrument’s construction details compared to the smaller sized bass violin and to the later violoncello confirms its identity as a large bass violin. The dimensions of the instrument verify its low tuning in C or in Bb. Inventories of late sixteenth-century Austria furnish evidence for the presence of bass violins in that time period. An account of the Spilman pochette violin, used for dancing, and Spilman’s name propose his various occupations, introducing him as an example of a Renaissance minstrel. The Spilman bass violin represents an example for everyday music making, and this frequent use of the instrument may have necessitated various performing positions that are confirmed by the existence of a pin and the thin lower bouts. This survey of playing positions of bass violins completes the chapter by means of iconographical and written evidence.

In 1920, the official catalogue of the Viennese Collection of Ancient Musical Instruments (Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum lists a “violoncello built by Dorigo or Dovigo Spilman, Anno 1590”. This label suggests that an instrument resembling

252 Schlosser, op. cit., 69.
the mid seventeenth-century violoncello existed as early as 1590. However, due to the larger dimensions, different materials of strings, and more various performing positions compared to that of the violoncello, I propose that the Spilman instrument should be labeled as a bass violin of large dimensions, and not as a violoncello.\footnote{For a detailed comparison between the bass violin and the violoncello, see chapter 5 of this study.}

**Origin and Label of the Spilman Instrument**

The Spilman instrument is part of the Obizzi Collection. This collection came from the Ambras and Cataio Castles, and now it belongs to the oldest holdings of the Collection of Ancient Musical Instruments in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The Cataio inventory includes a set of functional instruments for everyday or practical use, in contrast to the collection of Castle Ambras, which comprises either exotic or unique instruments that were gathered due to their aesthetic value starting in 1580 by the Tyrolean Archduke Ferdinand (1529-95).\footnote{Schlosser, op. cit., 11.}

The fact that the Obizzi Collection originates from Cataio, a village near Padua, is of major importance for the examination of the roots of the Spilman instrument, because its maker most likely lived in that city. The members of the Obizzi family from Northern Italy were enthusiastic collectors of musical instruments. The earliest account of the existence of an instrument collection in the castle of Duke Pio Enea degli Obizzi appears in a letter by the cavalier Francesco Berni in 1573. This letter mentions a “small musical theater […] near to a room for armory and one for diverse musical instruments and musical scores”\footnote{Ibid., 14.} in the Castle of Cataio, which had been the family residence since the beginning of the sixteenth century. The
Obizzi continued to enlarge their musical treasure trove until the nineteenth century. In 1805, the sixteenth-century section of the collection was gathered and systematically organized by Tommaso degli Obizzi, the last member of the family. In 1870, the extant instruments of the collection were moved to Vienna, where they are still located. 256

The Spilman bass violin is one among several sixteenth-century bowed string instruments in the collection. The instrument’s label reads: “Dorigo Spilman, Padua, Anno 1590” 257 (Fig. 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Label of the Spilman Bass Violin, ca.1590 in Kunshistorisches Museum, Vienna.

The geographic proximity of the castle of the collecting family to the workshop of the possible violin maker suggests the Paduan provenance of the instrument. The spelling of the first name on the label is ambiguous. The word “Dorigo” can also be read as “Dovigo,” which is a shortened form of Ludovigo, an early Italian equivalent for Ludwig in German. 258 Yet the “v” reading is no more than a possibility and is contradicted by a label of a pochette violin, which reads “pochette by Doricus Spilman in Padova, 1591.” 259 This violin does not survive, but its existence is verified in the account of the 1596 Ambras inventory (page 114-5). Due to this label, the “v” reading is unlikely.

256 Ibid., 15.
257 Ibid., 69.
258 Doctor Alfons Hubert, the main curator of the Ancient Musical Instrument collection in Vienna, proposed this possibility during one of our discussions during the examination of the Spilman instrument.
259 Schlosser, op. cit., 70.
The second name, “Spilman,” of German origin, translates into English as “a man who performs,” or a “musician.” Perhaps the builder was of German origin, possibly born in Füssen, Southern Germany, and migrated to Northern Italy, establishing a close parallel with the violin maker Gaspar Tieffenbrucker, who was of Bavarian origins (possibly also in the town of Füssen) yet worked most of his life in France. Dorigo most likely was a player himself, who built instruments for his own music making. Consequently, the title “Spilman” may have corresponded to the builder’s profession, rather than to a family name.

