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Baroque Violin Technique

Violin Playing in Late Seventeenth-Century England: Baltzar, Matteis, and Purcell

Mary Cyr

Violin playing underwent distinct changes in late-17th century England. With the Restoration (and the return of Charles II from France) Lully and the French manner of playing certainly prevailed for a time. But with the arrival of famous violinists from abroad such as Thomas Baltzar and Nicola Matteis the English were exposed to fresh influences. The holding of the bow (the bow grip), the placement of the instrument against the body, the kinds of sonorities used on the instrument, all underwent decisive changes. These new techniques and aspects of playing undoubtedly had an effect on Purcell in his *Sonnata's of III Parts* for two violins and continuo (composed about 1680 and published in 1683).

The "French Grip"

John Playford described the bow grip commonly used in England around mid-century and thereafter:

The *Bow* is held in the right Hand between the ends of the Thumb and three Fingers, the Thumb being stay'd upon the *Hair* at the Nut, and the three *Fingers* resting upon the Wood.¹

¹ John Playford, *A Briefe Introduction to the Skill of Musick* (London, 1654), 127.

This grip (commonly known as the "French grip") was employed not only in England but also throughout Europe, especially in France, where it was associated with Lully's orchestra, and in Germany, Italy, and the Low Countries.² Its continuing use in England is documented by John Lenton as late as 1693:

... let your Bow be as long as your Instrument, well mounted and stiff Hair'd, it will otherwise totter upon the String in drawing a long stroke; hold it with your Thumb half under the Nutt, half under the Hair from the Nutt, and let it rest upon the middle of the first joynt of the little Finger against the Wood, let the Bow move always within an inch of the Bridge directly forward and backward, let your Bow-wrist move loosly, (but not much bent), and hold not up your Elbow, more than necessity requires: Stand or Sit upright, beware of unseemly actions, &c.³

The "Thumb half under the Nutt, half under the Hair from the Nutt" represents a more detailed description of the French grip than does Playford's.

We can observe this French thumb-on-the-hair bow grip in a number of paintings by Dutch and Flemish artists portraying scenes of informal music making, not only in the 17th century but into the 18th as well.⁴ The portrait and figure painter Jan Olis (1610-1676), who worked in Dordrecht, painted a "Musical Party" with a well-dressed group of musicians, including a viola da gambist, a flute player, a lutenist, a violinist, and perhaps a singer. As in other paintings by this artist, the interior is a bare room with walls toned in

² See David Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing from Its Origins to 1761* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 75 and 248f. Boyden traces the French grip back as far as the late 15th century.

³ John Lenton, *The Gentleman's Diversion or the Violin Explained* (London, 1693), 11.

⁴ For background on the tradition of musical instruments and their symbolism in Flemish painting see Pieter Fischer, *Music in Paintings of the Low Countries in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1975), and Richard Leppert, *The Theme of Music in Flemish Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Munich: Musikverlag Emil Katzschler, 1977), 2 vols. Leppert observes that the violin was often a symbol in 17th-century Flemish art of "wasted time, laziness, and sin" (vol. 1, p. 77).

browns.⁵ All of the playing positions are portrayed in a realistic manner, and the French bow grip is clearly visible. (See Plate 1)

Another "Musical Party," by Jacob van Velsen (fl. 1625-1656), shows an interior scene with a violinist and one, or possibly two, singers as central figures. Here again, as in Olis's painting, the manner of holding the bow corresponds with Playford's description of 17th-century practice in England. (See Plate 2) Although the older French grip must have gradually fallen out of use during the 18th century, we can still observe its use in some scenes of informal music-making such as this one.

Two examples by the Flemish painter Jan Joseph Horemans (1682-1759) and by his younger brother, Pieter Jacob Horemans (1700-1776), illustrate the French grip being used by a cellist. The spirited scene entitled "Le galant concert" by Jan Joseph Horemans (see Plate 3) portrays two singers, a harpsichordist, a violinist, a cellist, and a double bass player. The informality of the scene is captured in musical terms by the postures of the players and the somewhat whimsical proportions of the double bass, with its extremely short neck and large body resting on a platform. The outdoor scene entitled "Konzert im Garten" (Plate 4) by Pieter Jacob Horemans, who was court painter to Charles Albert, Elector of Bavaria, shows two string players (a violinist and a cellist) using the thumb-under grip, joined by several wind instrument players and a lutenist.

The Italian Bow Grip

During the 1670s Nicola Matteis introduced to England the new way of holding the bow, with the thumb held on the stick (called the "Italian grip"). This allowed a smoother connection between notes, especially with the longer bow Matteis favored. According to Roger North:

... he taught the English to hold the bow by the wood onely (*sic*)
and not to touch the hair, which was no small reformation. . .

