

THE ORIGINS OF SOLO CELLO LITERATURE  
AND PERFORMANCE

by

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## Abstract

An investigation into the origins of cello repertory and performance explores territory that is unfamiliar to most musicians. Scholarly research has contributed admirably to our understanding of how the cello began and what factors led to its development, but few sources have brought together what is known about the origins of the instrument and its repertory.

This document is an attempt to address this problem after examining many dissertations, music dictionaries, books, articles, and sound recordings. Whenever practical, musical scores were obtained for examination and subsequent performances of these works occurred at Illinois State University and the University of Kansas.

Once this research was begun, it was clear that the origin of cello literature and performance was concentrated within a specific region of Italy, involving a reasonably small number of musicians. Although many early works for solo cello remain unpublished and only available at libraries in Italy, those that are readily available demonstrate a virtuosity and sophistication that reflects the musical activity that was occurring in Italy at that time.

## The Origins of Solo Cello Literature and Performance

The seventeenth century was a time of transition and formation for the violin family. Whether one looks at the literature, the development of an idiomatic technique, the standardization of instrumental design, the appearance of prominent players, or the establishment of distinct schools of playing, the violin family and its impact on music was entering a new and significant stage of development. For the violin, this evolution was marked by rapid progress and increased prominence as a solo instrument. For the cello, this progress was delayed almost one hundred years. Eventually all members of the violin family were to attain a distinct and eminent legacy, but the cello's evolution into a solo instrument provides a unique chapter in a fascinating history.

Relatively little is known about the violin family before 1600, though it is widely accepted that the violin was established within popular culture such as village fêtes, taverns, in homes, and also at aristocratic court functions such as the French ballet, English masque, and Italian *intermedio*. The ability to produce a strong rhythmic articulation and tone made the violin especially useful for dance music, with violin bands improvising upon familiar melodies.<sup>1</sup> In the sixteenth century, instrumental music separated into two main categories: works modeled on forms derived from vocal works not idiomatic to the instrument (including pre-

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<sup>1</sup> *1+1 Royal Delight, The King's Noyse*, liner notes by David Douglass, Harmonia Mundi 2907370, 2005.

existing vocal music and ensemble music that could be played optionally for voices or instruments) and instrumental works such as dances and instrumental fantasias.<sup>2</sup>

By 1600, the violin became important, not only in the opera orchestra but also in other forms of sacred and secular music. Solo and trio sonatas, intended for any treble instrument, began to appear in the first decade of the seventeenth century and were frequently played on the violin. As the treble instrument, the violin naturally assumed the melodic role in any musical work using stringed instruments and as a result its players made significant technical advances in the first half of the seventeenth century, especially when compared to the bass violin, the latter being the lowest-pitched member of the violin family and considered best suited for the accompaniment. As will be found later in this paper, the term “bass violin” must be used when referring to the early history of the cello, as there lacked a standardized, definitive bass instrument throughout the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth centuries. (See Appendix)

In ensemble music where voices and instruments were combined, it was the violin that not only doubled the vocal melody but often had an *obbligato* part of its own, distinct from the vocal part and idiomatically written for the instrument. In opera this was also true, for in the operas of Monteverdi (who was also a string player) the violins not only double the chorus but are used in this aforementioned role as an *obbligato* instrument (for example, in segments of the aria “Possente spirito” from *Orfeo*) or, as in the case of the *sinfonie* and other instrumental

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<sup>2</sup> David Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 2-3.

interludes, take the position of the primary melodic line (there are many such examples in *Orfeo*).<sup>3</sup>

However, it was the sonata (and its various interchangeable labels) that became the primary genre in which noticeable advancement of the violin family occurred. This technical and musical progress came primarily from Italy or Italians living abroad. This is not to say that other European countries, namely Germany and Austria, did not make an impact (Biber, Schmelzer, and Walther are but a few examples of Austrian and south-German violinist-composers active in the seventeenth century), but especially in the first half of the seventeenth century it was a comparatively limited role. In the eighteenth century England and France made a considerable contribution to the sonata repertory, but in the seventeenth century the literature came in the form of fantasias and dances of William and Henry Lawes, Locke, and others and later in the trio sonatas of Purcell and the trio and quartet *sonades* of Couperin. By contrast, there were thousands of solo and trio sonatas written in Italy during this century.

