The Baroque Cello and Its Performance

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The instrument we now call a cello (or violoncello) apparently developed during the first decades of the 16th century from a combination of various string instruments of popular European origin (especially the rebecs) and the *vielle*. Although nothing precludes our hypothesizing that the bass of the violins appeared at the same time as the other members of that family, the earliest evidence of its existence is to be found in the treatises of Agricola,\(^1\) Gerle,\(^2\) Lanfranco,\(^3\) and Jambe de Fer.\(^4\) Also significant is a fresco (1540-42) attributed to Giulio Cesare Luini in Varallo Sesia in northern Italy, in which an early cello is represented (see Fig. 1).

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1 Martin Agricola, *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* (Wittenberg, 1529; enlarged 5th ed., 1545), f. XLVIr., f. XLVIIIr., and f. LVr.  
3 Giovanni Maria Lanfranco, *Scintille di musica* (Brescia, 1533), 142.  
4 Philibert Jambe de Fer, *Epitome musical des tons* (Lyons, 1556), 61-62.
Figure 1: G. C. Luini (?)  
Varallo Sesia (VC), Cappella della Madonna di Loreto in Roccapietra, Assumption of the Virgin (1540-42), detail of the fresco.
The baroque cello differed in form only slightly from the modern instrument: it had a shorter and slightly more upright neck, a shorter fingerboard, a shorter and thinner bass-bar, a thinner sound post, a lower and differently shaped bridge, and usually no end-pin. Shape and measurements of the resonance box were not standardized until around 1707-1710, when Antonio Stradivari decided on a medium length of 75-76cm. Before that time instrument-makers made mostly larger cellos (77-80cm). In the 18th century, however, some violin-makers still made larger types.

The term "Violoncello" was first used in Italy in 1665 in a printed edition of Giulio Cesare Arresti's *Sonate A 2.& a Tre Con la parte di Violoncello a beneplacito*, Op. IV. Before that date, and indeed for quite a long time after, such terms as *basso da braccio*, *violone*, *violone da braccio*, *violoncino*, and *bassetto viola* indicated the instrument of the bass part, if any was specified. In France the name *Basse de violon* was more uniformly used until c. 1710, when the Italian term (and instrument) appeared; then we encounter the terms *violoncel(le)*, *violon de chelle*, (petite) *basse des Italiens*, or *basset*.5 In a similar way *violoncello* was adopted in England at the beginning of the 18th century to replace the bass violin. In German-speaking countries the situation is more confused; Italian terminology such as *Bassa Viola*, *Viola da Spalla*,6 *Bass Viol de Braccio*,7 or *Violoncello* was adopted, as well as such translations as *Bas-Geig de braccio*,8 *Violonzell*, *Bassetl*, or *Bassette*.9

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5 See, for example, Jean-Baptiste Sébastien Bréval in various chamber and orchestral works.


7 Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma musicum*, *De Organographia* (Wolfenbüttel, 1618).

8 *Idem.*, fig. XXI.

The Sixteenth Century

No parts written specifically for bass violin survive, but from iconographical sources and written indications it is possible to reconstruct that the instrument was used exclusively in popular contexts (in contrast to the more noble instruments of the viola da gamba family) such as processions and dance music for weddings, village parties, fairs, etc. Tuned in fifths (generally $B^b-F-c-g$), the instrument was played seated or standing and was held between the legs of the player on the floor or on a stool, or supported with a strap over the shoulder (in processions). Since the instrument needed to be partly supported by the left hand, the fingers were placed obliquely on the strings, and fingering was purely diatonic, as it was for the other violins as well. Bowing technique was rudimentary, and both underhand and overhand grips appear in iconographical sources.

The Seventeenth Century

The first documented use of the *basso da braccio* was in Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* in 1607, in which another tuning $C-G-d-a$ (described by Gerle in 1532), seemed more suitable to ensemble playing. In Italy as well as in Germany (Praetorius) this last tuning became standard, whereas the lower tuning was kept in use on the large English and French *Basse de violon* (see Fig. 2). The most acute problem during most of the 17th century is the choice of instrument in Italian and German music, especially when *violone* is mentioned. In general this term was used to refer to the whole *viola da gamba* family in Italy during the 16th century. Toward the second decade of the 17th century the viols went out of fashion in Italy, except for

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PROPOSITION IIII.

