

## **BACH'S VIOLONCELLO** *Shouldering the Burden of the Six Suites*

*The Violoncello is an Italian bass instrument resembling a Viola da gamba; it is played like a violin, i.e. the left hand partly holds it and stops the strings; partly however, owing to its weight, it is hung from the button of the frockcoat [...]. It is tuned like a Viola.*

- Johann Gottfried Walther, 1708<sup>1</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION**

The *Six Suites for Violoncello Solo* by Johann Sebastian Bach (BWV 1007-1012) are the sine qua non of every cellist's repertoire, one of the unavoidable and unsurpassable pillars of cello music. While few listeners today will refute the beauty and significance of these pieces, Bach himself never conceived of them as monumental when he wrote them, probably during his tenure in Cöthen (1717-1723). In his mind these suites were primarily of a pedagogical nature – not only for his cellists, whom he wanted to keep in shape and flexible, but also for his students who wished to become masterful composers. To this day these pieces are unrivaled in how they lead a single, non-chordal instrument seemingly to play several voices at once, creating a sense of (implied) polyphony without all voices physically sounding simultaneously.

Despite the omnipresence and monumental status of this set of works few scholars, composers and performers today – even, or *especially*, cellists themselves – take the time to consider what instrument(s) these pieces were actually intended for. The title given by Bach (or at least by his wife and copyist Anna Magdalena Bach), *6 Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso*,

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<sup>1</sup> Walther, Johann Gottfried. *Praecepta der Musicalischen Composition* In Jenaer Beiträge zur Musikforschung, Band 2, ed. Peter Benary. Leipzig: 1955. "*Violoncello ist ein Italiaenisches einer Violadigamba nicht ungleiches Bass Instrument, wird fast tractiret wie eine Violin, neml. es wird mit der lincken Hand theils gehalten, und die Griffe formiret, theils aber wird es wegen der Schwere an des Rockes Knopff gehänget [...]. Wird gestimmt wie eine Viola.*" [translation mine]

seems from today's perspective as clear as it could possibly be. However, the *violoncello*, unlike the well-established and wide-spread violin, was still coming of age during Bach's lifetime. As the *violoncello* was being liberated from the exclusive role of bass line doubling, changes were being made continuously – to the technique of playing the *violoncello*, and to the instruments themselves. Naturally, the landscape of instruments under the umbrella term *violoncello* was vast, far from the unified notion we have today.

## BACKGROUND

The history of the violoncello is an intricate one, as fascinating to delve into as it is frustrating to delineate. After the first appearances of the term *violoncello* in Italy during the mid-seventeenth century, it took far over a century until a consensus emerged on what exactly the term referred to, or at least until the spectrum of instruments qualifying as *violoncello* was narrowed down to anything close to the clarity that we believe to have today.

The opening quote above comes from Johann Gottfried Walther's *Praecepta der Musicalischen Composition* (written in 1708 but not published until 1955 in Leipzig) and harbors many surprises for a musician growing up today. Johann Gottfried Walther (1684-1748) was a nephew of Johann Sebastian Bach's and worked at the court in Weimar at the same time as his more renowned relative. This description was written at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and he relates the clearly less wide-spread or even novel instrument, the *Violoncello*, to the apparently more familiar "Violadigamba". It is a fairly safe assumption that by the latter he is referring to the fretted stringed instrument family well-established and popular in France and England. By this point the "Violadigamba" or *Viol* family had been around for far over a century, even as far East as Weimar. The comparison to the Viol seems obvious at first, but is misleading on several levels. Certainly, the size and shape of the Violoncello is comparable to that of a Viol, though Viols did range widely in sizes themselves. However, the difference of string numbers, the differences in tuning and the presence of frets are already three obvious reasons to consider said comparison highly problematic. Where the comparison does seem appropriate is in how the *Violoncello* and "Violadigamba" (as the name implies!) are played – rested between the legs of the seated player, held in an upright position. But no! Walther ruins even this comparison posthaste by telling us that the violoncello "**is played like a violin**, [...] partly however, owing to its weight, it is attached to the button of the frockcoat." These are more surprises that we had bargained for. There are just so many questions to ask!