And further, he indicates that this manner of playing was:

... immediately taken up by the best hands in a few years
and became the universall practice.⁶

⁵ Walther Berndt, *The Netherlandish Painters of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1970), vol. 2, p. 89.

⁶ John Wilson, ed., *Roger North on Music* (London: Novello and Co., 1959), 309.

Plate 1. Jan Olis, "A Musical Party"

(Oil on canvas, 36.7 x 52.8 cm. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London, catalogue no. 3548.)

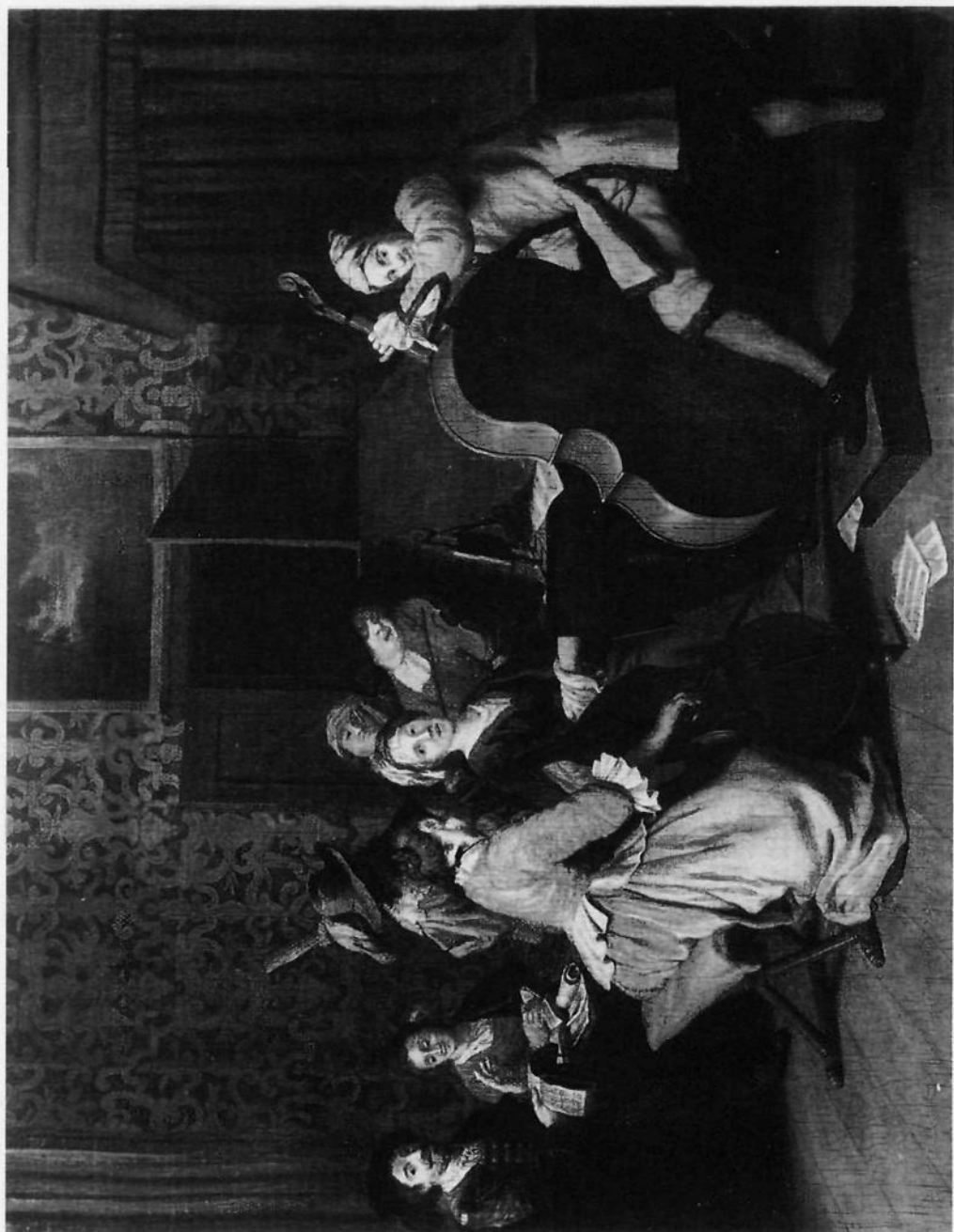


Plate 2. Jacob van Velsen, "A Musical Party (1631)
(Oil on panel, 40 x 55 cm. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees,
The National Gallery, London, catalogue no. 2575.)



