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## DECONSTRUCTING CORELLI'S BASS VIOLIN

by GREGORY BARNETT

The modern idea of the Baroque violoncello is well fixed in our imagination: as seen in period-instrument ensembles, the instrument is held vertically without an endpin and rests on the performer's calves; the bow is held overhand, usually, but not always, up the stick from the frog by a few centimeters. The anonymous portrait from the mid-1760s of Luigi Boccherini playing his instrument,<sup>1</sup> to take a historical example, furnishes a model for this technique. Like the concept of Baroque pitch at A 415, this standard is a compromise we make in order to establish and disseminate a technique with historical precedence that is distinct from present-day practice. But that standard also misleads us into accepting an oversimplified and uniform picture of Baroque performance practice.<sup>2</sup>

This essay examines the playing techniques of large, violin-family instruments in order to

- 1) hypothesise some general principles of bass-violin performance practice during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries,
- 2) identify the techniques of bass-violin playing that Corelli knew, and
- 3) describe where this leaves us as modern interpreters of historical repertory.

My larger aim is to add nuance and detail to our understanding of the forms of bass violin and of the ways they were played so that the current standard of the Baroque cello might be enriched through renewed experiment on the part of curious and intrepid performers. Above all, I mean to argue, not for a new and replacing standard of Baroque cello playing, but instead against standards on the whole and for a flexible technique suited to the performer's repertory, playing ensemble, and even performing environment. As we shall see, each of these circumstances of performance had an impact on bass-violin playing technique during Corelli's lifetime and beyond. It is our task to discover the same possibilities that the bass-violinists of Corelli's era explored.

<sup>1</sup> The original painting, possibly the work of Pompeo Batoni, is held in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. The most accessible reproduction of Boccherini's portrait is found in the biographical entry for Boccherini in Wikipedia at <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/LBoccherini.jpg>. This image pervades the literature on Boccherini himself appearing, for example, in Elizabeth Le Guin's study, *Boccherini's Body. An Essay in Carnal Musicology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, 40; and in a volume of essays edited by Marcella Bertucelli Papi, *Luigi Boccherini, un musicista lucchese alla corte di Madrid*, Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2009, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Laird, *The Baroque Cello Revival. An Oral History*, Lanham/MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004 offers a history of the modern conception of the Baroque cello, but in calling it a revival, Laird confuses the modern standard with historical practice. Circular reasoning ensues, in which the standard for the Baroque cello is „what we now identify as the ‚Baroque sound‘ on any cello ...“ (emphasis added).



*Performing Venue and the Violoncello da Spalla*

To begin,<sup>3</sup> consider the complex terminology of the Italian bass violin: if a violin was always called ‚violino‘ in Corelli’s era, the bass member of the violin family bore various names.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Johann Christoph Weigel used ‚violone“ in his *Musikalisches Theatrum* (1722)<sup>5</sup> while Filippo Bonanni used ‚viola“ in his *Gabinetto armonico* (1722)<sup>6</sup> for the instrument we recognise as the bass member of the violin family and call a violoncello. That term ‚violoncello‘ existed then too,<sup>7</sup> but a look at printed partbooks gives even further variants for the bass violin, such as ‚bassetto‘, ‚bassetto viola‘, ‚violeta‘, and ‚violoncino‘.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the terminology, iconographic evidence reveals fascinating discrepancies among the playing techniques used for the bass violin.<sup>9</sup> The most striking example can be seen in the violoncello partbook of Giuseppe Torelli’s *Con-*

<sup>3</sup> The information in this and the following three paragraphs summarises material that I introduced in „The Violoncello da Spalla. Shouldering the Cello in the Baroque Era“, *JAMIS* 24 (1998), 81–106.

<sup>4</sup> Two pathbreaking articles by Stephen Bonta – „From Violone to Violoncello. A Question of Strings?“, *JAMIS* 3 (1977), 64–99, and „Terminology for the Bass Violin in Seventeenth-Century Italy“, *JAMIS* 4 (1978), 5–42 – argue on the basis of documentary, iconographic, and organological evidence that the violoncello emerged in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century as a smaller form of violone made possible by the invention of overwound strings. In 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian usage, violone referred to a bass instrument of the eight-foot range, unless somehow qualified as grande or grosso, in which case a contrabass or sixteen-foot instrument was intended.

<sup>5</sup> Weigel’s *Theatrum* exists in facsimile as vol. 27 in the series titled *Studien zur Aufführungspraxis und Interpretation von Musik des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Blankenburg and Michaelstein: Kultur- und Forschungsstätte Michaelstein, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> A facsimile reprint of Bonanni’s *Gabinetto Armonico* with an introduction and added captions is *The Showcase of Musical Instruments*, ed. by Frank Lloyd Harrison (introduction) and Joan Rimmer, (captions), New York: Dover, 1964. The designation of a bass instrument as ‚viola‘ is clearest in the context of instrumental ensembles most often found in printed partbooks or personnel lists. The description of a four-part ensemble by Zaccaria Tevo, *Il musico testore*, Venice: Bortoli, 1706, 360, describes the ‚viola da braccio‘ as an alto-range string and the ‚viola‘ as a bass: „Pare, che per ordinario si adoprino degl’Istrumenti, due Violini per la parte sopra acuta, una Viola da braccio per la parte del Contralto, & una Viola, ò Fagotto, ò Trombone per la parte del Basso [...]“.