But first things first, back to basics. Etymologically, the word *Violoncello* stems from *viola*. (As we can derive from Walther's usage of the word/instrument as a reference point at the end of the opening quote, *Viola* was already a more established concept, entity. The term in itself, however, already provides endless ambiguity, commonly used to refer not only to the viola from the violin family, but also to the *viola da gamba* and any number of other loosely defined stringed instruments). Add to *viola* the Italian suffix *-one*, and we have the *violone*, the "large viola." Add to that the Italian diminutive suffix *-cello*, and we end up with the *violoncello*, the "small large viola." As one might expect, there was no immediate general standard for the size of a "small large viola," with massive overlapping gray areas on both ends of the spectrum, towards the smaller *viola* as well as towards the larger *violone*. It is clear now that any conversation about the history of the violoncello is necessarily intertwined with an investigation of the terminology involved, which in turn provides evidence regarding the lack of unification of instruments called *violoncello*.

Beyond size, however, we are confronted with a plethora of further variables. Throw in a qualifying term here or there – *da spalla*, *da braccia*, or *da braccio* – and we have to question our notions of how the violoncello is to be played properly. What position were these instruments held in? And further: How many strings did they have? How were the strings tuned? How was the bow held? What was the instrument's primary function? The deeper we dig, the more the questions abound – and the more answers seem to be valid. But then: how do we know what instrument specific pieces were written for, and/or what tuning the composer had in mind?

These are only a few of the questions and issues which make it impossible to force the history of the violoncello into one neat and chronologically continuous timeline. If there is one thing that is obvious in the midst of this confusing landscape, it is that the species *violoncello* was made up of a large variety of instruments – there were multiple instruments for each term, and multiple terms for each instrument. In this paper I will first give an overview of the beginnings of the solo violoncello in Bologna in the late seventeenth century. I will then attempt to highlight the points most relevant to the process of making historically informed performance decisions today. This will all lead to the ultimate question: **What instrument(s) did Johann Sebastian Bach have in mind when he composed his six suites for *violoncello solo*?**

## BOLOGNA

*A Cellist's Mecca*

We begin our journey further South, in Italy. It is the *Italian-ness* of the Violoncello with which Walther did *not* surprise us. It is specifically down there in Bologna where, during the final quarter of the seventeenth century, the first major school of violoncello playing famously came to be. The most tangible and lasting manifestation of this development presents itself to us in the form of the first examples of printed music for solo violoncello. Of the first pieces written during this period, the work of two composers stands out: Giovanni Battista Degli Antonii and Domenico Gabrielli. Though it is neither possible nor necessary to ascertain that these are the first composers ever to have written (and/or published) for the violoncello as a solo instrument, we certainly can not deny that their works for solo violoncello are among the most significant works of the genre prior to the *6 Suites a Violoncello senza Basso* of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Until quite recently, the set of seven *Ricercare* by Domenico Gabrielli (1659-1690) was considered the first music for solo cello. However, the publication of this set, along with the two sonatas for violoncello and basso continuo (1689) seems to have been predated by that of Degli Antonii's own twelve *Ricercare Sopra Il Violoncello o Clavicembalo* (1687). Nonetheless, Gabrielli, nicknamed 'Mingéin dal viulunzèl' (something to the effect of "Dominic of the cello" in Bolognese dialect), may be seen as more significant in this context. While Degli Antonii was esteemed by contemporaries primarily as an organist and composer, it is Gabrielli who gained a reputation as one of the first virtuoso cellists in an age when the cello was still thought of almost exclusively as an accompanying basso continuo instrument. Even though he was certainly highly respected as a composer, as well, his historic significance lies in his cellistic explorations. As John Suess notes,

"[Gabrielli's] canons, ricercares and sonatas [for violoncello] reflect both an advanced performing technique and an acute awareness of the sonority inherent in the instrument: his ricercares for unaccompanied cello contain florid passage-work and double, triple and quadruple stops."<sup>2</sup>

But Gabrielli did not stop there, not failing to infiltrate his other works, respectable in their own right within their respective genres, with a growing awareness and significance of the cello part. His trumpet sonatas, for example, showcase the cello in flashy obbligato parts, and both of these instruments show up in a quasi-concertante manner in some of his vocal music, including in operas and oratorios.