Expliquer la figure & l'extension de toutes les parties des Violons, & la maniere d'en faire des Concerts, & les pieces de Musique propres pour ce sujet.

ENCORE que l'on puisse quelquesfoit toucher deux chordes de Violon en meme temps pour faire vn accord, neantmoins il en faut plusieurs pour faire vn Concert entier, comme est celui des 24 Violons du Roy, c'est pourquoi ie mets icy trois figures des Violons en taille douce, afin de representturer toutes les parties ensemble, car la Haute-contre, la Taille, & la Cinquieme partie sont semblables au Dessus MN, dont l'archet est OP; il faut
the lowest instruments. Banchieri\textsuperscript{14} describes the \textit{basso viola} or \textit{violone de gamba}, tuned \(G_1-C-F-A-d-g\), and a \textit{violone in contrabasso}, tuned \(D_1-G_1-C-E-A-d\). The question is: is the \textit{violone} a bass (8’) or a double bass (16’) instrument? Bonta suggests that between 1610 and 1680, the \textit{violone} was a large cello strung with four gut strings which, because of their lesser sound qualities, required a bigger instrument.\textsuperscript{15} Thanks to a Bolognese invention of the 1660s, the silver-wired gut strings—thinner strings with a higher tension, giving the instrument a clearer tone—the shorter type called \textit{violoncino} offered more satisfying sound performances; from then on it was named \textit{violoncello}, and gradually superseded the large cello (first in Bologna and later in Rome and elsewhere). The term \textit{violone} was then used exclusively for a 16’ instrument of the \textit{viola da gamba} family, whereas \textit{contrabbasso} designated a cello-shaped four- or three-string double bass. Recent research, however, has demonstrated that this interesting theory cannot be maintained as a general rule.\textsuperscript{16} A possible solution could be to accept that in some cases \textit{violone} can indicate a large bass violin (especially in chamber music and most often in Rome), but that in other cases it can be a double bass viol (e.g., in church music) or even a third type of instrument, perhaps Banchieri’s \textit{violone da gamba} (\(G_1-C-F-A-d-g\))\textsuperscript{17} or Praetorius’s \textit{Gross Quint-Bass} (\(F-C-G-d-a\)).\textsuperscript{18} (See Figs. 3, 4, 5). In a few cases, \textit{violone} could even refer to a regular bass viol (\(D-G-c-e-a-d’\)). Moreover, it now seems that bass parts were only rarely—except in large-scale church music—doubled on the lower octave (16’) during the 16th and most of the 17th century. Large

\textsuperscript{14} Adriano Banchieri, \textit{Conclusioni nel suono dell’organo} (Bologna, 1609), 53-54, and \textit{L’Organo suonarino}, op. 25 (Venice, 1611), 43.


\textsuperscript{17} See also Francis Baines, “What Exactly Is a Violone,” \textit{Early Music} 5 (1977), 173-6.

\textsuperscript{18} Praetorius, \textit{Syntagma}, II, 26.
Figure 3. A. Banchieri, *L'organo suonarino Op. 25 (Venice, 1611), [43].

**REGOLA PER ACCORDARE**

**STROMENTI DA CORDE RVDELLATE**

Insieme con l'Organo ouer'Arpicordo.

**Concerto di viole da Gamba.**

**PRIMA VIOLA, BASSO**

2. Tenore in F. Graue. 4. Mezzana. in A.

5. Mezzana 4 Mezzanella 6 Canto

**Seconda 3. Viole, Tenor & Alto.**

2. Tenore in C. Mezzana in E.
3. Mezzanella in A. Acuto. 6. Canto in D.

2. Basso 2 Bordonc 3 Tenore
4. Mezzana 4 Mezzanella 6 Canto

**Quarta Viola Soprano.**

1. Basso in G. Graue. 2. Bordonc in G.
3. Tenore in F. Craue. 4. Mezzana. in A. Acuto.

4. Mezzana 5 Mezzanella 6. Canto

**AVISO**

Quella corda G. Grausim. detta di sopra, non essendo sopra la Tallatura Organica, deve intende re in'Ottafo sotto il G. Graue, così sarà quatro tali sotto il C. es infino della Tallatura, & finemente intened il Reg. in fa nel Chitarone.