<sup>7</sup> The earliest known use of the term is Giulio Cesare Arresti, *Sonate a 2 & a tre. Con la parte del Violoncello a beneplacito*, op. 4, Venice: Gardano, 1665.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Grossi 1678–82 (‚bassetto‘); Giovanni Battista Mazzaferata 1674 and Giuseppe Colombi 1676 (‚bassetto viola‘); Dario Castello 1644 (‚violeta‘); Giovanni Battista Fontana 1641, Francesco Cavalli 1656, and Gasparo Gaspardini 1683 (‚violoncino‘).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Drescher, „Giovanni Battista Vitali – ‚Sonatore di violone da braccio‘. Beobachtungen zum Problemkreis ‚Violone‘ und ‚Violoncello‘“, in: Monika Lustig (ed.), *Geschichte, Bauweise und Spieltechnik der tiefen Streichinstrumente. 21. Musikinstrumentenbau-Symposium Michaelstein, 17. bis 19. November 2000*, Döbel: Verlag Janos Stekovics, 2004 (Michaelsteiner Konferenzberichte 64), 57–74; best captures the varieties of both terminology and playing techniques centered on the Italian bass violin.



*certino da camera* (1688), whose first page features a decorated 'P' for prelude (cf. Fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> The illustration within the capital letter shows a player holding a cello-sized, bowed string instrument, horizontally at chest level. It happens, moreover, that the engraver, Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti, was himself a cellist.<sup>11</sup> Two more illustrations add weight to the evidence of Buffagnotti's shoulder-held cello: a crude sketch from the late 1660s by Giovanni Pistocchi shows Pistocchi himself holding his young son Francesco Antonio, Arcangelo Corelli playing the violin, Giovanni Battista or Antonio Bonini, on theorbo, and Giovanni Maria Bononcini, who is shown playing a bowed string instrument much larger than the violin (cf. Fig. 2);<sup>12</sup> and a fresco by Gian Giacomo Barbelli from S. Maria delle Grazie in Crema (1642) that includes a seated angel playing the same thing (cf. Fig. 3).<sup>13</sup>

Two more terms for the bass violin from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century reflect the playing position shown in figures 1–3: violoncello da spalla and viola da spalla (respectively, shoulder cello and shoulder viola). Viola da spalla appears in several Venetian sources,<sup>14</sup> and it is also given by German writers

<sup>10</sup> For practical demonstrations of violoncello da spalla playing technique, see Brent Wissick, „The Cello Music of Antonio Bononcini. Violone, Violoncello da Spalla, and the Cello ‚Schools‘ of Bologna and Rome“, *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music* 12 (2006) <http://sscm-jscm.press.uiuc.edu.ezproxy.rice.edu/v12/nol/wissick.html>, which includes sound and video examples of Wissick's experiments with a shoulder-held cello.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Callegari-Hill, *L'Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna, 1666–1800. Statuti indici degli aggregati e catalogo degli esperimenti d'esame nell'archivio, con un'introduzione storica*, Bologna: Antiquae Musicae Italicae Studiosi, 1991, 183–335, includes the membership records of the institution. These show (p. 195) that Buffagnotti was admitted to the Accademia Filarmonica at the rank of *suonatore* on the violoncello.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Talbot, „Pistocchi Sketches Corelli (and Others)“, in: *Studi corelliani V*, 441–443, first published this sketch, found on the inside cover of a partbook from Giovanni Maria Bononcini's *Varii fiori del giardino musicale*, op. 3 (1669). Talbot also identifies each of the figures in Pistocchi's sketch.

<sup>13</sup> This image is part of the frescoes on the vaulted ceilings of the Cappella del Terz'Ordine Franciscano, Crema. A reproduction of the full composition is found in the catalog of an exhibition held in the former church of San Domenico in Crema, *L'estro e la realtà. La pittura a Crema nel Seicento*, Milan: Leonardo Arte, 1997, 267. The picture of the angel-instrumentalist also appears in Elena Ferrari-Barassi, „Il ‚far musica‘ in alcune raffigurazioni“, in: Alberto Colzani, Andrea Luppi, and Maurizio Padoan (eds), *Seicento inesplorato. Atti del III Convegno Internazionale sulla Musica in Area Lombardo-Padana del Secolo XVII*, Como: Antiquae Musicae Italicae Studiosi, 1993, 97–125.

<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi*, New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1975, 304, has found listings of the viola da spalla in personnel records from San Marco, now housed in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Procuratoria de Supra, Basilica di S. Marco. The performers on this instrument in those records are Bernardo Tonini, Francesco Moro, and Giovanni Bononcini.





Fig. 1: Giuseppe Torelli, *Concertino per camera* (Bologna, 1687–88): Violoncello part-book, p. 1, engraved by Carlo Buffagnotti. Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), CC.26.



Fig. 2: Sketch (Bologna, circa 1669) by Giovanni Pistocchi showing himself with his young son, Francesco Antonio Pistocchi, plus Arcangelo Corelli (violin), G. B. or Antonio Bonini (theorbo), and G. M. Bononcini (violoncello da spalla). Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), X.111.