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<sup>2</sup> Suess, John. *Gabrielli, Domenico* ['Minghino dal violoncello'] In Grove Music Online, accessed April 23, 2013.

It is fairly certain that Degli Antonii and Gabrielli knew each other, as they were both members of the Accademia Filarmonica at the same time. Gabrielli became a member of this society of musical intellectuals in 1676, and was elected the *principe* (president) in 1683, which is certainly evidence of his influence in the musical scene and the respect he garnered from his colleagues, during a period in which societies, *Accademie* such as this one were the epicenter of musical development and progress. Degli Antonii became a member of the Accademia Filarmonica briefly thereafter, in 1684.

It was not only in the Accademia Filarmonica, though, that these two gentlemen would have had plenty of opportunities for influential exchanges with other important musicians of the region. Both Degli Antonii and Gabrielli were active as performers and composers around the city and region. Gabrielli, in particular, had his fingers in the finest pies of the area. In 1680, Gabrielli had filled the position as cellist of San Petronio when his teacher Petronio Francheschini (1650-1690), of whom Gabrielli had long been considered the star student, passed away. Consequently, his reputation as cello virtuoso extraordinaire garnered him many sought-after engagements at the court of Duke Francesco II d'Este of Modena. It is in either or both of these places that he was certainly in close contact with other cellist-composers such as Domenico Galli (1649-1697) and Giovanni Battista Vitali (1632-1692). Galli published cello sonatas in 1691, two years after Gabrielli's *Ricercare* were published, which they are similar to in style. Vitali was a founding member of the aforementioned Accademia Filarmonica, as well as *vicemaestro di cappella* to Duke Francesco II alongside Giuseppe Colombi of Modena (1635-1694), who, though primarily a violinist himself, also contributed to the development of the repertoire for cello. Vitali's influence compositionally is supposed to have reached colleagues such as Corelli, Torelli and as far as Purcell in England, as he is credited with significantly contributing to the development of the baroque sonata. The next generation of formidable cellists included Giuseppe Jacchini (1663-1727) and the two Bononcini brothers, the more famous Giovanni (1770-1747) and the younger Antonio Maria (1677-1726). After their father's death in 1678, the family moved to Bologna, where eventually they both started studying composition at San Petronio. Giovanni was admitted into the Accademia Filarmonica in 1686, after publishing a set of three instrumental works at age 15. Antonio Maria worked alongside his older brother until 1713. A *Laudate pueri* with an unusually floral cello obbligato part for its time, published in 1693, was for a long time attributed to Giovanni, but was recently discovered to have been written by Antonio Maria. Twelve cello sonatas were published around the same time, also by the younger of the Bononcini brothers. Apart from the two sonatas by Gabrielli, these are the first works of this genre and give many insights to the state and development of the instrument, its technique and repertoire.

With so many well-known, excellent cellist-composers in one place, when the cello had not yet established itself as much of an independent instrument with anything but bass lines within its playable range, it is no wonder that we now speak of the "**Bolognese Cello School.**"

## NOMENCLATURE

### *From Violoncino to Violone da braccio*

Before I discuss some of the practical issues pertaining to these early cello works – particularly the Ricercare by Degli Antonii and Gabrielli, and the sonatas by Antonio Maria Bononcini – I would like to revisit the ongoing accompanying dilemma of nomenclature within the undefined sea of bowed stringed instruments. In some of the publications that emerged from the "Bolognese Cello School," some additional (and additionally disconcerting) terms show up in reference to the instruments at hand. The name *violoncino* does pop up quite frequently, but can fairly comfortably be dismissed as an extinct synonym for *violoncello*, since the suffix *-ino* has the same diminutive function as *-cello*. Another term that repeatedly shows up in confusing fashion is *Violone*. Outside of Bologna, Arcangelo Corelli, for example, famously writes on the title page of his Opus 5, first published 1700 in Rome, *12 Suonati a violino e violone o cimbalò*. Nowadays, one generally assumes that he must have meant what we now call a cello, though the tuning is not unambiguous, as the sonatas work well in B-flat tuning, as well. (The controversy of whether he really meant the "o" and not perhaps an "e," and all of the possible ramifications shall remain untouched in this paper...) The confusion of terms seems to have lingered on for at least another century: the word *Violone* shows up in string quartets by Joseph Haydn. In the first edition of the six quartets Opus 20 published by Artaria, for example, solo passages in the cello part are marked *Violone Solo*.

