

The Evolution of the Viola

By Lovis Bailly

THE viola which antedates the violin and in all probability the cello also has been the last of the string instruments to enter into its own domain, but appears now to be at the beginning of a new phase of its existence, both as regards public interest, and appreciation of its peculiar qualities, and a deeper attention and more intensive study on the part of professional musicians.

The first historical evidence of the existence and use of the viola dates from about 1599 where it is found in the scoring of an Italian quartet. This date (1599) is about the date of the perfecting of the best type of viola, and falls within the lifetime of the famous maker, Gasparo di Bertelotti, called Da Salo from the town of his birth near ' Brescia. This extraordinary man, of whom little is known, except that he was born about 1542 and died in Brescia in 1609, is generally admitted to have practically invented the present form of the violin and to have made violas and double basses which have never been surpassed in tone.

One of his violas, a remarkably fine instrument, is in my possession and bears all the ear marks of Gaspero's best workmanship; a very large size; dark brown varnish; evenly grained and carefully selected. wood; long parallel sound holes; somewhat angular in form; simple almost crude shaping and finish with many evidences of hand carving with entirely knife; curves not entirely symmetrical, and last of all the label "Gaspero da Salo, in Brescia" no date (his instruments never bore dates). It is obvious that the viola had been in use in churches and choirs, for approximately 325 years, and that, in all of that time, its evolution has not equalled either in construction, or technic of playing, that of its companions, the violoncello or violin; and this notwithstanding the fact, that a fine though not large literature for this instrument has been in existence since the time of Bach, Handel, and Mozart.

The retardation of the development may attributed in part to the lack of any true normal form of construction for the viola, which has varied in size from an instrument equal in size to the cello to one but little larger than the violin. This lack of standardization has naturally resulted in many instruments, constructed upon dimensions poorly proportioned, affecting the quality of tone very unfavorably and preventing the use of the viola as a solo voice. The same eccentricity of size has also led to difficulties and misconceptions in acquiring a proper technic of playing.

Just here lies one of the chief obstacles to a proper development of the capabilities of the viola. Up to 1881 there was no school which offered any courses in the special technic in the viola playing, and the belief prevailed that anyone who could perform even in a perfunctory manner on the violin could easily pick up the viola and play it to the satisfaction of the public and profession; thus the instrument acquired the unenviable reputation of being ungrateful, and a mere filler in between the cello and violin, and of being at best an accompanying voice only.