**Concerto di Violette da Basso.**

**PRIMA VIOLETTA, BASSO**

1. Basso in G. Graue. 2. Tenore in D.
3. Mezzana in A. Acuto. 4. Canto in E.


**Seconda 3. Violette, Tenor & Alto.**


**VIOLINO IN CONCERTO ET SOLO.**

1. Basso in G. Acuto. 2. Tenore in D.


**CHITARONE, ET LIRE.**

1. Re in G. Grausim. 2. Mi in A.
3. Fa in b. moll. 4. Sol in C.
5. La in D. 6. Fa in b. mollle.

Questa l'Ottafo con fettima.

7. Settima in F. Graue.

10. Tenore in F. Acuto.
11. Mezzana in A. Acuto.

Settima Basso Bordonc Tenore

Mezzana, Mezzanella, Canto ouer' Ottafo sotto Organo Suonarino G 2
Figure 4. M. Praetorius, *Syntagma musicum, De organographia* (Wolfenbüttel, 1619), Illustration XXI.
bass viols and bass violins were more frequently played at real pitch without transposition, in order to add depth and volume rather than a lower octave. Before the introduction of wirewound strings, the larger cello might actually have been used less often than small double basses; this could explain the generalized application of the term *violone*, referring in the first place to a 16' or 12' five- or six-stringed and fretted *viola da gamba* instrument. The small bass violin (called *violoncino* or *violoncello*, the terms being synonymous) could have been used for more soloistic bass parts, supported by a full continuo (Fontana, *Sonate*, 1641; Cavalli, *Musiche sacre*, 1656; Freschi, Op. I, 1660). The introduction of the wirewound bass strings particularly affected the development of that instrument, when Bolognese composers such as Giovanni Battista Vitali, Giovanni Battista degl’Antonii, Domenico Gabrielli, and Giuseppe Jacchini (all musicians in S. Petronio) wrote their first solo *Ricercari* and sonatas. The juxtaposition of *violoncello*, *violone*, and *contrabasso* in the partbooks of Gabrielli’s and Torelli’s concertos, or Colonna’s and Perti’s masses and psalms, proves a clear distinction between the three instruments.

Once the bass violin was more regularly played in theaters and churches, and less in processions or in dance music, the support of the thumb was no longer necessary to carry the instrument, allowing more mobility to the left hand and thus some greater virtuosity (e.g., the *violone* part in G. P. Cima’s 2 *Sonate* in the *Concerti ecclesiastici*, Milan, 1610).

**Figure 5.** D. Speer, *Grundrichtiger Unterricht der musikalischen Kunst oder Vierfaches musikalisches Kleeblatt* (Ulm, 1687/97), 199.

**Don einem BASS - VIOLON.**

*Wie wird ein Bass-Violon gespielt und wie viel hat er Saiten?*

In Bass-Violon hat auch sechs Saiten; wird aber auf folgende Weise gespielt: die grösste und erste Saiten kommt ins conträ tiefe C; die andere in tiefe C; die dritte in tiefe F; oder E; die viertete in a; die fünfte in d; die sechste oder Quinte in g; wie in folgender Vorstellung zu sehen; und wie viel Bass haben unten zu finden; so viel hat jede Sait auch Griff.

**Bass-Violons Stimmung.**
No fingering methods from the 17th century are available, but Mersenne unequivocally indicates the similarity in technique for all the instruments of the violin family: fingering is still diatonic (0-1-2-3), and bowing is overhand, which we can deduce from Mersenne’s instruction that “on every first note of a measure, the bow should be pulled downwards.”\textsuperscript{19} His note on trills is also very useful: “One should use as many bow strokes as the trilling finger hits the string,”\textsuperscript{20} whereas he recommends “to soften the string by slightly shaking the finger closest to the one that holds the note on the string,” in other words a sort of a flattement. In Italy the earliest indication is to be found in Zannetti,\textsuperscript{21} in which regular musical notation on staves is juxtaposed with tablatures for the four instruments of the violin family. Conclusions on technique are identical to Mersenne’s and also to Bismantova’s.\textsuperscript{22} In this last treatise, the author provides some interesting bowing rules. As he states that they “are the same for the cello as for the violin” (p. [120]), we notice the rigorously observed rule of downbow on the downbeat.