In any case, backing up a century, Steven Bonta has convincingly concluded and put forward that the term *Violone* referred, in seventeenth-century Italy, to the bass instrument in the violin family, as opposed to the bass instrument of the *viola da gamba* family, which it commonly designated in Germany during the same period. However, when the front page of some of Vitali's publications specify *Violone da braccio*, it becomes more interesting/confusing. Vitali, on the same occasion, often refers to himself as *suonatore di violone*, but was later in his career most commonly referred to as a cellist. With that in mind, Vitali in any case must have had in mind some sort of bass violin when he wrote for *Violone da braccio*. Not surprising, but what does the *da braccio* mean? *Braccio* is clearly some form of the word "arm" (closest today to spanish *brazo*, but definitely derived from latin *bracchium*). Is this to differentiate it from an

*Violone da gamba*, and therefore to indicate it was an instrument that was *not* played resting on or near the legs?

This question does lead us directly back to the Bononcini brothers – or at least to their immediate family member, their father Giovanni Maria Bononcini (1642-1678). Giovanni Maria was primarily listed as a violinist during the course of his notable career. Nonetheless, Gregory Barnett discovered and had a close look at a sketch dating from around 1669, on which a very large string instrument is being held and played like a violin. The sketch is labeled "Bononcini." Even though Giovanni Maria died too early to see his sons become serious cellists and put his stamp on their musical education, it is not unthinkable that the tradition of playing *viola da spalla* and/or *violoncello da spalla* was passed along from father to son(s), or was simply commonplace enough for young Giovanni and Antonio Maria to have learned as a natural course of events, as an integral part of their string playing and violoncello playing education.

**What is a *violoncello da spalla*?** It is possible that the playing position that seems so awkward, un-elegant and impractical to us today originated from processional music, for example providing bass support to vocal ensembles during a procession. Of course, it would have been undeniably practical in any kind of situation – entertainments, dance ensembles – requiring even the slightest of mobility while playing. The most famous iconographic evidence for such instances can be found in Torelli's Opus 4, for which the violoncello part book is decorated by an engraving of a musician apparently ambulating along in the countryside with what looks like an oversized viola. (To contrast this, the violin part book of the same opus has somebody playing a realistically sized violin.) Other engravings and paintings, however, do show *viola da spalla* players in stationary positions, meaning there must have been good reasons for it to be played in this fashion beyond the consideration of movability. The most notable and explicit definition given for this instrument comes from the pen of the Northern German composer and musicologist (of sorts) Johann Mattheson (1681-1764), in his *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg, 1713):

*"... in particular the Viola di Spala, or shoulder-viol, has a large effect in accompaniment, because it cuts through strongly / and can express the notes purely. A bass can never be brought out more distinctly and clearly than on this instrument. It is attached to the chest with a strap / and thrown onto the right shoulder / and therefore has nothing / which disturbs or impedes its resonance."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mattheson, Johann. *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre. Hamburg, 1713.* Facsimile. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 2002. 285. [translation mine]

Johann Gottfried Walther, in his *Musicalisches Lexicon* of 1732, quotes Mattheson's definition verbatim, merely adding that "the ones with four strings are tuned like a viola, C.G.d.a., and reach up to a1."<sup>4</sup> This, of course, implies that there are also those with more (or fewer?) than four strings, but no more ink is spent on the issue. It is also interesting to notice that the description he here adopts from Mattheson for an instrument named *Viola da Spalla* is quite similar, though more detailed, to his own description of 24 years earlier, when he was, however, talking about the *Violoncello*.

