

The Birth of the Violoncello - 1

Diego Ortiz
(c.1510 – c.1570)

Recercarda No.2

*Instruments: small violoncello after Gasparo Da Salò (tuned G-d-a-d')
bass viol*

Domenico Gabrielli
(1651/1659? - 1690)

Sonata in G major (1st version)

*Instruments: violoncello (C-G-d-g)
violoncello (C-G-d-a)*

Jean-Baptiste Barrière
(1707 - 1747)

Sonata No.5 in F major
(*adagio - allegro - adagio - allegro*)

Instruments: 2 x violoncello (C-G-d-a)

Giuseppe Maria Jacchini
(1663 - 1727)

Sonata in A minor

*Instruments: small violoncello after Gasparo Da Salò (tuned G-d-a-d')
bass viol*

Luigi Boccherini
(1743 - 1805)

Sonata in A major "L'Impératrice"
(*allegro - largo - allegro*)

*Instruments: five-string violoncello (C-G-d-a-e')
violoncello (C-G-d-a)*

Domenico Gabrielli
(1651/1659? - 1690)

Canon for two cellos

This programme traces the crystallisation of the violoncello's modern form from a time when its identity was fluid; neither fully distinct from its viol-family cousins, nor completely emancipated as a solo instrument. Each of the composers featured was writing for his very own instrument, which emphasises the visceral nature of these works; this is unashamedly music for bodies as much as the spirit.

In many of **Ortiz'** *recercadas* the notion of "solo plus accompaniment" does not really hold; the "solo" is essentially an ornate and improvisatory embellishment for a madrigal. In this *recercada*, at least, the "accompaniment" is a repeated chordal bass-line, giving the melody a little more lime-light. What we are dealing with here is a written-out example of sixteenth-century *alla bastarda* improvisation, when an instrumentalist (specifically, a *viola bastarda* player) would improvise on a madrigal by picking out and diminishing fragments of each vocal part in turn, linking them together to create the illusion of a polyphonic texture. The viol's quickness of speech and fourth-based tuning system (minimising the need for shifting left-hand position) fostered this form of scurrying virtuosity, which serves as a contrast to Gabrielli's sonata for violoncello, an instrument of which the greater capacity for projection and more lyrical, richer tone lent itself to a mode of composition where the roles of solo and accompaniment could be more firmly established. The small, fretted "cello" played here is a modified copy of a viol by Gasparo da Salò, working in Northern Italy when the Spanish Ortiz was *Maestro de Capella* in Naples. The use of plucked viol as an accompaniment acknowledges the fact that, in Ortiz' time, the plucked *vihuela de mano* and the bowed *vihuela de arco* were often no more than two different techniques used the same instrument.

Gabrielli published a later version of his G major sonata in which he evidently adapted the composition to accommodate the modern C-G-d-a tuning; This first version, however, intends the typically Bolognese tuning which acknowledges the fourth-based viol tuning. The result is a greater - and more viol-like - degree of sympathetic resonance between the open strings. Nonetheless, the denser, more penetrating tone of the violoncello lends itself to a very vocal compositional style more typical of violin writing of the time than of music written for viol (the viol, by contrast, being considered the supreme instrument for mimicking the human spoken - rather than singing - voice). The violoncello's other predecessor was the much larger bass violin, cumbersome and slower to speak by comparison, although eminently suitable for playing bass lines. The revolution in string-making technology in the late seventeenth-century, whereby metal was wound round gut to increase the weight of a string without increasing its length, meant that a smaller model of bass violin - *violoncello* - could be made, with shorter, quicker-speaking metal-wound bass strings allowing for soloistic virtuosity to flourish an octave and a half lower than a violin's range. Being a bass player, one expects Gabrielli to understand the importance of the bass in supporting the melody, harmonically and rhythmically. This proves a welcome challenge for the accompanying cellist, deprived of (/freed from?) a keyboard instrument and therefore obliged to realise the figured bass.

Fifty years after the violoncello was first named on a composition as a solo instrument (by Gabrielli), **Barrière** represents one of the new thumb-position pioneers who took the cello to the end of the fingerboard and back, whilst writing music of melodic fantasy and intoxicating harmonic richness. This is a language owing much to the great French viol tradition he inherited, despite his imitation of the Italianate style. The way in which Barrière often blends melody and bass indistinguishably in an organ-like chordal texture is a distinctive way in which he demonstrates the visceral interdependency of the parts.