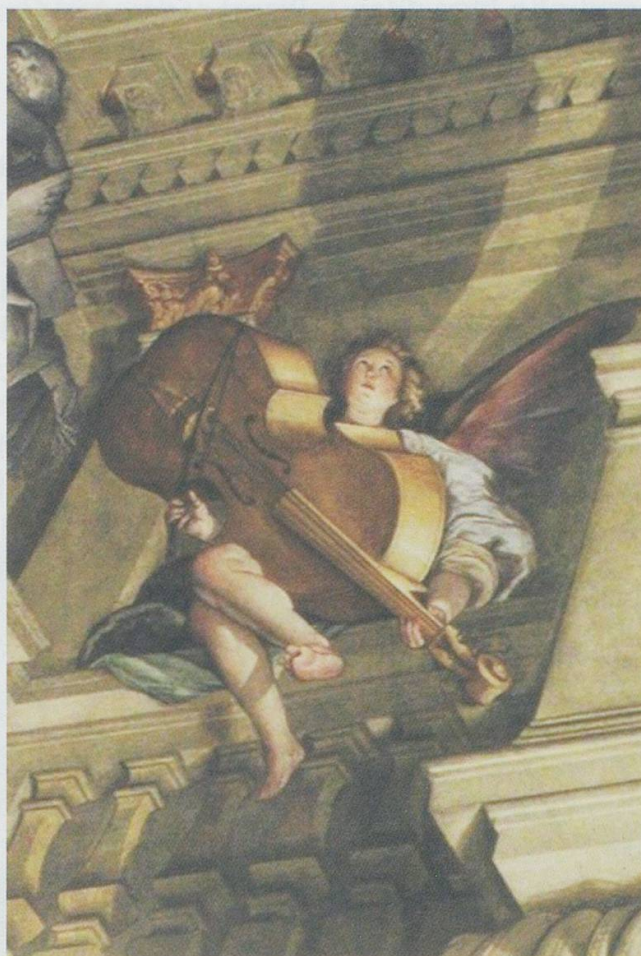


Fig. 3: Gian Giacomo Barbelli, Assunzione di Maria (1642). S. Maria delle Grazie, Crema.

as a synonym for violoncello, beginning with Johann Mattheson in 1713.<sup>15</sup> The violoncello da spalla is named as a new instrument (*alla moderna*) in a

<sup>15</sup> Johann Mattheson, *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* [...], Hamburg: Schiller, 1713, 285: „Der hervorragende *Violoncello*, die *Bassa Viola* und *Viola di Spala*, sind kleine *Bass-Geigen*, in Vergleichung der grössern, mit 5 auch wol 6 Saiten, worauff man mit leichterer Arbeit als auff den grossen *Machinen* allerhand geschwinde Sachen, *Variationes* und *Mannieren* machen kan; insonderheit hat die *Viola da Spala*, oder *Schulter-Viole* einen grossen *Effect* beim *Accompagnement*, weil sie stark durchschneiden und die *Tohne* rein *exprimiren* kan. Ein *Bass* kan nimmer *distincter* und deutlicher herausgebracht werden als auff diesem *Instrument*. Es wird mit einem *Bande* an der *Brust* befestiget, und gleichsam auff die rechte *Schulter* geworffen, hat also nichts, daß seinen *Resonanz* im geringsten auffhält oder verhindert.“ Mattheson's information is repeated or paraphrased in Joseph Friedrich Bernhard Caspar Majer, *Neu-Eröffneter theoretisch- und praktischer Music-Saal*, Halle: G. M. Majer, 1732; facsimile ed. by Eitelfriedrich Thom, Michaelstein: Kultur- und Forschungsstätte, 1991; and Johann Philipp Eisel, *Musicus Autodidaktos. Oder der sich selbst informirende Musicus*, Erfurt: Johann Michael Funcken, 1738; facsimile: Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der Deutsche Demokratische Republik, 1976. Jacob Adlung, *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit*, Erfurt: J. D. Jungnicol, 1758; <sup>2</sup>1783; facsimile ed. by Hans Joachim Moser, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1953, 599: asserts simply that „*Violoncello* heiß auch *Viola di Spala*.“



musical primer written by Bartolomeo Bismantova, his *Compendio musicale* of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> His description reads as follows:

Regola per suonare il Violoncello da Spalla. Il Violoncello da Spalla alla moderna s'accorda in quinta, salvo che il Basso, che in vece d'accordarlo in *C* solfaut, bisognerà accordarlo in *D* lasolre; e questo si fa per la commodità del Suonatore, mà però si può ancora accordare in *C* solfaut.

There are, however, no specific descriptions of the da spalla playing position in Italian sources, and Bismantova is the only source that uses the term violoncello da spalla. For descriptions of the shoulder-held playing position, it is first a French violist da gamba, Jean Rousseau,<sup>17</sup> and then a number of German music lexicographers who describe the playing of the Italian shoulder cello.<sup>18</sup> Later German writers such as J. F. B. C. Majer (1732) and Jacob Adlung (1758) would equate the violoncello with the viola da spalla, and that latter term appears in similar music dictionaries as an Italian form of bass violin, as late as the 1780s.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, a broader perspective that combines the varied terminology for the bass violin with the distinct playing techniques used for it points to larger and smaller forms. In a series of articles from the late 1970s, Stephen Bonta outlined a distinction among bass violins, between the violone and its diminutive form (violoncello, violoncino, bassetto), in which the smaller instrument was made possible by the invention and use of wirewound strings.<sup>20</sup> Within that broader picture of instrument form and terminology, we may see how shoulder-held playing technique (da spalla), captured in Italian pictures and described by French and German writers, was sometimes applied to the smaller form of bass violin.

This illustrates the still-changing nature of the Baroque cello in the example of the violoncello da spalla. Scholarship from the past decade has explored

<sup>16</sup> Bartolomeo Bismantova, *Compendio musicale*, MS, Ferrara, 1677; enlarged, 1694; facsimile ed by Marcello Castellani, Florence: Studio per edizioni scelte, 1978, 119. Translated as „Rules for playing the violoncello da spalla: the modern violoncello da spalla is tuned in fifths, except for the lowest string, which needs to be tuned to *D*, instead of *C*. This is done for the convenience of the performer, but one can also tune [the low string] to *C*.“

<sup>17</sup> Jean Rousseau, *Traité de la Viola*, Paris, 1687, 9: „on ne peut pas dire que la Basse de Violon dont on jouë présentement en Italie ne soit une véritable Basse de Violon, de la mesme espece que celle dont on jouë en France . . . parce qu'ils la tiennent sur le bras, au lieu qu'en France on l'appuye contre terre.“

<sup>18</sup> The earliest German source to describe shoulder-held cello technique is Johann Gottfried Walther, *Praecepta der musicalischen Composition*, MS, Weimar, 1708, 161: „Violoncello ist ein Italiänisches 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.“

<sup>19</sup> See n. 15 above.