## THE SHOWDOWN

*Who will gain the upper hand? Who the under hand?*

However you look at it, it is clear that there were different ways of playing the *violoncello*, and different names for the same instrument. This was true from the very beginning, if not more so than ever. In his remarkable article, Brent Wissick, backed by years of personal experience and experimenting on various different versions of the instrument, goes through all of the relevant repertoire in this context and goes into great details about a great number of aspects pertaining to the technique that is most likely to have been applied in each instance. (For such a thorough discussion, I do highly recommend his article!) With regards to Antonio Maria Bononcini, a representative of the "Bolognese Cello School," Wissick comes to the conclusion that he did, in fact, play *violoncello da spalla*, despite the unfortunate circumstances that there is no explicit evidence other than the music itself.

The following are a few of the most salient arguments, extracted directly from the music and, for the most part, verifiable by a process of trial and error, though certainly there will always be some degree of subjectivity involved, both in each individual player's and instrument's physicality, as well as in the frame of mind from which one approaches this issue.

**Notation, Range and Tuning.** The works of Gabrielli and Jacchini – who, we have seen via the Bolognese Cello Family Tree above, can be presumed to have been mentors to the Bononcini brothers – are predominantly notated in the bass clef. They make use mostly of the middle strings, and some of the figurations and double stops clearly require the tuning C-G-d-g, often referred to as "Bolognese tuning" – the tuning also used by Bach for Suite No. 5 in C minor. Antonio Maria Bononcini's aforementioned sonatas, dated back to the early 1690s, are primarily notated in tenor clef. This clef was usually associated with the tenor violin, most likely

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<sup>4</sup> Walther, Johann Gottfried. *Musicalisches Lexicon*, 1732. Facsimile. Kassel : Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1953. 637. [translation mine]

tuned G-d-a-e'. Bononcini's sonatas do require an a string, but also occasionally drop below G, therefore requiring a string below G. The lowest pitch is usually D, which is one of the possible tunings given by Bartolomeo Bismantova in his unfortunately very brief blurb on the *viola da spalla* (the other possibility being with a C for the bottom string). The tuning for these sonatas therefore is most likely either D-G-d-a or the "modern" cello tuning of C-G-d-a. The necessary top a string would also have been easy to adjust to for violinists who picked up the *violoncello da spalla*, playing in their familiar position. The frequently reoccurring figurations that keep the player on the top two strings also point toward a *da spalla* playing position, since these figurations are significantly more comfortable to play in that position than in the horizontal position. On the topic of tuning, Wissick submits that

*"the Bolognese tuning is arguably a raised alteration of the old B-flat tuning [of the basse de violon] rather than a scordatura of C tuning with a lowered top string. The invention of covered strings encouraged a general move toward higher tunings on smaller instruments that still had a full bass quality. It makes sense that initially the familiar violone gut g string on top was retained while the bottom three strings were raised a tone, resulting in a tuning of two fifths and one fourth. The two G strings in this Bolognese tuning share a great deal of sympathetic resonance when one or the other is sounded."*<sup>5</sup>

One undeniable instance in which the "Bolognese" tuning is required, i.e. a given, is when a g has stems in both directions, meaning that one is stopped and the other is an open string. This happens most notably in one of Jacchini's sonatas.

**Bow grip.** Many well-known paintings show cellists playing with an underhand bow grip, especially Italian ones. Perhaps it was mostly in France that cellists, or rather players of *basse de violon* were expected to match their fellow string players and play over-hand, as instructed by M. Lully. Wissick believes that "many cellists continued to use an under-hand bow hold throughout the eighteenth century," but further ruminates about whether "some were converted to over-hand playing by a stint on *da spalla*."<sup>6</sup>