Plate 3. Jan Joseph Horemans, “Le galant concert”

(Oil on canvas, 46.3 x 55 cm. Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, used by permission.)



**Plate 4. Attributed to Pieter Jacob Horemans,
"Konzert im Garten"**

(Oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm. Munich, Städtische Galerie im
Lenbachhaus, used by permission.)



The Manner of Holding the Violin

Matteis also became known for the length of his bow and for the manner in which he held the violin. Roger North claimed that "his bow was as long as for a Base violl" and that he "rested the instrument against his short ribs."⁷ That the low position he employed became common in England can also be demonstrated by a passage from Playford, who describes a similar position:

... the Neck thereof being held by the left hand, the lower part thereof is rested on the left Breast, a little below the Shoulder.⁸

In like manner, we may notice the low position of holding the violin in the paintings of Olis and Velsen (Plates 1 and 2 above).

That Matteis's manner of holding the violin was widely imitated by English players is indicated by a veiled reference to him in Lenton's tutor. Lenton (who held various court positions as violinist from 1681 until 1718) recommended a position slightly higher than that used by Matteis (but not under the chin). Lenton also draws a sharp distinction between the Italian and English styles of playing—this pointing to a fairly strong foreign influence having taken place upon violin technique in England by the 1690s:

... as I would have none get a habit of holding an Instrument under the Chin, so I would have them avoid placing it as low as the Girdle, which is a mongrel sort of way us'd by some in Imitation of the *Italians*, never considering the Nature of the Musick they are to perform; but certainly for *English* compositions, which generally carry a gay lively Air with them, the best way of commanding the Instrument will be to place it something higher than your Breast, your Fingers round and firm in stopping, not bending your joynts inward...

Multiple Stops, Virtuosity, and *Messa di voce*

Thomas Baltzar was another renowned violinist who made his way to England, probably shortly after 1653.⁹ The earliest record of him there is John

⁷ Wilson, *Roger North*, 168, 309. On the various manners of holding the violin, both "chin-off" and held with the chin, see Peter Walls, "Violin Fingering in the 18th Century," *Early Music* 12 (1984), 300-315, and Charles Medlam, "On Holding the Violin," *Early Music* 7 (1979), 561-563.

⁸ Playford, *Introduction*, 127.

Evelyn's reference of March 4, 1656, which describes a performance Baltzar gave in London. According to Evelyn, "he plaid on that single Instrument a full Consort," and also possessed a "wonderful dexterity."¹⁰

Anthony à Wood also reports hearing the young player's virtuosity during Baltzar's visit to Oxford in 1658. According to Wood, he "would run up his fingers to the end of the fingerboard of his violin."¹¹ A set of variations on "John, Come Kiss Me Now", published in *The Division Violin*¹² (1684), demonstrates Baltzar's imaginative and virtuosic approach to chordal playing, which was reported to have surpassed that of the English violinist Davis Mell (1604-1662), a court musician who "played sweeter" but was not as much admired.¹³ One of the significant features of lyra viol playing, which Baltzar captured in a splendid manner on the violin, was a texture that varied from one or two parts to several parts, so that the player was able to suggest a continuous contrapuntal texture by sustaining certain notes (see Example 1).

Baltzar had demonstrated a mastery of chordal playing from his earliest performances in England, as Evelyn testifies, but while he was a member of the Private Music in 1661, he probably found additional models in the lyra viol music of John Jenkins and Theodore Steffkin (also known as Ditrich Stoeffken), and he incorporated lyra viol idioms both in solo pieces and in suites for two or more violins.¹⁴

⁹ After studying music in his native Lübeck, Baltzar sought employment about 1653 at the court of Queen Christina of Sweden and sometime after this settled in England.

¹⁰ E.S. de Beer, ed., *The Diary of John Evelyn* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 367.

¹¹ For a fuller account of Baltzar's performances and compositions, see Peter Holman, "Thomas Baltzar (?1631-1663), the 'Incomparable Lubicer on the Violin'," *Chelys* 13 (1984), 3-38. The complete passage from Anthony à Wood is given on p. 8 of that article.

¹² See Margaret Gilmore, ed., *The Division Violin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹³ Holman, "Baltzar," 9.

¹⁴ See Peter Holman, in "Baltzar" and also in *Four and Twenty Fiddlers: the Violin at the English Court, 1540-1690* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 277.

Example 1. Thomas Baltzar, "Variations on John
Come Kiss Me Now." from *The Division
Violin* (London, 1684), pp. 20-22.