<sup>20</sup> An addition to articles by Stephen Bonta listed in n. 4 above, see his „Further Thoughts on the History of Strings“, *Catgut Acoustical Society Newsletter* 26/2 (November, 1976), 21–26.



the hypothesis of putting that form of cello into the hands of J. S. Bach,<sup>21</sup> a line of inquiry that connects with earlier research on the viola pomposa and violoncello piccolo.<sup>22</sup> My interest instead lies in tracing where, how, and why spalla technique was disseminated in Italy around the time of Corelli. To begin, most iconographic evidence shows it within ensembles that are placed in balconies or on railed platforms (cf. Fig. 4). In this context, the advantage of the spalla playing position was to save precious space by enabling the player to hang the instrument out over the railings, and this advantage obtains whether the ensemble is smaller (cf. Fig. 5), or larger (cf. Fig. 6), playing at a ball (cf. Fig. 7), or playing in church (cf. Fig. 8). Moreover, the suspended playing position achieves precisely that which Johann Mattheson described in his enthusiastic definition of the viola da spalla, in which the instrument „has nothing that in the least holds back or hinders its resonance.“<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 4: *Insignia degli Anziani del Comune di Bologna*, in the „Archivio degli anziani-consoli“, Festa dell'Annunciazione (1705). Archivio di Stato di Bologna (I-Bas), vol. 11, f. 105b.

<sup>21</sup> Lambert Smit, „Towards a More Consistent and More Historical View of Bach's Violoncello“, *Chelys* 32 (2004), 49–56; Dmitry Badiarov, „The Violoncello, Viola da Spalla and Viola Pomposa in Theory and Practice“, *GSJ* 60 (2007), 121–145; idem, „Errata, and More on the Violoncello da Spalla of the Italians“, *GSJ* 61 (2008), 324–325; Marc Vanscheeuwijck, „Recent Re-Evaluations of the Baroque Cello and What They Might Mean for Performing the Music of J. S. Bach“, *EM* 38 (2010), 181–192.

<sup>22</sup> F. W. Galpin, „Viola Pomposa and Violoncello Piccolo“, *M&L* 12 (1931), 354–364; Winfried Schrammek, „Viola pomposa und Violoncello piccolo bei Johann Sebastian Bach“, in: Winfried Hoffmann and Armin Schneiderheinze (eds.), *Bericht über die Wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum III. Internationalen Bach-Fest der DDR Leipzig, 18./19. September 1975*, Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1977, 345–354; Ulrich Drüner, „Violoncello piccolo und Viola pomposa bei Johann Sebastian Bach. Zu Fragen von Identität und Spielweise dieser Instrumente“, *Bach-Jahrbuch* 73 (1987), 85–112; Mark M. Smith, „Joh. Seb. Bachs Violoncello piccolo. Neue Aspekte – offene Fragen“, *Bach-Jahrbuch* 84 (1998), 63–81.

<sup>23</sup> Mattheson, *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (see n. 15), 285. For the complete description by Mattheson, see note 15 above.





Fig. 5: *Insignia degli Anziani ... festa da ballo*, Palazzo Fibbia (1716). Archivio di Stato di Bologna (I-Bas), vol. 12, f. 68a.



Fig. 6: *Insignia degli Anziani ... presbiterio di S. Petronio* (1666). Archivio di Stato di Bologna (I-Bas), vol. 8, f. 93a.





Fig. 7: *Insignia degli Anziani ... festa da ballo*, Palazzo Fibbia (1737). Archivio di Stato di Bologna (I-Bas), vol. 13, f. 125a.