While this involves a certain amount of speculation, the following is more physically (and *only* physically) evident when experimented with: the cello works by Gabrielli and Vitali, and their compositional trainee Jacchini all exhibit bowing configurations conducive to, i.e. most effectively and comfortably executed with an over-hand bow grip. A typical passage fitting the bill would be one with quick notes on regularly alternating strings, where the bow hand is allowed to comfortably open and close in a (relatively) natural clock-wise motion. Bononcini's

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<sup>5</sup> Wissick, Brent. "The Cello Music of Antonio Bononcini: Violone, Violoncello da Spalla, and the Cello 'Schools' of Bologna and Rome." *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music* 12 no. 1 (2006). 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 7.

sonatas, on the other hand, display almost Corelli-like passages which allow a clock-wise "scrubbing" motion with an over-hand bow grip, particularly when the instrument is in *da spalla* position.

While these examples may seem, especially to a non-string player, insignificant and incidental, they can not be disregarded. With composers who knew they would be playing their own music, we not only know that they were ultimately aware of how comfortable and effective their music was to perform. We may further assume that they predominantly worked out their music with their instruments at hand and therefore *conceived* of the music, in particular such passages, with their own instrument and own interest in mind. It is therefore not far-fetched to conclude from bowing patterns that a Jacchini was playing under-hand, while a Bononcini was playing over-hand.

***Left Hand Stretch.*** While there are multiple left hand issues to explore, I will focus on the span of the left hand between the first and fourth fingers, most relevantly in double-stops. Surviving fingerings for any instruments held in *da gamba* position rarely show any kind of stretch, or what we now might call extensions (the latter of which, incidentally, was first documented by Jean-Louis Duport in his ground-breaking treatise *Essai sur le doigté du violoncelle, et sur la conduite de l'archet*, published in 1806). However, such stretches come more naturally in the slanted hand position of a violinist, or, perhaps, a *violoncellist da spalla*. Bononcini's sonatas force the cellist to such stretches repeatedly, but the *da spalla* theory "may explain some major second double stops in the Bononcini sonatas that are very difficult to play with a cello in *da gamba* position, but which fall easily under the hand in *da spalla* position."<sup>7</sup> Some such double stops are impossible to play on a violoncello in *da gamba* position, lest one make use of the left thumb. This exact issue is one of the crucial arguments in my discussion of the the *Violoncello* in the Cello Suites by Johann Sebastian Bach.

## BACK TO BACH

### *What Instrument are the Suites for Violoncello Solo for?*

To some of today's cellists, the issues arising from the early history of the violoncello may seem obscure and insignificant. However, the ambiguities surrounding the instrument are not confined to the first few decades of its history. There are ramifications that should interest

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<sup>7</sup> Wissick, 9.

even those cellists who have no intention of delving into the literature of the 17th century, or even most of the 18th century. It effects the Bach Suites.

The research outlined above and the resulting picture of the history of the *violoncello* defy the clarity we think we have. If nothing else, at least the two "unusual" tunings for the final two suites should make us question our definitive notion of the intended instrument for these pieces. Suite No. 5 in C minor (BWV 1010) calls explicitly for *scordatura*, a re-tuning of the top string from a to g – what we now know has been dubbed "Bolognese" tuning by some. The final Suite No. 6 in D major (BWV 1011) calls for a five-string cello, with "regular" tuning and an added e string on top. (This five-string version is commonly and misleadingly referred to today as *violoncello piccolo* – a term that does show up in crucial fashion in other works by Bach and contemporaries, but is by no means married to a particular number of strings. More in a moment...)

So Suites Nos. 5 and 6 are "weird." Many see this as even stronger an indication that the first four suites are for "regular" four-string cello in "regular" tuning. But let us reconsider. We will do this on two levels: the physical practicality of playing the music, and the historic evidence found in Bach's music.

## **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Let's first look for a few hints in the six suites themselves – a practical approach to figuring out if any of this makes any sense. Simply seen, the first two suites in G major and d minor (BWV 1007 and BWV 1008) do not pose any technical problems and don't bring up any serious performance issues in this context, meaning: everything is easily executed in the "regular" upright, or *gamba* position, and in low positions, as most violoncello music of the time must have been in, in accordance with the state of development of contemporary left-hand technique and methods on the instrument. About halfway through the *Prelude* of the following suite of the

set, Suite No. 3 in C Major (BWV 1009), however, we run into trouble.