It was not until well into the second half of the seventeenth century that solo works specifically written for the cello emerged. This phenomenon can be traced to one region of Italy, beginning in a specific decade and written by only a handful of composers. The thriving culture of instrumental music in late seventeenth century Italy had two of its most prestigious and flourishing examples in the Emilian cities of Modena and Bologna in northern Italy. Bologna was the home of the famous

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<sup>3</sup> Boyden, 132-33.

Accademia Filarmonica with its rich tradition of instrumental music while Modena benefited from one of the wealthiest and most musically active courts in Italy, culminating with Duke Francesco II d'Este of the Estense family.

The years 1680 to 1690 in this region of Italy were important ones for the cello, for it was during this decade that solo literature first appeared and when performers on the cello attained a significant amount of fame and recognition. Several milestones in cello literature were reached during these years. The earliest extant composition for solo cello, a collection of twelve unaccompanied *ricercari* by Giovanni Battista Degli Antoni (c1660-1697), was published in 1687 and titled *Ricercate sopra il Violoncello ó Clavicembalo*, Op. 1. Another significant contribution is found in two manuscripts, one of which is dated 1689, of seven unaccompanied *ricercari*, a canon for two cellos, and two continuo sonatas by Domenico Gabrielli. A third important addition to the solo cello repertoire is the publication of four continuo sonatas for cello (the first such sonatas to be published) by Giuseppe Jacchini. Two were published in Bologna in a collection of sonatas in 1695 and two more in Modena in 1697. Although there were other prominent cellists and other works written for the cello during this time,<sup>4</sup> any contemporary scholarly work on the origins of solo cello literature and performance will certainly

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<sup>4</sup> Other early cellists such as Giovanni Battista Vitali, Petronio Franceschini, and Antonio and Giovanni Bononcini will be discussed later in the paper.

list these three composers as being on the forefront of this new development for the cello.<sup>5</sup>

The appearance of these works was not arbitrary, as this development seems to coincide with a number of significant factors that occurred in or around Bologna at about the same time. The most notable is the first true lineage of cellists, cultivated within the intense concentration of excellent string players in that region (Bologna was arguably the most important center of violin playing in Italy from the 1660s).<sup>6</sup> The second factor leading to solo cello playing, which will be addressed later in the paper, was the dramatic improvement of string technology originating in Bologna around 1660 that allowed gut strings to be wound with metal wire, thus enabling shorter and thinner strings that produced a stronger tone and greater facility on the instrument. This almost undoubtedly led to smaller instruments and greater virtuosity on the instruments.<sup>7</sup>

Such localized enthusiasm toward the cello as a solo instrument provides the unique opportunity for a detailed account of the origins of solo cello repertory while also permitting a comprehensive summary of this literature. It is the intent of this paper to offer a historical perspective on the emergence of solo cello literature in the Emilian region of Italy by exploring the reasons behind this sudden interest in the

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<sup>5</sup> Although Antoni was not a cellist, he is significant for writing the first known work for solo cello. Gabrielli and Jacchini were famous Bolognese cellists as well as prominent composers and were the first to write sonatas for their instrument.

<sup>6</sup> Elvidio Surian and Graziano Ballerini, "Bologna: Religious Institutions", *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 9 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>7</sup> Paul Laird, *The Baroque Cello Revival* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 3.

cello as a melodic instrument and defining what elements contributed to and encouraged this development. This investigation will be limited to the Emilian region in the final two decades of the seventeenth century and will be accomplished by surveying the earliest solo works for cello, examining a few of these pieces in detail, identifying the major player-composers and defining their significance, looking at some of the precedents that led to solo works, and exploring the musical environment that encouraged this development.