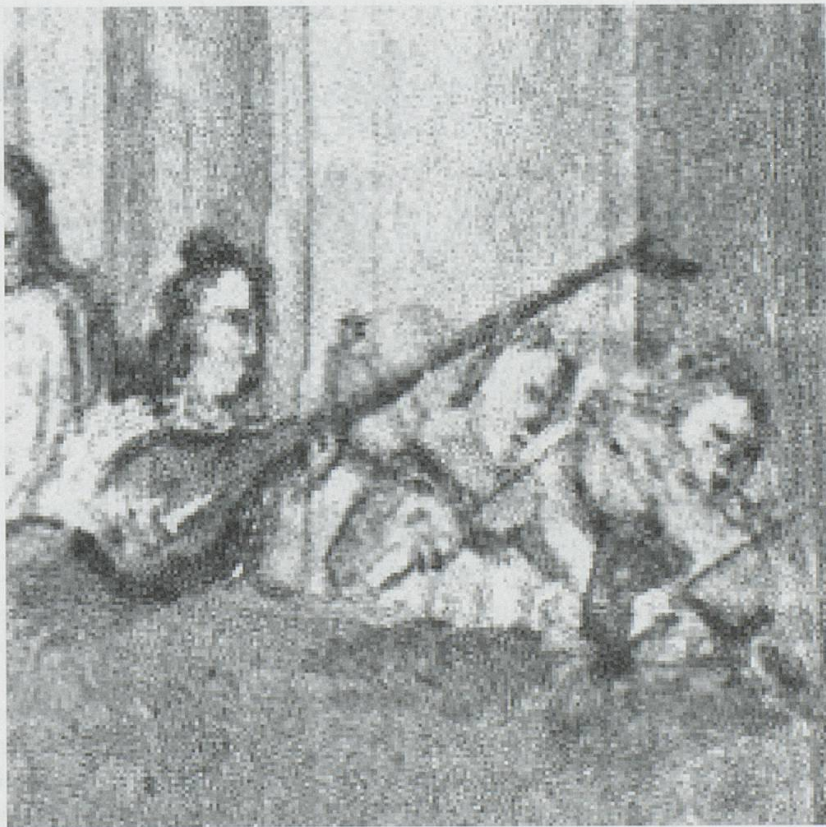


Fig. 8: *Insignia degli Anziani ... Festa di S. Petronio* (1722). Archivio di Stato di Bologna (I-Bas), vol. 13, f. 37a.



Based on these illustrations, spalla technique appears primarily to have been a matter of practical convenience: when space was limited in the musicians' gallery, the cellist made do by hoisting the instrument up and letting it hang out. The violoncello da spalla was, therefore, not so much a distinct form of bass violin, as an optional playing technique used in case of need. A further illustration, Pierre Paul Sevin's depiction of a large musical ensemble in Rome from around 1670,<sup>24</sup> is the only example I know that shows something akin to spalla technique in Rome.<sup>25</sup> Even here, however, there is some variation in the position of the instrument with scrolls pointing up, sideways, or downward, depending on the individual player.

### *Corelli's Bass Parts and Playing Technique*

Sevin's illustration suggests that Corelli could have known and used violoncellists da spalla, but we can get a better idea of the probabilities by considering the strengths and weaknesses of the spalla playing position, and comparing these to the requirements of Corelli's bass lines. In his op. 1–4 (published between 1681 and 1694), Corelli's bass parts range from low *C* to a top pitch of *g'*, although *f'* or even *e'* are the more frequent high notes. Overall, he concentrates most on the middle range of the instrument, sounding low *C* to *G* most frequently at cadences and venturing above *d'* only occasionally. His op. 5 and op. 6, published in 1700 and 1714, respectively, work that range up to an occasional *b'-flat*, while still drawing most frequently on the middle of the cello range. All of Corelli could therefore be performed without thumb position in a *C G d a* tuning. Even a tuning of *B'-flat F c g*, which is attested in French-influenced northern Italian music,<sup>26</sup> would require only a slight extension of intermediate lefthand position.

The American cellist Brent Wissick who has tried spalla technique, focused primarily on solo cello repertory of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century: Domenico Gabrielli, Giuseppe Jacchini, and Antonio Maria Bononcini, in particular.<sup>27</sup> He found that the shoulder-held position of the cello favors playing on the higher strings, in particular, passage-work that avoids string crossings because the lower strings

<sup>24</sup> The original watercolor is located in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, inventory number THC 3628. A reproduction appears in Per Bjurström, *Feast and Theatre in Queen Christina's Rome*, Stockholm: Bengtson, 1966, 60; see also the reproduction of the painting in the paper by Alexandra Nigito in this volume, p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Apart from Sevin's painting, there is no iconographic evidence for the violoncello da spalla outside of northern Italy – specifically, Emilia, Romagna, and the Veneto – so that its practical dissemination may have been limited to those areas in spite of descriptions by French and German authors of its playing technique.

<sup>26</sup> This tuning is associated with the French *basse de violon*, and there is evidence from the Este court in Modena that it was used in Italy, too: Domenico Galli, *Trattenimento musicale sopra il violoncello a solo*, no opus (MS, I-MOe MS. MUS. C 81), contains music that descends to *B'* and *B'-flat*; and Giuseppe Colombi, *Tromba à basso solo* (MS, I-MOe MS. MUS. F. 280), and *Chiaccona à basso solo* (MS, I-MOe MS. MUS. E. 350), feature chords that require the lower tuning, specifically, open *F* and *c* strings.

<sup>27</sup> Wissick, „Cello Music of Antonio Bononcini“ (see n. 10).



require the performer to extend the right arm around the body of the instrument in order to bow the lower strings. On the basis of his comparison of gamba and spalla playing positions, Wissick proposed some of the solo cello sonatas of Antonio Maria Bononcini as likely repertory for the violoncello da spalla.<sup>28</sup> The main characteristic of Bononcini's writing that suggests spalla technique is its range: written in tenor clef, most of the music falls between *d* (the pitch of the open second string) and *a'* (the octave of the first string).

Another possibility is my own suggestion for spalla repertory, made on the basis of musical and other circumstantial evidence: the composer is Antonio Maria's brother, Giovanni Bononcini, who was also a cellist and whose father, Giovanni Maria, played the violoncello da spalla (cf. Fig. 2). It happens moreover, that the younger Bononcini is listed as performing on the viola da spalla in personnel records from San Marco in Venice (see n. 14 above). My excerpt of suggested spalla music (cf. Fig. 9) comes from a *sinfonia* within a collection that Giovanni Bononcini dedicated to Giovanni Paolo Colonna, who was chapelmaster of S. Petronio, where – as we have seen in figures 4, 6, and 8 – shoulder-held technique was used. This music works well according to Wissick's findings because of its predominantly conjunct motion that uses the upper two strings of the cello until the very last measure. The cello part of another Bononcini *sinfonia* (cf. Fig. 10) uses different figuration from the previous example, but again relies on the top two strings of the instrument.



Fig. 9: Giovanni Bononcini (1670–1747), op. 3, no. 3 (1685) – Violoncello. Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), X.124.