To today's cellists, the arpeggio section with the G pedal in measures 46-55 may not seem like much of an impasse on the technical level. Confronted at most with a slight struggle with intonation, said modern cellist will slap her left thumb onto the fingerboard as though it were but another finger, albeit in a lower and moderately less comfortable position than usual for this particular digit. We must realize, though, that the violoncellists of Bach's day probably would not have dreamt up the possibility of using their left thumb to push down the string. Even if they had, there would have been no practiced method in place in doing so.

The first mention of such usage of the left thumb appears in 1741 in a treatise on cello playing by French organist and composer, Michel Corrette, *Méthode théorique et pratique pour apprendre en peu de tems le violoncelle dans sa perfection*. This comes approximately two decades after the Bach Suites are commonly presumed to have been composed (Cöthen, 1717-1723), and from significantly further South-West, for what it's worth. In any event, we may safely conclude that this technique was not in common usage in Northern Germany by the early 1720s. Given this information, we will now agree with Christine Kyprianides, who, among others, points out in her confrontation with "the Obvious in the Bach Cello Suites"<sup>8</sup> that this passage is unplayable without the use of the thumb if the violoncello is held in the upright position we are familiar with today. (Kyprianides quite reasonably rules out the option that cellists would have shifted during this passage: even though the chords are consistently broken and on paper no two notes are played at once, it seems obvious that this passage should and would have been thought of chordally.) In the mind of many modern scholars, this may be the most conclusive evidence in the Suites themselves that they were conceived of as being played "da spalla"-style, i.e. in horizontal playing position. The *Prelude* of Suite No. 4 in E-flat major, its constant strain on the span of the left hand and plethora of awkward shifts strengthen this (horizontal) position: The *Violoncello da Spalla* would have been smaller than our "modern" or

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<sup>8</sup> Kyprianides.

modernly conceived "baroque" cello, and the angle of the left hand on the fingerboard would have made stretches such as the ones necessitated by the aforementioned passages in the third and fourth suites much more feasible, even comfortable.

## HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

But there's more: an investigation of a select number of pivotal Bach cantatas provides even more, even stronger evidence that Bach's cello – or at least one of Bach's cellos – was, in fact, *da spalla*. To sum up, there are four relevant types of evidence in the cantatas:

1. **What is the range of the part?** Cantata BWV 71, *Gott ist mein König* (1708) is the first one which calls specifically for *violoncello*. However, whenever the other *continuo* parts go below G, the *violoncello* part plays an octave above. This strongly implies that the lowest note of the instrument in question was G. Furthermore, on the high end of the spectrum, the part reaches e-flat 2. The likely tuning for this instance of *violoncello* is likely to have been G-D-a-e1, i.e. like a violin, just an octave lower.

2. **What role does the instrument play?** In said Cantata BWV 71, the *violoncello* functions as the bass instrument, as we would be most likely to expect, but specifically to the flute section. This might imply a certain timbre our sound. Perhaps this tells us something about the relative 'softness' of the instrument, too, if it was paired with the flutes. On the other hand, whenever Bach specified *violoncello piccolo* (in the ten cantatas BWV 6, 41, 49, 68, 85, 115, 175, 180, 183, and 199), it is a prominent obbligato part.

3. **Where (physically) is the part written?** In Cantata BWV 6, the *violoncello piccolo* solo was originally written in the concertmaster's part. Certainly instrumentalists of the day were generally more versatile than today, and many a violinist would have been expected to be able to double on viola, triple on cello etc. In that vein, it may not have been unusual for a violinist on occasion to play the cello. However, if a violinist and a cellist were present, it does seem telling that the *violoncello piccolo* passage was given to the violinist. Was he more apt at playing the instrument? Was it less of an adjustment during the cantata for the violinist to switch than for the cellist to switch? If so, the *violoncello piccolo* was likely to have been held *da spalla* and probably had the same strings as a violin, just like the *violoncello* in Cantata BWV 71 (with the possible addition of a fifth string, the cello C on the bottom).