Any examination of the origins of cello playing and its literature would be incomplete without a consideration of the factors that led to the instrument's development. Once entered, however, the path to trace the lineage of the cello is immediately unclear and filled with uncertainty. In spite of substantial research, the immediate ancestry of the cello is extremely difficult to verify or even substantiate at this point in time.<sup>8</sup> (See Appendix)

At the heart of the matter is the issue of terminology. Throughout seventeenth-century Europe, terms used by musicians for instruments were not at all standardized and certainly not consistent, even within individual countries.<sup>9</sup> In Italy, this is particularly true. Modern scholarship has attempted to clarify this confusion, but there remains considerable debate and disagreement over what type of bass instruments were played prior to the mid-seventeenth century and what terms were used to refer to them. Archival records from the seventeenth century

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<sup>8</sup> Laird, 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Allsop, "Ensemble Music: In the Chamber and the Orchestra," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello*, ed. Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 160-62.



such as bookkeeping documents of churches, printed music, and theoretical treatises refer to a “bass violin” using a wide variety of terms.<sup>10</sup> As Stephen Bonta aptly points out, printed music alone demonstrates this broad array of references to a bass violin. *Bassetto, bassetto di viola, basso da braccio, basso di viola, violetta, violone, violone da braccio*, and, in the second half of the seventeenth century, *violoncino* and *violoncello* are just some of the twenty-four names that Bonta cites as common references to the bass violin.<sup>11</sup>

Not only did the bass violin have ambiguous nomenclature, it was made in a wide range of sizes. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, bass violins were built as small as 71 cm in length to at least 80 cm. When Andrea Amati and his family began making bass violins in the 1560s, they built instruments that were quite large. A famous example that has survived to the present-day is the “King” Amati, built sometime in the latter half of the sixteenth century. At about the same time, however, smaller bass violins were made in Brescia that measured only about 71 cm in length.<sup>12</sup> In the late seventeenth century, Stradivari was making large bass violins with a body length of about 79 cm, such as the “Medici” and “Servais.”<sup>13</sup> By today’s standards, these examples are extreme, the 1707 Stradivari “Forma B” model of 75 cm representing a more common measurement. The difference between

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Bonta, “Terminology for the Bass Violin in Seventeenth-Century Italy,” *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 4 (1978): 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Bonta, “Terminology,” 6.

<sup>12</sup> Laird, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Laird, 7.

an instrument that measures 71 cm and one that measures 80 cm is significant, as

John Dilworth points out in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello*:

These two sizes [71 cm and 80 cm] seem to have persisted as alternatives well into the eighteenth century, and they have provoked some discussion amongst modern scholars as to whether they were one and the same instrument or, rather, two variants designed for different usages and tunings.

This view is supported in the treatises of Johann Joachim Quantz (1752) and Leopold Mozart (1756), both describing two sizes of cellos, a small version for solo playing and a larger one for orchestral playing.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the confusion for modern-day scholarship is considerable. The names given to a bass violin could be generic, referring to a number of different instruments, each a different size, with varied tunings, and even from distinct families. Or the same instrument could have had several different names, reflecting the disparity in regional dialects within Italy. Stephen Bonta summarizes this disparity of terminology and instrumental design when he states:

The use of so many terms for the bass violin suggests that there existed a variety of instruments of differing sizes, reflecting a period of time when there was continual experimentation...<sup>15</sup>

What is indisputable is that bass instruments from various families served primarily as members of the basso continuo throughout the seventeenth century. There is a minority of scholars, though, who believe it was also common practice for musicians, from the very earliest time, to take melodic parts from the violin literature and play them on the bass violin. Nona Pyron, in an appendix of William

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<sup>14</sup> Laird, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Bonta, "Terminology," 6.

Pleeth's book *Cello*, contends this was actually quite common in the seventeenth century:

One of the mysteries of music history is that when idiomatic virtuoso writing for the violin began to develop in the early decades of the seventeenth century... there was no rise of an equivalent repertoire for the cello. Historians from the late eighteenth century onward have taken this to mean that cello playing was in a more primitive state of development at this time than was violin or viola da gamba playing... and reasoned that it could have coped with nothing more taxing than the basso continuo line...<sup>16</sup>

Pyron proposes this alternative interpretation, based on the assumption that idiomatic distinctions were not as firm as they are today:

Cellists, considering themselves to be 'violinists' (albeit 'bass violinists'), quite naturally adopted the violin repertoire as their own (transposing it down an octave), making no more distinction between the various voices within the family of violins than do singers today with their solo repertoire.<sup>17</sup>

