

LARGE VIOLAS

By C. E. Mertzanoff

The subject of viola proportions has troubled makers and has been discussed by many writers in the past. No doubt owing to changing ideas of performers, as years passed, instrument builders designed various sizes, generally of smaller proportions than early forms developed at Brescia and Cremona. It was, in time, recognized that the small bodies did not produce true tenor voice; neither did the short span provided for the thick C string exert sufficient tension to make the low tones sonorous or readily produced.

From time to time attempts have been made to create oversized violas which would produce a truer tenor quality of tone than that obtained even from the 16 to 16 1/2 inch body proportions. This approximate size, the nearest average to what is now considered a standard, is, in comparison to the violin, small, considering the lower pitch to which it is tuned.

In my articles on Paganini's compositions appearing in this magazine, I have related how that violinist, who was also an excellent viola player, had a special "grand" viola built, designed to be suitable for his "Sonata per le Gran Viola" (see page 241). I am not able to state who made it. Paganini named this creation "contra viola." The Stradivari viola of 1731 which was in his possession and which he generally used, was approximately 16A inches in length of body.

A type of large violas was once known as Viola da Spalla, so called because the manner of holding them was across the chest of the player, suspended from a strap over the right shoulder. We first find mention of the type in Johann Mattheson's "Das neu eröffnete Orchestra" (1713). [Mattheson was a German theorist and composer, author of numerous writings on diversified subjects; he was born at Hamburg 1681 and died there 1764.]

The viola da spalla had been used by wandering musicians during the 17th century and Mattheson wrote "Because of its clear and more piercing tone quality, the viola da spalla is especially suited for accompaniment. Other instruments lack its quality of expression."

The instrument is also praised in the "Musikalisches Lexicon," written by Johann Gottfried Wagner, an organist. The tuning was the same as followed today, four strings, C G D A.

Caspar Maier, cantor, and author of "Museum musicum theoreticopracticum," an instruction book on how to play old and obsolete instruments, speaks of a "viola di fagotto," or bassoon-viol, which was tuned like a 'cello, an illustration of which appears in Antoine Vidal's book "Les Instruments a archet." Grove's Dictionary states that the name viola di fagotto was sometimes given to the Viola Bastarda, which was a sort of bass-viol made in different sizes and mounted with six strings.

Perhaps the best known oversized viola is the one conceived by J. S. Bach, which was called the Viola Pomposa. Ernst Ludwig Gerber (1746-1819), court organist and lexicographer, son of one of Bach's pupils, wrote: "The stiff way in which the violoncello was played in Bach's time compelled him to invent, for the animated basses in his works, the so called viola pomposa, which was a little longer and deeper than a viola and was tuned an octave higher than the 'cello. It also had a fifth string (E). It was laid on the arm and on this convenient instrument very high and rapid passages were played with ease. How greatly Bach was pleased with this instrument may be surmised from the fact to the five 'cello sonatas he added a sixth, presumably for this viola pomposa." (See J. S. Bach by Albert Schweitzer.) This sonata is in D, 12-8 time, and bears the title "Suite 6me a cinq cordes," with the tuning the same as the 'cello but with the additional higher fifth.

Both Gerber and Spitta (1841-1894) believe that the sixth sonata was written for the viola pomposa. Spitta was the author of a monumental "Life of Bach," which appeared in two volumes (1873-1880).

G. Kinsky, however, points out that Bach may have very well composed the sonata for a five stringed gamba or 'cello, an instrument in use in those days. He bases his opinion on the following facts: The violin partitas and 'cello suites were composed in Cöthen earlier than the year 1723; Bach wrote the latter for the 'cellist and gambist Christian Ferdinand Abel, whereas the idea for a large viola did not materialize until after 1723, the year Bach went to Leipzig and had made the acquaintance of Johann Christian Hoffmann, a famous violin maker, to whom he entrusted the construction of the pomposa.

The maker Hoffmann was born in Leipzig in 1683 and died 1750; he was considered one of the best in Germany and furnished instruments of various kinds to the courts of Poland and Saxony. The Heyer Museum contained examples of his work including 2 theorbos, dated 1720 and 1725, 2 gambas of 1731, a viola d'amore of 1730 a viola da spalla of 1737, 2 violas pomposa dated 1732 and 1741, and a 'cello piccolo. In 1773 the

orchestra at Cöthen included 4 violins, 2 'cellos, and a contra-bass, all made by Hoffmann between the years 1715-1732.