Description of Construction

Even though the scroll, the pegs, the bridge and the strings are of later origin, the body of the instrument is still in its late-sixteenth-century form. The instrument has rounded shoulders and rounded lower bouts (Fig. 4.2). The neck is connected to the button on the back by an eighty-four degree angle. The back- and top plates are arched, with the highest arching in the middle area. The curves of the ribs form deep lateral indentations, on both sides.

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260 Ibid., 70. The origins of Spilman placed into the town of Füssen is also suggested by Mr. Hubert.
261 Ibid., 69-70.
262 Ibid., 69.
Figure 4.2. Belly of the Spilman Bass Violin, ca.1590 in Kunshistorisches Museum, Vienna.

The bass violin possesses protrusive corner blocks on either side of the ribs, embracing the center bouts. The ribs have double purflings around the top and simple linings on the back.
The top and back plates have overhanging edges over the ribs. The sound holes of the bass violin are shaped in F form. The instrument has four strings and no frets. The tailpiece is made of pine or nut wood, usually the same material as the fingerboard. The string holder is firmly fixed with a gut string to the end button on the lower end of the ribs (compare Fig. 4.3).

The belly of the Spilman instrument is constructed from spruce. The back plate has been assembled from four pieces of sycamore. This building method, unique in the sixteenth century, is due to the large size of the instrument. The overall length of the bass violin is 1250 mm, whereas the later violoncello’s usual overall length is 1030 mm. Also, the length of the upper bouts is 45 mm larger in size than the standard mid seventeenth-century size of violoncellos. The same is true for the width of lower bouts, some 43 mm greater than the size of the later model.

The Spilman bass violin possesses a longer neck than the later violoncello model and the smaller sized Freiberg bass violins. The neck has a length of 530 mm, and the scroll is 215 mm long. Accordingly, the vibrating length of the strings is also larger than the string stop of the smaller sized bass violins: 713 mm. The standard sized violoncello, in comparison, has a string stop of 630-680 mm. The Spilman bass violin possesses pure gut strings, in contrast to the mid seventeenth-century cello, which had two gut strings for the upper strings, and two wire wound strings with a gut core for lower strings. Based on its longer strings, its longer neck and its longer string stops, the Spilman instrument would have been tuned at least a fifth lower than

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264 Ibid., 2.

265 Ibid., 1.

266 Ibid., 2.

267 Ibid., 1.
the Freiberg instruments. As a result, it probably employed the C-G-d-a or Bb-F-c-g tunings of
the larger sized bass violin model (chapter 2).

The large dimensions of the Spilman instrument should have produced an extraordinary
resonance during performance. Furthermore, the large size of the instrument necessitated the da
gamba playing position along with the strap-holding pose. All these features of the Spilman
instrument correspond to iconographical, organological, and written pieces of evidence
concerning sixteenth-century bass violins, discussed in the first three chapters of this essay. In
consequence, the Spilman instrument must be classified as a larger sized bass violin, and not as a
violoncello, because its main construction details show unambiguous bass violin characteristics,
including the material of its strings. Furthermore, its size corresponds to the lower and larger
sized bass violin model.

Bass violins such as the Spilman instrument are documented in various Austrian
inventories of instrument collections. The 1596 Ruhelust inventory in castle Ambras accounts for
several bass violins. The second entry of the list describes “violins, four pieces, among them one
bass and three tenors” (“Viole de praz oder cleine geigen, vier stuckh, ain pasz, 3 tenor”).
The inventory furthermore states “more violins, [built based on distinct models or] different copies,
bought by duke Landron; eight pieces, among them a bass, four tenors and two small sopranos”
(“mer viole de praz, ain andere copei, die der graf von Ladron hat kauft, acht stuckh, als ain
pasz, 4 tenor, ain discant und 2 claine discant”). No instrument presented in the inventories is
extant today; however, the accounts confirm their existence in late sixteenth-century Austria.