The prevailing sentiment among contemporary scholars, however, is summarized by Robin Stowell in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello*:

The cello was emancipated from its purely bass role towards the end of the seventeenth century when works for solo cello and for cello and continuo were composed by musicians in the basilica of San Petronio in Bologna.<sup>18</sup>

When solo works were written for bass instruments, the composer often did not designate a specific instrument, especially in the first half of the century. The bass violin was slow to achieve success as a solo instrument, probably due to its cumbersome quality (initially, bass violins were usually larger to produce a decent sound on the gut strings, and thus were somewhat awkward to play), and during the

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<sup>16</sup> Nona Pyron, "An Introduction to the History of the Cello," in *Cello*, by William Pleeth, (London: MacDonald and Co., 1982), 231.

<sup>17</sup> Pyron, 232.

<sup>18</sup> Robin Stowell, "The Sonata," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 116.

seventeenth century had little solo music written for them.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, this gradual and often erratic early history was marked by continual experimentation with size and form well into the eighteenth century, several generations after Stradivari produced his now-standard “Forma B” cello in 1707.

Advancement in string technology in Italy during the 1660s has been correctly identified as an important contributing factor in the bass violin’s rapid increase in prominence, especially with regard to solo literature.<sup>20</sup> Up until this time, strings were made solely from sheep intestines, wound together in varying widths of diameter to produce what today are commonly called “gut strings.” On the violin, these strings were thin and responsive to the bow, but lower-pitched instruments had to be equipped with much thicker strings. The deeper the pitch, the more massive a string must be. This mass can come from length, thickness, or a combination of the two.

Since common attributes of thick strings were out-of-tune harmonics, poor sound quality, and low volume, an early solution to providing the correct mass to a low-pitched string was the size of the instrument. The larger the instrument, the longer the string length can be, which allows for a thinner string that has a suitable tension. If the bass instrument is too small, the string must be very thick in order to produce low pitches and the string will have an unsuitably low tension, thus making it difficult to play. This is a crucial aspect of bass instruments since most performing

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<sup>19</sup> Laird, 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Bonta, “From Violone to Violoncello: A Question of Strings?” *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 3 (1977), 88.

occurred within large settings such as churches where projection and resonance were vital within the ensemble.<sup>21</sup> For these reasons, luthiers produced instruments that were as large as possible without exceeding the reach of the fingers in first position.

In the 1660s, the development of wire-wound strings dramatically altered this situation. Gut strings wound with metal increased the mass without adding a lot of thickness, making it possible for them to be thinner and shorter.<sup>22</sup> Small bass violin instruments now had projection in the lower register, and the player had more facility with less space between intervals and increased response of string to the bow. Large bass instruments did not disappear, but now there was a bass instrument that could handle more demanding and virtuosic literature.

The earliest printed music to use the term *violoncello* appeared in 1665 in a work by Guilio Cesare Arresti. This *Sonate*, op. 4 calls for a violoncello in the basso continuo part. Within a few years, other composers such as Gioseffo Maria Placuzzi, Maurizio Cazzati, and Giacomo Antonio Perti made frequent references to a *violoncello*.<sup>23</sup> Soon partbooks with separate parts for the *violoncello* and the *violone* appeared, giving the impression that the *violone* and the *violoncello* were

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<sup>21</sup> Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, (Paris, 1636), trans. Roger E. Chapman. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1951), 187-88.

<sup>22</sup> Laird, 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Bonta, "Violoncello: Origins and History to c1700, Repertory", *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 12 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

distinctly separate instruments.<sup>24</sup> What is significant in all of these references to composers and their use of the term *violoncello* is that each had an important association with the northern Italian city of Bologna, either in the Basilica of San Petronio or the Accademia Filarmonica, or both.