**Example 1. Bismantova [112-115].** The dot over the note indicates \( \text{\checkmark} \). The dot under the note \( \text{\checkmark} \).

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Mersenne, IV, 185.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 182.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Gasparo Zannetti, II Scolaro (Milan, 1645).
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Bartolomeo Bismantova, Regola p[er] suonare il Violoncello da Spalla, ms. appendix to Compendio musicale (Ferrara, 1677).
\end{itemize}
In the same period Muffat explains the difference in bowing used by the Italians and by Lully in France, where underhand bowgrip was still in use following the example of the viol players.

Although theoretical works still suggest a completely diatonic fingering up to the beginning of the 18th century, the music itself—again, after the introduction of the wirewound strings in Bologna—indicates a much more advanced technique. The hybrid diatonic-chromatic fingering technique, i.e. the modern cello-technique, was according to Corrette, introduced in France by Giovanni Bononcini (in Paris in 1733), who had studied the instrument with his father Giovanni Maria and with Domenico Gabrielli in Bologna. Gabrielli, or even his predecessors in San Petronio (Giovanni Battista Vitali and Petronio Franceschini) might have been one of the first cellists to make a generalized use of the new technique in which the four fingers were put perpendicularly on the string, and a half tone apart from each other. This allowed these first violoncello players to introduce frequent position shifts, double stops, chords, virtuoso ornamentation, fast scales, more passages in the high range (e'-c''), tremolos, batteries, slurs, arpeggios, and skipping over two strings, to their technique. Giuseppe Jacchini was particularly famous for the way he accompanied singers in their recitatives: he seems to have made broad use of chord and melodic ornamentations in his continuo parts.

By the end of the century tuning was almost standardized to C-G-d-a, although a performance of Gabrielli's 7 Ricercari will be easier on a cello tuned C-G-d-g (otherwise many chords, e.g., c-e-g, are not realizable). Later on, this way of tuning the instrument became more marginal, since it was designated as scordatura. On the use of five-string cellos, no documentary evidence is left from the 17th century. Mattheson mentions five-string cellos, but he obviously is referring to the violoncello piccolo (C-G-d-a-e') or violoncello mezzo which was used in Germany—J. S. Bach wrote for the in-
strument in six of his cantatas and in the Sixth Suite in D-Major (BWV 1012).29

The Eighteenth Century

Very soon after the innovations made by the first cellists in Bologna, other Italian musicians popularized the instrument elsewhere in Italy and throughout the rest of Europe. In France the introduction of the new violoncello (as opposed to the old basse de violon) was a real threat to the existence of the bass viol. It generated an important controversy, culminating in the publication of Le Blanc’s pamphlet,30 which was promptly answered by Corrette’s cello method (1741).

In this earliest systematic treatise on how to play the cello, Corrette first describes how to hold the instrument (see Fig. 6 as opposed to Fig. 7).

The cello must be placed between the calves of the legs. Hold the neck with the left hand and slant it a little to the left side and hold the bow in the right hand. See that the instrument does not touch the ground, since that would dampen the sound.31

No endpin is to be used, although some theorists recommend it for beginners.32 For the bow grip, Corrette (see Fig. 8) recommends three different violin-related ways, even if cellists like Martin Berteau (originally a viol player) kept using the underhand grip (see Fig. 9).


30 Hubert Le Blanc, Défense de la Basse de viole contre les Entréprises du Violon et les Prétentions du Violoncel (Amsterdam, 1740).

31 Corrette, Méthode, Article 1, p. 7.

Figure 6. M. Corrette, *Méthode théorique et pratique pour apprendre en peu de temps le violoncelle dans sa perfection* (Paris, 1741), frontispiece.