268 All possible holding positions are discussed later in this chapter.
269 Schlosser, op. cit., 12.
270 Ibid., 12.
Due to Dorigo Spilman’s origin and the approximate place of the musical instrument inventory to the Spilman bass violin’s location, it is very likely that the bass violins described in these lists refer to instruments built similarly to the Spilman bass violin. Further reports of musical instruments describe a small soprano violin, which is stated to also have been built by Spilman. The shared function of the violin and the bass violin suggest the maker’s various employments, while his family name proposes his social status.

The Employment of the Bass Violin outside the Court

The inventories of the Ambras castle 1596 and 1788 suggest that Dorigo Spilman built other instruments aside from the bass violin. The listings describe a small violin or pochette as having been constructed by Spilman: ‘‘one small violin somewhat long and fairly slender’’ (‘‘ain clains langelets gar schmals geigl’’) in 1596, and ‘‘one fairly lovely, small dancing-master violin, with a light body in brown wood with golden engravings […] by Doricus Spilman in Padova 1591’’ (‘‘ein gar hübsches Tanzmeister-Geiglein mit einem schlankem Leibe von braunem Holz mit vergoldeten Stichen […] von Doricus Spilman in Padova 1591’’) in 1788.\textsuperscript{271} The pochette received its name due to its size and storing position. The body of the instrument was so tiny that it could literally fit into a dance master’s pocket. The performer could access it easily to demonstrate a dance tune or a rhythm on it for educational purposes. Marin Mersenne, for example, states that ‘‘the smallest one [of the violins] is named the poche, because it is so small that the violinists who teach dancing carry it in their pockets.’’\textsuperscript{272}

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{272} Mersenne, op. cit., 235.
This Spilman *pochette* is not extant after its last known account of 1788, but its description as a work of fine craftsmanship singles it out as a quite different instrument aesthetically, compared to the rather functionally built large bass violin. Yet no matter how different the violin and the bass violin may have been built, their shared function to accompany dance represents them both as true examples of active music practice. These facts suggest that Spilman indeed built different sizes of violins aside from performing.

Spilman may have exercised most the professions of a late-renaissance musician or minstrel. Secular musicians have been called *Spilmanen* in German-speaking countries since the thirteenth century, and their social status was that of the plebeian. Until the middle of the sixteenth century, they held no civil rights and earned their living by traveling from town to town to beg their way with music making, singing and fiddling. The church often persecuted them. Yet, by mid sixteenth century, the term *Spielman* changed meaning. It referred to a professional musician or minstrel of more than average technical skills, who performed on hand-made instruments, generally built by the player himself.

Many of these minstrels were instrument makers, dealers and dancing masters at once. Most of these musicians were employed in towns by the council or by wealthy patricians for official ceremonies, which gave them financial stability, a fixed location and basic citizen rights. Yet all fiddlers, no matter what the range of their instruments were, belonged to the lowest ranks of urban population. For example, a late sixteenth-century Saxon manuscript that associated the use of specific instruments with particular social groups, allowed the lowest two social ranks, 

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273 Ibid., 15.


275 Ibid., 62.
including “craftsmen, peasants, servants, maids and day-workers,” to perform only on the violin (Geige).  

Performance on the bass violin within the violin band was primarily influenced by the social status of its players. Violinists were representative of the lower social strata, in contrast to viol players, who belonged to the higher social level. As paid professionals, violin players were officially engaged in church ceremonies, such as baptism, funerals, or weddings. However, the core of their employment involved performing on secular occasions, such as wedding receptions, banquets, public processions and festivities. Jambe de Fer confirms the violinist’s occupation and states that the violin was used often to accompany weddings, mummeries and religious processions. Furthermore, violinists most likely performed well-known tunes, chansons or folksongs as well as drinking songs: everything that pleased the crowd.

