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"Before the Chinrest: A Violinist's Guide to the Mysteries of Pre-Chinrest Technique and Style" by Stanley Ritchie

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Book Review: Ritchie, Stanley. *Before the Chinrest: A Violinist's Guide to the Mysteries of Pre-Chinrest Technique and Style*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-253-22318-0.

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Violins were used without a chinrest prior to its invention by Louis Spohr around 1820, so Stanley Ritchie's *Before the Chinrest* covers a wide swath of time encompassing the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and early Romantic periods. According to Ritchie, the chinrest altered how the violin was held, and thus how it was played. By allowing the player to secure the violin under the chin, rather than resting it lightly upon one's collarbone (as Ritchie recommends), the chinrest enabled left- and right-handed playing techniques to evolve, and with them distortions in performance practice when these techniques are applied to music written prior to the chinrest's development. Ritchie, however, does not consider wear patterns on old violins that prove the chin was in fact used to steady the violin during playing prior to the invention of the chinrest. (Old violins often show considerable wear not only on the bass side of the tailpiece but on the treble side as well, and this can clearly be seen in the photograph of Ritchie's own violin on the book's cover.) Curiously, Francesco Geminiani's *The Art of Playing the Violin* (London, 1751) recommends holding the violin below the collarbone, rather than above it, while Leopold Mozart's *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* (Augsburg, 1756) suggests two other positions: chest height and against the neck.

From the book's title, one might expect *Before the Chinrest* to deal at least in part with certain physical aspects of the violin, such as its strings and fittings, that affect performance, but in his preface Ritchie downplays the importance of "hardware" in his criticism of "musicians who, having previously derided the concept and mocked the pioneers [of informed performance practice] . . . perceived that there was money to be made and jumped aboard without paying the fare. In the cynical spirit of derision they decided that all they needed to do in order to qualify as a 'Baroque' or, later, 'Classical' musician, was borrow the necessary equipment" (p. xii). Indeed, there are very few references to "equipment" in this work. Ritchie makes passing reference to that arch-enemy of early music—the "Tourte" bow—and states that it did not come into general use until "well into the nineteenth century." It was, however, developed around 1780 by François-Xavier Tourte (ca. 1747-1835), the Parisian bow maker who gained celebrity in his own time for refining the bow. Though Ritchie has a great deal to say about bowing,



he writes nothing about the characteristics of bows themselves—Baroque, transitional, or otherwise—or even how they are held. For example, there is no mention of the so-called French and Italian grips, or whether the bow was held at the frog or beyond it.

Aside from his discussion of the chinrest, the scant references to the physical aspects of the violin include Ritchie's comment that "the lower tension of gut strings, especially when the violin is tuned to A=415 or 395 Hz, will not permit the use of downward pressure of the kind generated by pronation, the inward rotation of the forearm, which has the effect both of stifling the sound and frequently causing the string to give slightly and the pitch or a note to waver (p. 3)," and that "because of the lower tension of the strings it is not possible to play as far from the bridge as on the modern instrument" (p. 5). Giuseppe Tartini, however, made a physical study of violin string tension in 1734 and ascertained that the combined tension of a set of gut violin strings was about sixty pounds—significantly greater than the tension of a set of medium weight Dominant strings at modern pitch, which is about forty-nine pounds. If Tartini's measurements are accurate, the use of significantly heavier stringing, even at Baroque pitch, might invalidate some of Ritchie's bowing restrictions and advice.

Ritchie provides directions for tuning the violin that deviate from the general practice of tuning the open strings in perfect fifths. Instead, he advises violinists to tune their open strings to the tempered notes of the keyboard instrument with which they are consorting. With most temperaments used by harpsichordists and fortepianists today (as well as the past), this would mean that the open strings of the violin would not be tuned as perfect fifths but made narrow. Ritchie prefaces his remarks on tuning by describing two types of intonation, which he terms "vertical and horizontal," and noting that "the latter is often referred to as 'expressive' intonation, in which sharps are raised and flats lowered in order to produce a particular expressive effect, and commonly used in solo performance" (p. 85). He then advises

when playing in a string quartet or orchestra, however, it becomes immediately apparent that this kind of intonation does not work, and it is in these contexts that familiarity with 'vertical' intonation, by which thirds and sixths in a chord are pure, is essential. One should first become familiar with vertical intonation in order to understand that when using 'expressive' intonation one is playing deliberately, if creatively, out of tune. (p. 85)

He continues:

because of the comma it is impossible to tune a violin so that all intervals are pure. One has to choose between tuning perfect fifths, by which method the ninths (G-A and D-E) and the sixth (G-E) are too wide, or tuning in narrow fifths as described below. When one plays with a harpsichord, each string should be tuned separately in order to match the partic-

ular historic temperament, which will virtually never be equal. The tuning system proposed below produces narrow fifths between the open strings but a temperament in which it is possible to tune any note on the instrument to any open string. Using this method you will quickly learn the difference between enharmonic notes: D-sharp, you will find, is lower than E-flat; B-flat, higher than A-sharp. You will find that F to F-sharp is a narrow semitone, and F to G-flat is wide. (p. 85)