*Noble Soulien de l'harmonie,
Qu'avec Majesté tu nous veras,
Par ta divine mélodie,
Tu donne l'Ame à nos Concerts.*
Figure 7. P. L. Ghezzi, *Il virtuoso del Sig.r de Bacqueville*
Drawing, Rome ca. 1720
Chapitre II.

De la manière de tenir et conduire l'Archet.

Il faut prendre l'Archet de la main droite. On peut le tenir de trois façons différentes: la première qui est la manière la plus usitée des Italiens, est de poser le 2°, 3°, 4° et 5° doigts sur le bois ABCD. et le pouce dessous le 3° doigt E.

La seconde manière est de poser aussi le 2°, 3° et 4° sur le bois ABC. le pouce sur le crin F et le petit doigt posé sur le bois vis-à-vis le crin G.

Et la 3° manière de tenir l'Archet est de poser le 2°, 3° et 4° doigts du côté de la hausse H I K, le pouce dessous le crin L et le petit doigt au côté du bois M. Ces trois façons différentes de tenir l'Archet sont également bonnes, et il est bon de choisir celle avec laquelle on a plus de force: Car pour jouer du Violoncelle il faut de la force dans le bras droit pour tirer du son.
Figure 9. P. L. Ghezzi, S. Pietro Sterlich sonator di Violoncello bravo, il quale è stato in Spagna per molto tempo fatto da mè Cav. Ghezzi il dì 10 Xbre 1742. Drawing, Rome 1742 (I-Rvat, Ottob. Lat. vol. 3118, f. 162r.)
Corrette describes fingering in chapters IV to VI, still showing an old diatonic system (0-1-2-4), although he mentions "another Position" (in chapter XIV), which is the modern 0-1-2-3-4 chromatic fingering. This system was used by the Italians (see Fig. 10), but Corrette does not really recommend it, since it is also the standard viol fingering! Totally new is his description of the thumb position. This technique was certainly used by virtuoso cellists before 1740; for example, in Lanzetti’s Sonatas Op. I (1736) the use of the thumb is indispensable (range C-a”), a technique which he himself later codified in his undated Principes.  

Developed more and more as a solo instrument during the 18th century, the cello was still largely used as a continuo string bass. If Quantz still forbids cellists in 1752 to embellish or to play chords in a bass part, it certainly means that most of them did so whenever they could, according to the tradition initiated half a century earlier by Jacchini. Thus the practice of playing chords, especially in recitatives, is certainly something that modern baroque cellists should do. Moreover, Baumgartner writes that in a recitative the bass note should be “relatively loud” and the other chord notes should be “slightly touched,” which also implies that the bass note was rarely played in its full written length. In an appendix he gives a method concerning how to play chords on the cello, even when reading only the figured bass.

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33 Cf. Salvatore Lanzetti, Principes ou L’Application de Violoncelle par tous les Tons (Amsterdam, c. 1760?).

34 Jean Baumgartner, Instructions de musique, théorique et pratique, à l’usage du Violoncello (The Hague, c. 1774).

35 Ibid., Chapter XII.
Figure 10. M. Corrette, Méthode (Ch. XIV, 42).

Chapitre XIV.

Contenant une autre Position.

Cette position ne diffère d'avec celle que nous venons de démontrer dans les Chapitres précédents que dans la 1ère position que ses partisans appellent 1ère manche : Ce cette différence n'est que de mettre le 3ème doigt au lieu du second pour faire le MI sur la 4ème Corde, le DI sur la 3ème, le SI sur la 2ème et l'UT sur la 1ère ; qui est toujours en progression de quinte, comme dans l'autre manière de doigté : ainsi, selon cette position, le doigt droit comme dans l'autre position à la distance du 2ème du 1er doigt, le second doigt étant pour faire le demi-ton d'après, et le 3ème doigt à la distance du 1er doigt, et le petit doigt à celle d'un demi-ton du 3ème doigt. Par cette Règle tous les 4 doigts servent.

Exemple.

![Diagram of musical notation and fingerings](image-url)