In some exceptional instances the bass violin (Bassgeige) had an elite status within the band of violins due to the expense of the material and the amount of wood it required to build one. The bass violin’s market price was equivalent to the cost of about forty pigs in 1614, thus it fell outside of the purchasing range of most musicians. Due to this extraordinarily high price and the correspondingly low budget of its players; bass violinists often built their instruments themselves. Most bass violin players were professionals, so in order to earn an every-day living, bass violinists had to be also the builders, especially in lower social circles. Both instruments and Spilman’s name confirm that he was most likely one of those bass violinists.

Spilman possibly built many violins of different sizes, among them the bass violin that survived four hundred years of active music making. His accomplished skills in violin making

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276 Ibid., 70.
277 Jambe de Fer, Epitome, transl., op. cit., 63.
278 Ibid., 66.
suggest, that he dedicated himself solely to performing and building instruments. As his name rightly implies he was a Spilman, representing an example of a true Renaissance minstrel.

Spilman’s low social status and the bass violin’s presence within the collection of functional and practical musical instruments imply that it was played mainly in rural settings, outside of the court. Because the instrument provided every-day living to its builder, it was held in several different manners, in order to accommodate diverse occupations and employments. These various playing positions are confirmed by certain construction features of the Spilman bass violin, suggesting two basic ways of securing the bass violin during performance, with slight variations.

Performing Styles of Bass Violins

The bass violin was performed in two ways: either in a stationary position or in a position designed to enable the performer’s movement. The first style of holding the bass violin could have been utilized, for instance, at a wedding ceremony, during the banquet after the mass, in the pub, or simply indoors, when the musicians occupied a fixed location. The other basic holding practice was used mainly in processions, during marching, or in street music making. The Spilman bass violin bears evidence of having been performed in both ways.

In case of a stationary position, a player usually took the bass violin between his legs, embracing the lower ribs of the instrument with his inner thighs to keep it from falling or slipping. In 1590, the instrument inventory of Archduke Charles from Styria documents this
manner of performance when it refers to “three new bass violins, as [in the manner] one takes them between one’s feet” (“drei neue baszgeigen, so man zwischen füeszen zu nemen pflegt”).

This practice of holding a bass violin in a fixed position is further documented in the late-sixteenth-century painting *Robert Dudley dancing with a Lady*. As part of the violin band, in the left side of the canvas, the bass violin player holds his instrument between his legs, placed on his inner thighs. The body of the instrument is turned out to the right side, not at all placed on the floor, but rather held in the air. The bass violin is large in size; therefore, this embracing method seems realistic enough (Fig. 4.3).

Figure 4.3. *Robert Dudley Dancing with a Lady* traditionally called *Queen Elisabeth I Dancing with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester* c1580, Penshurst Place.

279 Schlosser, op. cit., 20.
This same possibly frequently used position left an imprint on the rib construction of the Spilman bass violin. The ribs of the Spilman bass violin, made of maple, are the thinnest part of the instrument. At the lower bouts, where “one takes them between one’s feet,” the wood is relatively thin. Furthermore, a slight indentation and many cracks are visible on both sides at the lower ribs, (Fig.4.4) which suggest that the instrument was probably held in-between the performer’s legs on a regular basis.

Figure 4.4. Ribs on the bass side lower bouts of the *Spilman Bass Violin*, ca.1590 in Kunshistorisches Museum, Vienna.

In addition to this method of placing the instrument between one’s legs, bass violinists also could position it on the floor, in front them, or on the lap, affixed in a horizontal angle. The holding differences probably depended upon the weight and size of the bass violin. Jambe de Fer confirms these practices in his description of holding the instruments in *da gamba* fashion.

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280 Ibid., 20.
The author states that the bass violins might be “held at the bottom […] some between the legs, others upon some seat or stool.”

The holding positions, originally used for viols, had been transferred to the newcomer bass violins as well. Jambe de Fer adds that some performers place the instrument “right on the knees [in the Italian manner…] the French, [however,] make very little use of this method.” In 1542, Silvestro Ganassi expressed his disapproval of this practice, calling it “Moorish.”

Ganassi’s comment is confirmed in a canvas painted by Alonso Vazquez (Fig. 2.8). The bass violin is placed on the right inner thigh of the angel. A slight variation of this holding custom is depicted in illustrations of bass violins by Bernardino Lanino. Both instruments are positioned on the floor, touching the left outer upper legs of the players (Fig. 2.9 and Fig. 2.10).