Ritchie does not specify which tuning system he is referring to, but it is presumably mean-tone (though there are no enharmonics in that temperament), as in that system the pitch order of sharps and flats follows the sequence he gives (in Pythagorean intonation the order of sharps and flats is reversed). One might question the advisability of violating the perfect fifths of a violin's open strings for the sake of a harpsichord, especially when the harpsichord so often serves a subsidiary continuo role and quite frankly can barely be heard even in relatively small ensembles. Indeed, Scipione Maffei remarks in the *Giornale dei letterati d'Italia* (Venice, 1711) that "the violin, not having keys, can find everything in its place, and in whatever key make heard perfect notes" and that harpsichords and theorbos cannot play in tune with the violin, but that "when used in concert, the ear does not notice it." In his *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin, 1752), Johann Joachim Quantz expresses conflicting views regarding the pairing of violin and keyboard: he recommends that when harpsichordists accompany instruments that produce "true ratios" (such as the violin), the harpsichordist should omit notes that would produce tempered major and minor thirds, or "hide them in a middle or lower part," where they would be less likely to "displease the ear," though elsewhere he suggests that violinists "will not do badly to follow the rule that must be observed in tuning the keyboard, namely, that the fifths must be tuned a little on the flat side rather than quite true or a little sharp, as is usually the case, so that the open strings will all agree with the keyboard."¹ Unfortunately, Quantz also does not specify the keyboard temperament, but presumably he was indicating one of the period's so-called "well-temperaments" that feature fifths that were not as narrow as those used in strict quarter-comma meantone. However, the widespread use by many of today's early music ensembles of "Vallotti" temperament (which includes a sequence of sixth-comma tempered fifths between F-C-G-D-A-E-B—while the fifths bridging the "black keys" are tuned beatless) does present difficulties for violinists who are accustomed to tuning their strings in perfect fifths. Requiring them to adjust their open strings to Vallotti or to some form of meantone may explain why the string sections of many early music groups often sound so painfully out of tune.

When a keyboard instrument is unavailable for tuning the violin's open strings, Ritchie suggests what can only be described as a "baroque" tuning procedure for tempering his open strings, which is about as complex as setting the temperament of a keyboard instrument. His first step is to make sure that the outer E and G strings make, in

1. Translations adapted from Edward R. Reilly, *Johann Joachim Quantz: On Playing the Flute* (New

his words, “a perfect sixth” (actually a thirteenth). This is achieved by playing any one of a variety of chords that he provides, all of which involve verifying the tuning of open strings from stopped positions on others; then the A string is tuned from the G string by tuning up a “perfect sixth” from an E stopped on the G string, and so on. In addition to the fact that tuning from a stopped position is potentially inexact, Ritchie’s tuning procedure would appear to require three hands to execute, as one hand is needed for bowing, another for stopping one of the strings, and yet another for turning the tuning peg.

In his discussion of interpretation, dynamics, tempo, and ornamentation Ritchie cites relatively few early treatises—Francesco Geminiani’s *The Art of Playing on the Violin* (London, 1751), Leopold Mozart’s, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* (Augsburg, 1756), and Pierre Marie François de Sales Baillot’s *L’Art du violon* (Paris, 1835) being the most frequently quoted, though it would have been instructive if Ritchie contrasted the technical instructions found in these works. For example, Geminiani’s method of playing staccato calls for drawing the bow off the string, while Mozart advocates “short strokes without dragging the bow,”² and Baillot indicates that the bow should remain on the string. Not only does he not quote these sources, but he himself says virtually nothing about the performance of staccato, except when staccato dots appear within a slur in the context of portato (which he states “does not involve dry, stopped bow strokes but, rather, constant motion of the arm while pressing and releasing the bow with the index finger to create the pulsations). Ritchie claims that the spiccato bow stroke is neither applicable in “Baroque performance nor in Classical music (p. 10),” yet the term appears in violin music written in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by Antonio Vivaldi, Pirro Albergati, Giovanni Bononcini, and Tomaso Vitali. While these composers may not have been advocating a bouncing bow stroke, this is precisely the definition that Baillot gives. With this in mind, Ritchie’s book is more of a personal statement drawn from his long experience as a period violinist rather than a comparative review of historical sources, such as can be found in Robert Donington’s *The Interpretation of Early Music* (London, 1963), David D. Boyden’s *The History of Violin Playing From its Origins to 1761* (Oxford, 1965), Robin Stowell’s *Violin Technique and Performance Practice in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1985), and Willi Apel’s *Italian Violin Music of the Seventeenth Century* (Indiana, 1990).

Before the Chinrest includes many thoughtful suggestions on both technique and musical expression, and its numerous musical exercises (which curiously include adaptations from D. C. Dounis’s *Daily Dozen* [1925]) will no doubt greatly assist violinists seeking to perform the Baroque and Classical repertoire in a stylistically appropriate manner.

2. Leopold Mozart, *Versuch einer gründliche Violonschule*, 2nd ed. (Augsburg, 1770), 50.