Other makers produce the pomposa type and there seems to have been quite a wide use of the instrument. In Bach's time the Violone and the Violone Grosso were the lowest pitched of the strings; accompaniments were played by the 'cello and, an octave higher, the violoncello piccolo, and the viola pomposa. The various types and sizes of bowed string instruments which were the direct descendants of the viols, classed by names such as above mentioned, as violas of differing register and method of stringing, gradually disappeared as the quartet as we know it today proved its practical efficiency—the violin, viola, violoncello, and bass.

Violas of classical dimensions are known to have been produced as early as 1592. Of the better known makers, Gasparo da Salo, Maggini, the Amati, as well as others, built large violas, rarely small sizes. From the middle to the end of the seventeenth century, smaller sizes seem to have been demanded, but, on the whole, viola building decreased noticeably. At the time of Stradivari, and throughout his period, the viola was so neglected by composers that very few were made—of the thousand and better of instruments produced by the great master during his life-time, only ten violas are known to exist and of those there remains only one of large size; two of similar dimensions are recorded to have been made, named by the master "Tenore," the smaller type being designated by him as "Contralto." The Tenore which has survived is preserved at the Museum of the Musical Institute at Florence. It has a body length of 18 7/8 inches, which exceeds that of the large violas of Gasparo and Amati.

Of later years, J. B. Vuillaume, about 1855, evolved his "Contralto," his idea having been to provide necessary air volume without unduly increasing the length or depth, by broadening the shoulders and bouts. This form produced a square, squatty effect, giving the instrument an appearance much as though it had been forcibly squeezed or compressed at its extremities causing it to bulge out sidewise !

The "Ritter" viola was another short-lived attempt to promote an "invention" of Professor Hermann Ritter. According to his specifications, in 1875 Karl Adam Hörlein of Würzburg, built Ritter's "Viola Alta," the body length 18 7/8 inches. Ritter himself played upon it at one of the Wagner Festivals with the Bayreuth orchestra. He afterward added a fifth string (E) thus combining the compass of viola and violin.

In 1891, Dr. Alfred Stelzner (died 1906) attracted some notice when he brought out a viola-like instrument to which he gave the name Violotta. The outline consisted of elliptical and parabolic curves instead of circular segments. The length of the body was 16 inches; the width across bouts, upper 9 1/4 lower 11 1/16; rib heights, at upper end 1 3/4 middle 2 3/8 and lower end 2 1/8 inches. Examples are at the Paris Museum and the Berlin Museum.

Valentino de Zorzi, an Italian violin maker of Florence (1837-1916), invented a large instrument which he called Contra-violino. It was tuned an octave lower than the violin and was played upon in a manner like the 'cello. One of these is preserved at the Museum at Florence. De Zorzi also made several copies of the Stradivari tenore.

The late Fred L. Dautrich, a violin maker who lived and worked at Torrington, Connecticut, designed and built an instrument similar to de Zorzi's contra-violino. This he named "Vilon" designating it as a new tenor. A smaller size, as a new type also, he named "Vilonia," requiring, on account of its size, that it be played between the knees. The writer visited the maker while he was still among the living and was impressed by the clear sonorous tone of these off-shoots of the violin family.

Although the various examples which have been mentioned here offer no solution to the problem of standardization of viola dimensions, they have been described merely to indicate that the modest viola seems to have offered an alluring object for experimenting; the violin and the violoncello are practically immune to attempts of that nature and judging by what has occurred in the past, the viola will continue to be the object of hopeful inventors.

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Not mentioned in the preceding articles anent large violas, the fact that a Spanish violin maker, R. Parramon Castany, of Barcelona, who advertised himself to be "the luthier of Pablo Casals," announced the perfection of the "Parramon Tenor-Viola; The True Viola. Tuned as the ordinary viola, played like the 'cello. Powerful sound, clear and expressive. Attractive new instrument, approved by famous artists, etc., etc."

The subject of viola sizes, which included considerable interesting reference to the large "tenor," has been under discussion many times in the past. Some interesting reviews will appear in these columns at a later time.

EDITOR