Bass violinists also secured their instrument between their legs, as discussed by Jambe de Fer, in order to stabilize the larger sized instruments in a steady performing position. The instrument would have been held vertically and not horizontally between one’s legs, but located in front of the performer on the floor. This particular way of embracing a bass violin is shown on the painting Ball at the Valois King’s Court in 1581. The canvas, which is now part of the Musée des Beaux Arts in Rennes, depicts a violin band that accompanies dance at court (Fig. 4.5).

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281 Jambe De Fer, Epitome, transl., op. cit., 62.
282 Ibid., 43.
The bass violin is placed between the bass violinist’s legs, yet it rests in front of the player, on the floor. The large dimensions and the considerable weight of the instrument may have necessitated the bass violin’s placement on the floor. A slightly different holding pose is shown on a painting by Crispin Simon De Passe, depicting students performing music in a tavern (Fig.4.6).
Figure 4.6. *Musizierende Studenten* by Crispin Simon de Passe, 1612.

The illustration shows university students, who seem to entertain themselves with earthly pleasures; prominently including music making by players of a lute, a harpsichord and a small violin band of three members. The bass violin player holds his instrument vertically in front of him, in an outward turning angle, between his legs, but leaning on the inside of the left thigh. The instrument is partly placed on the ground, supported by the right leg of the performer.

The bass violin rests on the player’s right foot and the top of the foot touches the end button of the instrument. An almost identical placement is depicted in the illustration by Balthasar de Beaujoyeux (Fig. 3.6). In this drawing, the bass violin is held on the right outer thigh of the performer, and the end button is placed on the left foot of the bass violinist.
Another possibility to secure the bass violin was accomplished by its placement on the upper part of the legs in a more horizontal angle. This method can be seen in the miniature engraving of the Bavarian Court Ensemble under Lassus, painted by Hans Mielich 1570 (Fig. 1.1). The bass violin is depicted behind the bass viol player and it can be seen only in part, because the bass viol is placed in front of it. Yet it is obvious that the right upper bout is resting on the table while the other half of the instrument is held on the leg of the performer for balance.

The vertical holding position, either on the ground, on a stool, or most frequently, between or on the legs of a player remained until the late-nineteenth century the principal holding positions of violoncelli. The slight differentiation of placing the bass violin in front of the performer, between or on the legs, may have depended on the size and weight of the instrument. The larger bass violins were positioned in front of the player or placed on one thigh, and the smaller instruments might have been secured between the performer’s legs.283

The playing position that accommodated movement during performance is verified by Jambe de Fer, who describes that the violin is easier to carry than the viol.284 Ludovico Zacconi underlines this description when he states that “carrying the viole da gamba through the streets is neither convenient, nor even easy; they [the viols] are more comfortable to play in the home and make a more pleasant harmony there.”285 Because movement was involved while performing, the player of the bass violin needed to find a way not only to hold, but also to carry the instrument. For this sake, a strap was used, which was to be fixed to the instrument by a pin and wrapped around the shoulder or around the neck of the player.

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283 Although there are exceptions to that rule; just as the large bass violin held between the player’s legs in Figure 4.3.
284 Jambe De Fer, Epitome, transl., op. cit., 63.
This carrying position is also consistent with a singular construction detail of the Spilman instrument. The Spilman bass violin possesses a small protrusive hook on the back plate of the body. It is placed between the two upper corner blocks of the ribs, approximately in the horizontal middle (Fig. 4.7 and Fig. 4.8).