4. **What clefs are the parts written in?** Bach notated *violoncello/violoncello piccolo* parts in five different clefs. Here, too, we do need to remember that Bach's musicians were

probably more fluent in a wide variety of clefs than is common for musicians today. Nonetheless, there is no such range of clefs in his notation of other parts, confirming our notion that half a century after the first great violoncello school established itself in Bologna, the instrument with all its variations and deviations was still in an experimental phase.<sup>9</sup>

## IN CONCLUSION

Though the discussion regarding the early history and the definition of the *violoncello* always feels like it brings up more questions than there could ever be correlating answers, there are a few uncomfortable certainties that we can state in conclusion:

- Everywhere from Bologna to Köthen and beyond, and at least through Johann Sebastian Bach's lifetime, the term *violoncello* did not refer to one specific instrument and one specific way of playing it. Looking back, it can be regarded as an umbrella term to include bowed stringed instruments with a strength in the bass region but also an increasing flexibility for higher ranged and faster passages.

- The *violoncello* was in an experimental phase for approximately the first century of its existence. It seems that many musicians were untroubled by the lack of unification. This could be true either because string players were generally more flexible and used to switching from instrument to instrument more easily to begin with, or because it just didn't seem like an issue in light of the short history of the instrument. Bach (most evidently) and contemporaries expressed their worries with the deficiencies of the instruments at their disposal in this area, and were continuously working to find a bowed bass instrument that had larger flexibility and capacity for playing obbligato parts.

- Much of the music specified for *violoncello* – from the early Bolognese repertoire, up to and including the Cello Suites by J.S. Bach – was written for and/or played on instruments smaller than today's cello and/or in a horizontal position.

In the case of J.S. Bach, in particular, scholars have discovered even more complex issues pertaining to the instrument situation. Thereby, Bach's *violoncello piccolo* most likely differs from the instrument that many of his contemporaries referred to as *violoncello piccolo*. Bach's

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<sup>9</sup> While, for example, Luigi Boccherini over a century later also used at least five different clefs in his cello writing, this happens in a very different context. By Boccherini's time, the violoncello was a well-established instrument of which he was a virtuoso. In his case, he likely felt comfortable writing in so many clefs *because* he was so fluent on the cello, rather than because there was no standard of notation. While Bach rarely changes clef within a movement for the cello, Boccherini does so freely, and possibly in loose correlation to the hand position on the fingerboard. (See Le Guin, 21.)

biographer Nikolaus Forkel even started the myth that Bach himself "invented" an instrument that would suit his needs, stating in his *Musikalischer Almanach*:

*"...Joh. Seb. Bach invented an instrument, which he calls Viola pomposa. It is tuned like a Violoncell, but has one more string above, it is slightly larger than a viola, and is fastened with a strap so that one can hold it in front of the chest with the arm."*<sup>10</sup>

The "invention" of an instrument by Bach is an exaggeration, and the term *viola pomposa* never shows up in any of Bach's music. What is true, however, is that Bach had a long-standing, close and trusting relationship with Leipzig-based violin maker Johann Christian Hoffmann, which culminated in Bach being chosen to handle Hoffmann's estate upon his death in 1749. It is likely they worked together continuously over decades on tinkering with and improving stringed instruments. One of the results may have been what Bach refers to in his ten cantatas as *violoncello piccolo*, and what Forkel refers to as *viola pomposa*. In the end, the terminology is secondary – after all, who is to say whether a particular instrument is a small cello or a large viola? Bach certainly was never interested in stream-lining the terminology, nor in the homogenization of the instruments themselves. Bach always sought ultimately to find the instruments (and players) to serve his music best.

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<sup>10</sup> Forkel, Johann Nikolaus. *Musikalischer Almanach*, Band I. Leipzig, 1782. 34-35. Facsimile: <http://archive.org/stream/MusikalischerAlmanachFrDeutschlandAufDasJahr1782/ForkelAlmanach1782Klein#page/n0/mode/2up> Accessed on February 14, 2013.

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