Although northern Italy always had a rich and thriving musical tradition, the image we have of Emilian music in the seventeenth century is one that decidedly favors instrumental music, specifically strings and trumpet.<sup>25</sup> This region contributed greatly to many of the major trends and characteristics of Baroque music. Foremost of these was the shift from instrumental music as a supplemental extension of social functions (accompaniment to dance or theater, for instance) to an emphasis on instrumental music as a professional activity within a distinct genre of music. As a major center of vocal and instrumental music, the Emilian region was filled with many qualified musicians, skilled career professionals who earned their livelihood with their art. Secondly, the region's remarkable churches and cathedrals encouraged continuance of the Baroque ideal of concerto style, especially involving strings and trumpet. Also, compositions from this region overwhelmingly emphasize the basso continuo instrumental group juxtaposed with a predominant top line, another central characteristic of the Baroque. As a final point, the region's contribution to the evolution of the sonata, so essential to Emilian instrumental music, is underscored in the following perspective:

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<sup>24</sup> Marc Vanscheeuwijck, "The Baroque Cello and Its Performance," *Performance Practice Review* 9, no. 1 (1996): 86.

<sup>25</sup> Surian and Ballerini, "Bologna: Religious Institutions."

That Bologna was the foremost center of the sonata in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century can be credited largely to the musical chapel of San Petronio, with its small but efficient orchestra, to the Accademia dei Filarmonici (founded in 1666), and to two among several publishers, Monti and Silvani.<sup>26</sup>

Musical life in Bologna must have resembled the musical atmosphere in many large cities of today, with excellent freelance and contract musicians competing for recognition and success in a sophisticated and prestigious musical environment. The church of San Petronio and the Accademia Filarmonica were the two most famous institutions for music, although other organizations such as the *Concerto Palatino della Signoria* (which performed for official university, civic, and religious functions) offered additional employment opportunities for the Bolognese musician.<sup>27</sup>

The *Cappella musicale*, principal performing group within the magnificent church of San Petronio, had a successful existence dating back to the early fifteenth century, often including generations of musicians within individual families.<sup>28</sup> By the late sixteenth century, instrumentalists there had salaried positions. Thanks to Maurizio Cazzati, the *maestro di cappella* at San Petronio from 1657 to 1671, these wages were quite high and attracted many fine musicians.<sup>29</sup> The power and

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<sup>26</sup> William S. Newman, *The Sonata in the Baroque Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 133.

<sup>27</sup> Elvidio Surian and Graziano Ballerini, "Bologna: General history to 1500", *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 12 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Richard Barnett, *Musical Issues of the Late Seicento: Style, Social Function, and Theory in Emilian Instrumental Music* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1997), 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> Anne Schnoebelen, "Cazzati, Maurizio: Life", *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 3 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

influence of the local nobility was also significant in the success and governing of musical institutions, including appointments to musical posts within church institutions.<sup>30</sup> Concern for enduring and steady employment was a primary reason for so many dedications in printed music to local politicians and nobility, as opposed to high-ranking papal legates.<sup>31</sup>

The Accademia Filarmonica, the other remarkable musical institution in Bologna, was founded in 1666 by a Bolognese nobleman, Count Vincenzo Maria Carrati, and had the support and encouragement from other local aristocracy.<sup>32</sup> This academy went beyond the usual concept of an *accademia* as an informal gathering of literary intellectuals or amateurs. Instead, this institution was controlled by professional musicians who had a vested interest in cultivating and expanding the musical environment. It was a guild and conservatory combined within one institution. Members met weekly (or more) to hear each other's works or to discuss composition. These were known as the *esercizi* for composers and the *conferenze* for performers.<sup>33</sup> The Accademia was highly structured, with rules that addressed acceptance into the academy, dismissal, promotion, and conduct. It consisted of three orders (composers, singers, and instrumentalists) and granted prestigious and influential titled positions to its most celebrated musicians.<sup>34</sup> The Accademia and

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<sup>30</sup> Barnett, 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> Barnett, 13-22.

<sup>32</sup> Newman, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Barnett, 22-25.

<sup>34</sup> Elvidio Surian and Graziano Ballerini, "Bologna: The Academies and Conservatory", *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 12 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>



San Petronio were both tightly controlled and monitored by the Bolognese Senate, a collection of local noblemen that held great power and influence over the arts.