Figure 4.7. Ribs on the bass side of the Spilman Bass Violin with pin.
The pin is made of metal (possibly iron) and it has a hole vertically, so that a cord or rope can run through it, which can be fastened to the performer. The pin has a bolt shape that has been screwed through the back plate of the instrument (Fig. 4.9).
Closer inspection shows three additional dark brown circles on the left side of the bolt. They are found along a large crack. These holes were possible precursors of the present hook, which replaced the bolt after the latter probably had caused the wood to crack (Fig. 4.10). An explanation for the function of the screw is found in the treatise *Epitome Musical*. In 1556, Jambe de Fer confirms to the holding positions of violins, with particular attention to the bass violin:

[The violins] are held upon the arms, some with a scarf, cord, or something else. The bass, because of its heaviness, is very troublesome to carry; hence it is supported with a little hook in an iron ring, or something else, which is attached to the back of the said instrument quite suitably, […] so that it does not hamper him who plays upon it.\(^{286}\)

\(^{286}\) Jambe de Fer, *Epitome*, transl., op. cit., 63.
According to this report, bass violinists used a strap around their neck or around their shoulders, to secure the instrument by a pin or by a bolt that was attached to the back plate of the bass violin. The Spilman bass violin seems to have regularly been played in the manner Jambe de Fer describes. The cord around the neck, or around the shoulders of the performer, was attached to the hook of the instrument in order to affix the bass violin in a secure holding position. Because of the weight of the instrument, the load caused a crack in the wood, so the pin did not last long. As a result, it needed to be replaced several times. The relatively numerous repeated substitutions reveal the performer’s constant attempts to make the instrument...
portable and functional again. This means that the Spilman bass violin must have been played
constantly, or even on a daily basis for a period of time during its lifetime.

Iconographic evidence verifies to that holding method as well. In 1600, the painting A
Village Wedding Procession by Jan Brueghel the Elder provides further confirmation of this
holding practice. The central theme of the picture is an open-air traditional wedding ceremony.
An entire landscape of a small rural town is shown, with a bridal procession in the foreground, in
front of the church, behind a drummer and the groom, the bridal procession is comprised not
only of friends and relatives, but also of a violin band of three players in the lower center (Fig.
4.11). The violin band marches in front of the bride, and it provides a musical accompaniment
for her on her way to the church.
Figure 4.11. Detail from Jan Brueghel the Elder, *A Village Wedding Procession*, Southern Low Countries, ca.1600, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

All instruments of the band bear main characteristics of the violin family, such as F-shaped sound holes, rounded upper bouts, a highly arched bridge, narrow fingerboard, protrusive corner blocks around the deep indentations on both sides of the ribs, and overhanging edges of the top plates over the ribs. The musicians perform on three different sizes of violins: soprano, alto and bass. All violins possess four strings, except the soprano, which has only three.
Brueghel’s canvas depicts late-sixteenth-century holding customs of all three sizes of violins. The smallest instrument is held on the shoulder, the alto against the shoulder, and the bass violin is supported by a strap around the right shoulder of the player. This strap possibly is fastened to the back of the instrument, around the middle of the back plate. Although the hook or screw is not shown in the painting, its existence can be deduced from the visible strap over the shoulder and the almost horizontal holding position, which requires another fixed point on the back plate of the bass violin. In a way similar to that of the smaller violins, the bass player grabs his instrument with his left hand. This support of the left hand and the belt that is affixed to his instrument secure the balance. The presence of the iron ring in a form of a hook on the Spilman bass violin suggests that it was played in the same or in a similar manner to the Brueghel instrument.

In summary, sixteenth-century bass violins may have been held in a variety of ways, yet these positions can be reduced to two basic positions: one to accommodate the moving player and another, the stationary.

Conclusion

The Spilman instrument presents final and complete evidence for the existence and nature of the larger sized and lower tuned bass violin model. Based on its construction details, size and the material and lengths of its strings, the two alternate tunings in C or in Bb are confirmed. The bass violin’s label and historical background of Spilmanen verify its builder’s probable low social status. The function of both the Spilman pochette and his bass violin propose the builder’s various occupations and the bass violin’s role as an instrument of everyday live-music making.
Finally, the existence of the thinned-out lower bouts and the presence of a securing and holding device in a form of a pin imply the numerous possible holding positions of the Spilman bass violin. Due to the presence of the pin and Spilman’s name and social status, the bass violin was most likely used in rural settings rather than at court. As a result, the proposed classification of the larger and lower pitched bass violin is established.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The goal of this essay has been to discuss and to classify the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century bass violin by means of the following criteria: construction, early history and development, role due the social status of builders and players, use within the violin band, performing positions, and defining terminology. Accounts of inventories, organological treatises, and music theoretical writings, lists of households and royal courts, descriptions of feasts, reports of choreographies, iconographical examples and three extant instruments have confirmed the bass violin’s existence since the sixteenth century.