<sup>28</sup> Lowell Lindgren (ed.), *Antonio Bononcini. Complete Sonatas for Violoncello and Basso Continuo*, Madison/WI: A-R Editions, 1996 (Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era 77) is a modern edition of all the known cello sonatas by Bononcini.





Fig. 10: Giovanni Bononcini, op. 3, no. 5 (1685) – Violoncello. Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), X.124.

Corelli's bass lines, by contrast, require the performer to play across the instrument and to make frequent string crossings. Especially distinctive in Corelli's idiom is his use of disjunct, fast-moving basses (cf. Fig. 11). Spalla technique, by positioning the lower bouts of the instrument against the player's bow arm, thus presents a specific disadvantage when playing Corelli. And while this example shows Corellian bass-violin writing that is most comparable to Bononcini's in its concertato function, it also typifies the difference between the two composers: Corelli concentrates mostly on the middle of the bass-violin range whereas Bononcini writes a part that ranges higher with more conjunct writing.

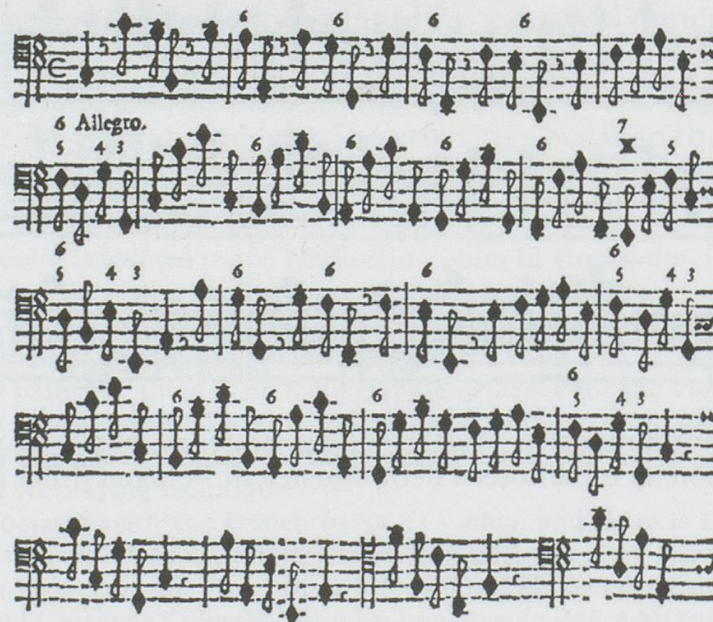


Fig. 11: Corelli, op. 3, no. 8 (1689) – Violone, ò Arcileuto. Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), Y.188.



*Corelli's Bass Violin*

In sum, while Corelli's music hardly excludes the violoncello da spalla, I do not believe he had it in mind when composing. Instead, what he envisioned looks much like what we can see in a series of images of both unidentified and identified cellists, whose playing position featured not only a vertical position of the instrument, but also an underhand bow grip. Among the unidentified players are musicians featured in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch paintings of convivial domesticity that include bass violinists.<sup>29</sup> Another unidentified cellist is shown in a woodcut (cf. Fig. 12) that the modenese publisher Fortuniano Rosati used in the 1690s for three different prints, including the one shown here from the op. 3 of Giuseppe Jacchini, who was a Bolognese cellist.<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 12: Frontispiece decoration used for Giuseppe Jacchini, *Concerti per camera a violino e violoncello*, op. 3 (Modena, 1697). Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), AA.126.

<sup>29</sup> Winfried Pape and Wolfgang Boettcher, *Das Violoncello. Geschichte, Bau, Technik, Repertoire*, Mainz and New York: Schott, 22005, includes colorplate reproductions of several 17th-century Dutch paintings that feature a bass violinist: Anthonie Palamedesz (1632); Jan Miense Molenaer, (1635); David Teniers the Younger, showing himself playing the instrument (1645/46); and Pieter de Hooch (early 1670s). The bass violinist in these paintings is shown with the instrument resting either on the floor or on a low stepping stool. One shows the player standing; all illustrate an underhand bowgrip at the frog.

<sup>30</sup> A. Veracini, op. 2 (ca. 1684); G. Jacchini, op. 3 (1697); T. Pegolotti, op. 1 (1698).



Known cellists depicted with a similar playing technique are found throughout the Italian peninsula from Rome to Venice: Pietro Salvetti, active at the Medici court in Florence and also a player of the lirone is shown with the bow held underhand in Antonio Domenico Gabbiani's painting of Ferdinando de' Medici and his musicians, circa 1690 (cf. Fig. 13); two images survive of Giacobbe Basevi Cervetto,<sup>31</sup> a Venetian who emigrated to London in the late 1730s, that show him playing with both an overhand and underhand bow grip;<sup>32</sup> Antonio Vandini,<sup>33</sup> who played in the cappella musicale of the basilica of S. Antonio di Padova and used an underhand grip, as did Antonio Tonelli,<sup>34</sup> who was active in Bologna, Parma, and Venice; and Pietro Sterlichi,<sup>35</sup> who was active in Rome, and Nicola Francesco Haym, who had a close working relationship with Corelli (cf. Fig. 14).<sup>36</sup> Moreover, during his visit to Padua in 1770, Charles Burney commented, „it is remarkable that Antonio [Vandini], and all the other violoncello players here, hold the bow in the old-fashioned way, with the hand under it.“<sup>37</sup> The iconographic evidence adds to Burney's observation to support the idea that the underhand grip predominated among Italian cellists during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Talbot, „Some Notes on the Life of Jacob Cervetto“, *MeL* 94/2 (2013), introduces convincing evidence for 1690 as the year of Cervetto's birth year, instead of 1680–1682.