In Modena, a city approximately twenty-five miles from Bologna, the influence of local nobility was even more pronounced because it had a single, centralized court: the “Serenissimo di Modena” of the Estense Dukes. Like Bologna, Modena had a formidable musical tradition, with a lively and professional atmosphere that played a central role in the development of Emilian instrumental music. It too had a cathedral that employed musicians in its *Cappella musicale* (often hiring as its director some of the well-known Bolognese composers as well).<sup>35</sup> However, the difference lay in the secular realm, for the musical environment at the Estense court at Modena was quite unlike that of the Accademia Filarmonica. The Duke of Modena had influence over all musical activities, including the *Cappella musicale* of the cathedral and the *strumentisti* at his own court.<sup>36</sup> Erich Schenk summarizes this disparity, stating:

At Bologna music was a function of the church, at Modena, of the court. At Bologna instrumental music was developed in the traditional pathways of the national art; at Modena on the contrary it absorbed various foreign elements. We owe the assiduous cultivation of instrumental music [in Modena] to the direct influence that the princes exerted upon it for two generations. And the fact that it lasted for only two generations is due to the same cause.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Elvidio Surian and Alessandra Chiarelli, “Modena”, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 23 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>36</sup> Barnett, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Erich Schenk, “Osservazioni sulla scuola istrumentale modenese nel Seicento,” *Atti e Memorie*, Series V, Vol. X (Modena: Accademia di scienze lettere e arte di Modena, 1952), as quoted and translated by Gordon Kinney, 149.

One example of this contrast is found in the collections of instrumental music from each city. The Biblioteca del Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale “G.B. Martini” in Bologna (the RISM sigla is *I-Bc*) is made up almost entirely of printed music, reflecting the success and sophistication of the Bolognese printing presses. Bolognese composers were often focused on commercial enterprise, writing mainly for the music public at large (which represented a wide range of ability, from amateur to the professional). As a result, this music tended to be accessible and non-virtuosic, with ensemble sonatas dominating this collection.<sup>38</sup> The Biblioteca Estense in Modena (*I-Moe*), however, contains mostly manuscripts, written by accomplished musicians for the entertainment of ducal court. These works tend to be more virtuosic with an emphasis on the solo sonata, both accompanied and unaccompanied.<sup>39</sup> This virtuosity, combined with the fact that the compositions were composed by the most accomplished performers of the time, gives the impression that these manuscripts were written by player-composers for their own use and, as a result, were unpublished. Consequently, these manuscripts, unlike most of the printed music, tend to show more accurately the cutting edge of performance and level of string technique during this period.

The earliest generation of cellists that had a significant association with Bologna or Modena consisted of Giovanni Battista Vitali (1632-1692), Domenico Galli (1649-1697), Petronio Franceschini (c1650-1680), Domenico Gabrielli (c1659-1690), Giuseppe Maria Jacchini (c1663-1727), Attilio Ariosti (1666-1729),

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<sup>38</sup> Barnett, 112-14.

<sup>39</sup> Barnett, 113.

Antonio (1677-1726) and Giovanni (1670-1747) Bononcini, Evaristo Felice Dall'Abaco (1675-1742), Pietro Paolo Laurenti (1675-1719), and Angelo Maria Fiorè (c1660-1723). Others, such as Angelo Bovi, Domenico Maria Marcheselli, and Benedetto Zavattoni, are minor figures about whom little is known.<sup>40</sup> Some, such as Antonio Tonelli (1686-1765), had only a peripheral association with these cities, and others, such as Clemente Monari (c1660-c1728), were known as performers on the *violone*.<sup>41</sup> Additions to this list could include many violinists, such as Giuseppe Torelli (1658-1709), who were competent on all instruments of the violin family, an almost expected trait of that period.<sup>42</sup>

Of those cellists listed above, some played a more significant role in the early development of the cello. Vitali, as a cellist-composer, was a founding member of the Accademia Filarmonica. Franceschini was the first paid cellist at San Petronio, one of the first members of the Accademia Filarmonica, and teacher of Domenico Gabrielli.<sup>43</sup> Antonio and Giovanni Bononcini (brothers) were composers and cellists associated with San Petronio in the early part of their respective careers, known for their concert performances and elaborate writing for the cello (not only in solo sonatas, but also as an *obbligato* instrument in their operatic arias).<sup>44</sup>

Incidentally, it was Giovanni Bononcini who was incorrectly referred to as the

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<sup>40</sup> Cowling, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Cowling, 65.