The reason for undertaking this complex research was initially inspired by the meager words of both Michael Praetorius and Marin Mersenne. Praetorius writes in 1618: “since [the violins] are such familiar instruments I need not say much about them.” Similarly, in 1635, Mersenne states: “[the drawing of] the bass [violin] is so well done, that there is no need to pause for its description.” Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, the situation changed dramatically. The clear, shared knowledge about bass violins gradually gave way to a chaos of speculations and controversial theories purporting to classify the bass violin as distinct instruments such as the viol, viola, double bass or violoncello. Accompanying this development we see a basic disinterest in the proper nature, use and status of this particular instrument.

The main cause for this confusion is the lack of a clear, single, comprehensive study focusing exclusively on the sixteenth-century bass violin, from its origins to the mid seventeenth century, based on primary sources. The majority of books on the violoncello mention the bass violin in connection to the origins of the cello, but all discussions are based on downsized
instruments that, as a result of the alterations, became violoncellos. Moreover, some of the basically unaltered bass violins, such as the Spilman instrument are continuously labeled as violoncellos without any clear indication of what their original nomenclature was.

In almost all instances, the sixteenth-century history of the “violoncello” is not connected to its mid-seventeenth century counterpart in a straightforward way, nor is it stated clearly that the violoncello and the bass violin are different instruments. Usually the distinct nature and nomenclature are not even mentioned, reducing the bass violin to an instrument that represents an immature, incipient stage in the violoncello’s development. As a result, any study of the bass violin has been considered part of violoncello research, rather than a separate area of studies that involves the origins, history and a different instrumental identity.

Research on the topic reveals considerable disagreement concerning sixteenth-century bass violin terminology, creating an “identity crisis” for the instrument. The ensuing complexity obscures, rather than clarifies, the proper lineage and identification of the bass violin. Scholars argue for various labels, which include tenor violin, double bass violone, bass viol or violoncello. Yet based on its construction details, which are identical with that of the violin, and due to its register and its sixteenth-century terminology, the instrument must to be called “bass violin.”

The first appearance and standardization of the label “violoncello” did not take place until the middle of the seventeenth century. The violoncello’s emergence was based on the invention of the wire-wound bass strings, the general change in musical style and the first solo repertoire for the instrument. These factors initiated the standardized C-G-d-a tuning, and the common holding custom in a seated position between the player’s legs.

The downsizing of the early bass violins into violoncellos does not support the transformation and distortion of their original history and identity as bass violins in the sixteenth
and early seventeenth century. Furthermore, the extremely rare survivors of the untouched bass violin type should be labeled with the historically appropriate term “bass violin” or its direct translations, as used in the sixteenth century.

The sixteenth-century bass violin differs from the later model violoncello in its size, various tunings, holding positions and the material of its strings. The function of the bass violin being part of an ensemble rather than an individual instrument, distinguishes it from the violoncello, which emerged and was frequently used as a solo instrument. Furthermore, the mid seventeenth-century violoncello model differs from the present-day violoncello in the following ways as well: the material of its strings, its holding position, other construction details and the instrument’s role.

Even though these differences are significant, the label “violoncello” did not change over some three hundred years, but rather, it is differentiated by the terms “baroque” and “modern” instruments, to separate the seventeenth-century model from that of the present day. If there already are so many major differences between the early violoncello and the violoncello of today, how is it possible to force a nomenclature that is both inaccurate and non-specific upon an instrument that existed 130 years before the “baroque violoncello?” Similarly to the relationship between the baroque violoncello and the modern violoncello, the bass violin is the direct ancestor of the violoncello, but its distinct nature deserves a separate and historically appropriate term.