<sup>32</sup> The two portraits of Cervetto are found in Edmund Sebastian Joseph van der Straeten, *History of the Violoncello, the Viol da gamba, their Precursors and Collateral Instruments with Biographies of all the most eminent players of every country*, London: Reeves, 1914; reprinted 1971, 152 and Plate XXI.

<sup>33</sup> Two depictions of Vandini, both showing him using an underhand grip, are found in two different sources: the first is van der Straeten, *History of the Violoncello* (see n. 32), 162; the second is a caricature by Pier Leone Ghezzi that bears the caption: „Antonio Vandini famoso sonatore di Violoncello al servizio della Capella di S. Antonio in Padova fatto da me Caval. Ghezzi.“ The original drawing is located in the Biblioteca Civica Passionei in Fossombrone, and a digital reproduction is found at [http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-Q3mJniAK-xY/TgBIR28UHfI/AAAAAAAAAcA/WlRyg\\_s2IE8/s1600/9\\_0\\_1.gif](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-Q3mJniAK-xY/TgBIR28UHfI/AAAAAAAAAcA/WlRyg_s2IE8/s1600/9_0_1.gif).

<sup>34</sup> Van der Straeten, *History of the Violoncello* (see n. 32), 146.

<sup>35</sup> Sterlichi's playing is shown in a caricature by Pier Leone Ghezzi (Rome, 1742). The original sketch is located in the Vatican Library (I-Rvat, Ottob. Lat. vol. 3118, f. 162<sup>r</sup>), and an online reproduction is found as Figure 9 (p. 94) in Marc Vanscheeuwijck, „The Baroque Cello and Its Performance“, *Performance Practice Review* 9/1 (1996): 78–96, see: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1170&context=ppr>; 04 June 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Haym is shown in a series of paintings by Marco Ricci of an opera rehearsal in London circa 1709. Reproductions of all three are found online in the repository of Wikimedia: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marco\\_Ricci\\_-\\_Rehearsal\\_of\\_an\\_opera\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marco_Ricci_-_Rehearsal_of_an_opera_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg); [http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/painting\\_290355/Marco-Ricci/An-Opera-Rehearsal](http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/painting_290355/Marco-Ricci/An-Opera-Rehearsal); and <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marco-Ricci-rehearsal.png>; 04 June 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*, London: Becket, 1771; reprinted in London, by: Becket, Robson, and Robinson, 1773, 142.





Fig. 13: Domenico Gabbiani, *Musicians of Ferdinando de' Medici* (Florence, circa 1685). Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Florence.

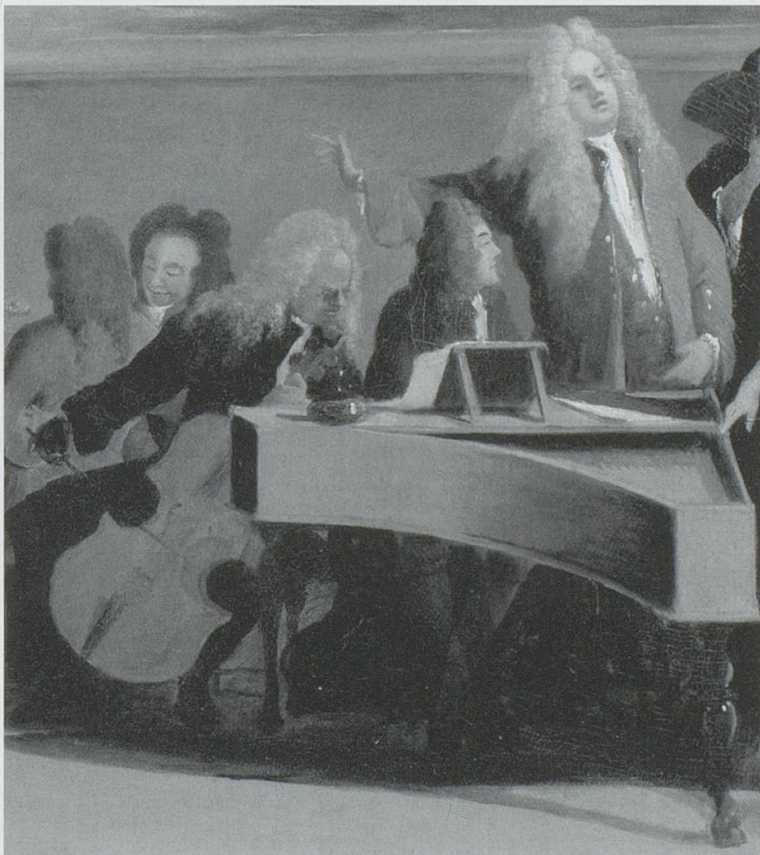


Fig. 14: Marco Ricci, *Rehearsal of an Opera* (circa 1709). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.523.



Overall, three features of Italian bass-violin technique stand out. First, the predominant bow-hold is underhand,<sup>38</sup> but it is not the grip used for the viola da gamba; rather, it is one in which the hand meets the stick at or very close to the frog. Second, when it is possible to see the complete instrument, we see it held close to or even on the floor. Third, the playing techniques vary notably. This last point is emphasised by further illustrations that show even more possibilities, in which the cellist sometimes stood while resting the instrument on an elevated surface (cf. Fig. 15), or held the instrument in a position somewhere between vertical (da gamba) and horizontal (da spalla) (cf. Fig. 16).