Concerning Matteis, the use of contrasts of different tone colors appears to have been a specialty of his as well, for Roger North describes his *stoccata* or stab as a stroke he used "to set off a rage, and then repentance."¹⁵ North also praised Matteis's *messa di voce*, which North calls *arcata* and describes as a gradual swell and the addition of some vibrato.¹⁶ With his longer bow and Italian grip, according to North, Matteis frequently employed the *messa di voce*, and although "nothing is so difficult as the *arcata* or long bow," Matteis produced "an *arcata* from the clouds."¹⁷

John Evelyn heard Matteis on November 19, 1674 and also praised his articulation and his manner of shading the tone with different colors:

... he had a stroak so sweete, & made it speake like the Voice of
a man; & when he pleased, like a Consort of severall Instruments:
he did wonders upon a note . . . he seem'd to be *spiritato*'d &
plaied such ravishing things on a ground as astonished us all . . .¹⁸

Like Baltzar, Matteis employed chordal playing too, although the optional double stops in his music do not exhibit the same difficulty or variety that we find in Baltzar's music.¹⁹

The Performance of Purcell's Violin Sonatas

When performing Purcell's sonatas today, violinists frequently strive for a light, even tone that recalls the blend and smooth articulation of a viol consort.²⁰ This approach tends to deny the music some of its novelty and

¹⁵ Mary Chan and Jamie C. Kassler, eds., *Roger North's 'Cursory Notes of Musicke' (c. 1698-c. 1703), A Physical, Psychological and Critical Theory* (Kensington, Australia: Unisearch, 1986), 168.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Beer, *Evelyn*, 605.

¹⁹ See, for example, his *Ayres for the Violin . . . The Third and Fourth Parts* (London, 1685; repr. Gregg Press, 1966).

²⁰ As observed by Eric Van Tassel in a review of *Henry Purcell, 10 Sonatas in 4 Parts*, with Catherine Mackintosh and Monica Huggett, violins, Christophe Coin, bass viol, and Christopher Hogwood, chamber organ and spinet (Florilegium DSLO 601), in *Early Music* 11 (1983), 141. Other recordings devoted entirely to Purcell's sonatas include *Henry Purcell*,

obscures its Italian character, which is much in evidence. Along with the growing popularity of sonatas for one, two, and three violins with bass viol, English violinists were experimenting with the new techniques (discussed above) that brought about a virtual revolution in violin playing shortly before the publication of Purcell's first collection of sonatas of 1683. These changes are attributable to the strong influence that Baltzar and Matteis must have had during the 1660s and 1670s. The new bowing and sound these two violinists produced undoubtedly had an effect on Purcell's sonatas as well.²¹

Although Purcell's writing did not demand the same virtuosity, Baltzar nonetheless appears to have influenced his music. Peter Holman has suggested that Baltzar's composition for three violins and continuo and his Paven in C Major possibly provided Purcell with the inspiration for his Divisions, "Three Parts on a Ground" (Z752) and for his Pavan (Z731).

That Matteis had an influence on Purcell was initially suggested by Bridge²² and subsequently taken up in greater depth by Proctor.²³ Matteis's name is linked with Purcell's only in the planning of the new Royal Academy, where the two were to have taught (along with Keller, Draghi, and Finger). However, this prospect failed to materialize. There are numerous compositional similarities between Purcell's and Matteis's works,²⁴ and it seems reasonable to assume that Matteis's playing was well-known to Purcell. Therefore players of Purcell today might well consider incorporating both the lively articulation and use of *messa di voce* that Matteis championed. Rather than adopt a violin tone that emulates the smooth bow strokes of the viol, a more forthright stroke would be preferable, using a bow of sufficient

Sonatas of III Parts, Ricercar Consort (RIC 080088), *Henry Purcell, Ten Sonatas in Four Parts*, London Baroque (HM France 901438), and *Henry Purcell Kammermusik* [1683 Volume: Sonatas 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12], Heidelberger Barokensemble (Da Camera Magna CD 5002).

²¹ See especially Peter Walls, "The Influence of the Italian Violin School in 17th-Century England," *Early Music* 18 (1990), 578-87. See also Jack A. Westrup, "Foreign Musicians in Stuart England," *Musical Quarterly* 27 (1941), 70-89, where these issues are discussed from a broader perspective.

²² John Frederick Bridge, "Purcell and Matteis," *Sammelbände der IMG* 1 (1899-1900), 623.

²³ George Alfred Proctor, *The Works of Nicola Matteis Sr.* (Ph.D. dissertation, Eastman School of Music, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 10-15.

²⁴ See Michael Tilmouth, "Nicola Matteis," *Musical Quarterly* 46 (1960), 37.

length to allow a variety of articulations and dynamic nuances, both in fast and slow passages. This, indeed, might recall something of the spirit of Matteis's *spiritato*'d playing that so captivated John Evelyn.