The bass violin shares the construction details of a violin, yet it has two distinct sizes; a smaller and a larger size. The different sizes bear two separate tunings: a higher and a lower one, yet these two pitch systems can be further separated into four pitches, such as F, G and Bb and C. All strings of the bass violin are made of pure sheep gut. The Freiberg bass violins embody the
small bass violin, and the Spilman instrument represents the larger bass violin type. The instruments furnish conclusive evidence for the models and provide general information about subjects closely related to the bass violin and its players. Due to their different natures and origins, the Freiberg and Spilman bass violins complement each other in a convincing and comprehensive way.

The Freiberg instruments survived as works of art due to their role as signifiers of Saxon royal pomp. Even though they were built as objects of active music making, they were preserved for their aesthetic value. The Spilman bass violin, in contrast, represents an exemplar of the everyday music-making of its builder, a professional bass violinist. The Freiberg models indicate that bass violins were used in church as well as in secular settings at royal courts; whereas the Spilman instrument suggests the employment of bass violins at rural occasions, outside of the court.

The existence of two bass stringed instruments in Freiberg confirms both the performance practice of bass violins within the violin band and the use of different instruments for distinct pitch standards in late sixteenth-century Europe. Furthermore, they corroborate the existence of two separate tunings for small sized bass violins, in F or in G, while the Spilman bass violin represents the large bass violin’s tuning in C or Bb. Due to its extreme string lengths and their low tension, the Spilman bass violin could have been tuned to either C or Bb without danger of breaking the strings, which may have been the case with the shorter strings of the smaller bass violin.

The three extant bass violins together provide a complete picture of the instrument’s possible playing positions. It can be inferred that the Freiberg instruments, although possibly never actively played, were most likely held in a fixed position due to their end block. In
contrast, the Spilman bass violin, which shows evidence of constant usage, was held either in a stationary position, or in a way that suited a marching performer.

Even though the Freiberg bass violins do not give any indication as to who the performers might have been, the earliest surviving score that specifies violins occurs within *Le Balet Comique de la Royne*. This report identifies the bass violinist of the small bass violin as the composer of the music itself. This person, Lampert de Beaulieu was a professional musician as was Dorigo Spilman, the builder of the larger bass violin. Yet, compared to Beaulieu, who was employed by the French court as a singer, composer and bass violinist, Spilman probably worked outside the court, within the lower social strata. He was not only the maker, but a bass violinist and possibly a dealer as well, occupying himself with many aspects of music, much like his colleague at court.

Directly or indirectly, both the Freiberg and Spilman bass violins identify local violin making centers of sixteenth-century Germany. The flourishing Saxon violin building tradition of the sixteenth- and seventeenth century declined in the eighteen century and was revived again much later. Spilman, who was possibly born in Füssen, Southern Germany, may represent the first generation of the violin building school of that town, which was to become one of the most important centers of violin-making in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe.

Prototypical standards of musical instruments are based on individual exemplars. As a result, even though the three bass violins discussed are products of violin building schools of specific regions, their unique proportions and features do indeed embody the “ideal bass violin model,” present in late sixteenth-century Europe. That the bass violin existed and was used throughout the continent in the last decades of the sixteenth century is confirmed by the wealth
of evidence found and described in this thesis, originating in Austria, Germany, France, England, Italy, Spain, Hungary, the Low Countries and Poland.

Yet no matter how immensely helpful the Freiberg and Spilman bass violins are for the purposes of establishing the instrument’s type, they have lost their playability and sound due to the time that has elapsed between their creation and now. For this reason, I wish to close my essay with Marin Mersenne’s words that describe the sounds of the bass violin within the violin consort in 1635, as part of the “Universal Harmony,” or, in his own words, the Harmonie Universelle. He states:

The violin has this above all the other instruments, […] that it imitates and counterfeits all sorts of instruments, such as the voice, the organ, the hurdy-gurdy, the bagpipe, the fife, so that it can suggest the sadness, as the lute does, and can become animated like the trumpet, and those who know perfectly how to play it can represent everything that occurs to them.[…] Those, who judge the excellence of music and its instruments by the beauty and excellence of airs and chansons have rather powerful reasons for maintaining that it is the best, of which the greatest is drawn from the great effect it has on the passions and affections of the body and soul.287

287 Mersenne, op. cit., 242 and 235.
SOURCES

Organological Sources


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