Fig. 15: *Insignia degli Anziani ... bacchanale* (1680). Archivio di Stato di Bologna (I-Bas), vol. 10, f. 120a.



Fig. 16: Girolamo Martinelli (1658–??), *Concerto in the Home of the Lazzari Family* (Carpi, circa 1680). Museo Civico „Giulio Ferrari“, Palazzo Pio, Carpi (Modena).

<sup>38</sup> A more comprehensive survey than mine of underhand bow grips among Baroque-era cellists is Mark Smith, „The Cello Bow Held the Viol Way. Once Common but now Almost Forgotten“, *Chelys* 24 (1995), 47–61. Smith describes that grip as „the viol way“, but he is careful to note on pp. 59–60 that bass violinists held the bow closer to the end of the stick, often gripping the frog.



Not only did bass-violin playing technique vary in Corelli's time and beyond, but Corelli's own bass lines and demands on bass violinists changed over the course of his career. I have already mentioned the upward extension of bass-violin range in Corelli's op. 5 and op. 6. In addition, Corelli demanded more from the bass violin in two other respects: first, his op. 5 sonatas feature moments of virtuoso exchange in which violin and bass violin are equal partners (cf. Fig. 17); and then, in his op. 6, Corelli unambiguously assigns the violoncello a role in continuo realisation (cf. Fig. 18). The cello partbook is figured and, for the first time in Corelli's oeuvre, that figured part is not shared with either the arciliuto or cembalo.

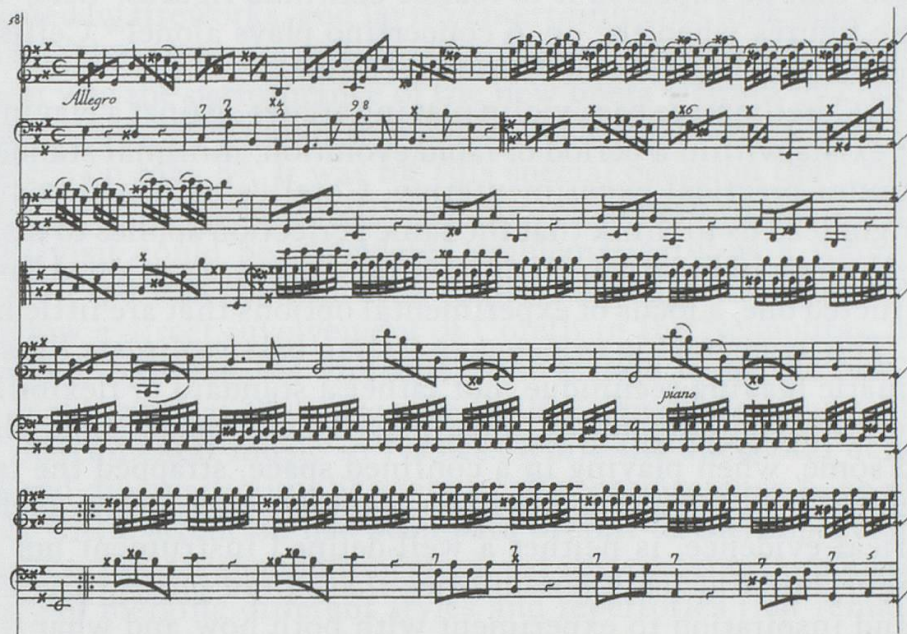


Fig. 17: Corelli, op. 5, no. 11 (1700) – Violone o Cimbalo. Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), Y. 196.



Fig. 18: Corelli, op. 6, no. 1 (1714) – Violoncello del Concertino. Museo Internazionale e Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna (I-Bc), Y. 199.



### Conclusion

The Corellian bass violin that I envision, then, is a matter both of how it is played and what is played on it. On the basis of the musical and iconographic evidence surveyed here, modern-day Baroque cellists should consider the following: first, the underhand grip on or just next to the frog – that is, distinct from the bow-grip of gamba players – is well-supported by the iconographic evidence and would add rhythmic weight to the bass with an especially crisp and forceful downbow. Second, Corelli's music illustrates not only that he came to regard the bass violin as a virtuosic counterweight to the solo violin, but also that he expected it to realise continuo figures. Who, after all, is reading the figures when the op. 6 concertino plays alone?<sup>39</sup> Cellists need to play chords here as a matter of routine technique.

Third, the Corellian-era bass-violin playing argues against a playing standard because it exists within a period of rapid evolution, minimal standardisation, and maximum practical experimentation. Corelli's perfected compositional models might lead us to think that the same perfection applies to instrumental playing technique in his time. To the contrary, my re-envisioned bass violin is a deconstructed one, a locus of experimental options that are little known and less tried. The iconographic evidence of Italian bass violinists illustrates, not a paradigmatic playing technique, but rather a standard of flexibility, where, among Corelli's contemporaries, most played underhand, some played overhand, and some, when playing in a confined space, strapped the instrument in a horizontal position across the chest. Corelli's bass violin, as depicted by the historical evidence, is neither a well-defined instrument nor technique for playing it, but a locus of possibilities that afford present-day cellists the freedom and inspiration to experiment with both how and what they play.

<sup>39</sup> The title page description of Corelli's op. 6 would seem to rule out harpsichord or theorbo accompaniment of the continuo when the concertino plays alone. It reads, „Concerti grossi con duoi violini e violoncello di concertino obligati e duoi altri violini, viola e basso di concerto ad arbitrio, che si potranno radoppiare.“ The instrumentation of the concertino is thus limited to two violins and violoncello. The concerto grosso, by contrast, includes a *basso ad arbitrio* that allows for continuo accompaniment by one or more unspecified instruments, including keyboards and plucked strings.