Travelling through Italy, the Frankfurt lawyer Uffenbach said of Gabrielli's pupil **Jacchini** that he performed on "nothing more than a simple bass or violoncello" and that it sounded "more like a viol in his hands than a bass instrument". This sonata in the Corellian slow-fast-slow-fast format exploits the tenor register to contrast expressive lyricism with virtuosic outbursts; the cello's bass register is consigned to the accompaniment, implying that Jacchini was consciously championing his instrument's improbable soloistic capabilities in opposition to its established bass-function. The choice of viol as accompaniment imagines an instance of cross-cultural collaboration between an Italian cellist and French viol player, in the spirit of *Les Goûts-réünis*. Whilst this term refers to a specifically French concept of ideal music whereby the best of Italian style is blended with the best of French (leading to the import and republication in France of countless Italian compositions with additional, quintessentially French figures written into the basso continuo parts), the same process of cross-cultural fertilization seems to have been happening south of the alps, at least in northern Italy. Many French viol players, curious to discover the new "violoncello", travelled to Italy to study.¹ A mid-eighteenth-century manuscript² by the Milanese Christoforo Signorelli contains not only a treatise on fingerings for fretted violoncellos (such as the one played in this Jacchini sonata), but also notes on how to realise bass lines using a seven-string (and therefore French) viol.³ On a related note, it was for the London-born Christina Visconti, who married the celebrated Cremonese Violinist Gaspare Visconti, that Stradivarius made a viol in 1707. Therefore, whether, played by French, English, or Italian players, the viol was still used, exceptionally, in early- to mid-eighteenth-century northern Italy, including as a continuo instrument.

The dedication of **Boccherini's** sonata refers to Empress Maria Theresia of Austria, Boccherini's employer between 1757 and 1764. This sonata shares with his thirty-odd other sonatas for cello and bass the youthful exuberance and expressive sensitivity which attracted the teenager more than did formal rigour. The particular technical demands and often extremely high register (even for Boccherini) of the solo line support the argument that Boccherini also owned and occasionally wrote for a "violon chico" with an e string. Certainly, Boccherini's inventory lists this

¹ V Walden, *One Hundred Years*, p. 13

² Museo Civico Bibliografico, Bologna, D. 117

³ C.f. Vittorio Gueilhmi.

smaller instrument alongside his Stainer cello. The case for this being a small five-string instrument is made by Prof. Christian Speck, who discovered the “l’Impératrice” sonata in Vienna in the early nineties and suggests it is written for a five-string instrument⁴. More than any other type of music, this style of composition - by an instrumentalist writing for the specific capabilities of his very own instrument - requires the act of playing the piece on the proposed instrument in order to test the theory itself. My conclusion is that I am not wholly convinced that it was written for an instrument with a top e string.

Argument against five-string cello: With an e-string, the sonata “feels” - under the left hand in particular - unfamiliar by comparison with other Boccherini sonatas. Bach moulds his sixth suite to the particular capabilities of his five-string violoncello piccolo, such that it feels utterly idiomatic; not only are certain chords impossible without the fifth string, but the rhetoric of the music also exploits the e string and avoids the weaker C and G string, displaying an ingenious understanding of the nature of this exceptional instrument. In Boccherini’s sonata, there are no chords that couldn’t also be played on a four-string cello. Furthermore, Boccherini’s writing in other cello sonatas displays, like Bach, a thorough understanding of the way a human body interacts with a four-string cello. Extended passages are written under one thumb position, which would be the case for this sonata, if played on a four-string cello.

Argument for five strings: In other sonatas, Boccherini tends to use (almost) the full gamut of c clefs - tenor, alto, mezzo-soprano and soprano, and typically signals a shift to a new thumb position (and a new voice within the composition) by a shift in clef. This sonata is written almost exclusively in transposing treble clef (sounding an octave lower), with one or two other clefs used in places where the thumb position doesn’t need to change (but they do tend to signal the entry of a new voice).

In many ways, this sonata *is* exceptional for Boccherini. It’s the only known sonata he wrote with a title; the range *is* stratospheric; even if played on four strings, several arpeggio passages cannot be executed under one thumb position, as is so commonly the case in other sonatas.

Whatever the instrument was, it is clear from this discussion that the approach to performing this particular sonata necessitates a keen awareness of the relationship between a human body and the instrument it plays; consequently, too, one imagines Boccherini relishing the physical act of exploring this instrument.

From Ortiz’ *recercadas*, where the relative interest of the solo and accompaniment is not immediately evident, to a virtuoso sonata by Boccherini where the bass line but sparsely supports the solo, the interrelationship between melody and bass is ever-changing. This recital concludes with **Gabrielli**’s canon, where melody is as much the bass as the bass is the melody.

Programme notes by Jonathan Rees, 2013

⁴ Early Music, May 2005.