<sup>42</sup> Barnett, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Walker and Marc Vanscheeuwijck, "Franceschini, Pietro" *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 14 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>44</sup> Lowell E. Lindgren, foreword to Antonio Bononcini, *Complete Sonatas for Violoncello and Continuo* (Madison, Wi.: A-R Editions, Inc., 1996), ix.

“inventor” of the cello in Michel Corrette’s *Méthode théorique et pratique pour apprendre en peu de tems le violoncelle dans sa perfection* (1741). Corrette later praises Giovanni as one of the “skilled masters of Europe.”<sup>45</sup> Jacchini and Gabrielli are perhaps the most significant of this list, not only for their fame as performers, but especially because of their innovative and imaginative contribution to the literature for solo cello.

The first printed music for solo cello of which we can be certain is Giovanni Degli Antoni’s *Ricercate* Op. 1 (1687), a collection of twelve unaccompanied *ricercari*. Although these works will be discussed in more detail below, it is significant to note that this publication was unique in its time, for it is the only printed collection of the period to be devoted exclusively to works for solo cello.<sup>46</sup> A manuscript collection of cello works by Domenico Gabrielli followed soon thereafter and dates from 1689. It contains seven *ricercari*, a canonic cello duet, and three continuo sonatas for solo cello, of which one is a revised version of another. Although Gabrielli never published any works for cello solo, this manuscript collection contains the earliest examples of cello sonatas. Domenico Galli added to the inventory of unaccompanied cello pieces with his *Trattenimento musicale sopra il violoncello à solo* (Modena, 1691), a collection of twelve unaccompanied sonatas written in the style and manner of studies. They were probably inspired by

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Douglas Graves, “The Theoretical and Practical Method for Cello by Michel Corrette” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1971), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory Barnett, review of *Antonio Bononcini: Complete Sonatas for Violoncello and Basso Continuo*, edited by Lowell E. Lindgren, *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music* 5:1 (1995) <<http://www.sscm-jscm.press.uiuc.edu/jscm/v5/no1/Barnett.html>>, par. 2.

Gabrielli's *ricercari*, as the two cellists worked together at the Estense court in Modena.<sup>47</sup>

Giuseppe Jacchini's *Sonate à Violino é Violoncello, et à Violoncello solo per camera* Op. 1, a collection of six duets for violin and cello and two cello continuo sonatas, was printed in Bologna by the famous engraver Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti in 1695. Two years later, Jacchini published his *Concerti per camera* Op. 3 in Modena that included two additional cello sonatas. These two publications represent the first cello continuo sonatas to appear in print.<sup>48</sup> Other printed collections with cello sonatas emerged within a few years of Jacchini's output. Luigi Taglietti's *Suonate da camera* Op. 1 (Bologna: Silvani, 1697) has eight "Capriccios" for cello and basso continuo and Angelo Maria Fiore's *Trattenimenti da camera* (Lucca, 1698) includes three sonatas for cello and basso continuo, a "Minuet, à Violoncello solo", a "Canone all 'Unisono à due Violoncelli" and an Allegro for two cellos, also in canon.<sup>49</sup> Giacomo Cattaneo's *Trattenimenti armonici da camera* Op. 1 (Modena: Rosati, 1700) includes one cello sonata.<sup>50</sup> There are earlier works for *violone*, such as Vitali's *Partite* and Colombi's *Toccata à Violone Solo*, that anticipate these compositions for cello by at least ten years. They are quite idiomatic for the cello

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<sup>47</sup> Robin Stowell, "Other Solo Repertory" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 137.

<sup>48</sup> Stowell, "The Sonata", 116-17.

<sup>49</sup> Stowell, "The Sonata", 117.

<sup>50</sup> Barnett, *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music* 5:1, par. 4.

and, based on the discussion found in the Appendix on the uncertain history of the *violone*, could have been intended for an instrument very similar to a cello.<sup>51</sup>

In a recent edition of Antonio Bononcini's complete sonatas for cello and basso continuo, Lowell Lindgren proposes a convincing theory that this cellist-composer wrote these sonatas around 1693, while only sixteen years old.<sup>52</sup> If true, these twelve highly virtuosic cello sonatas, demonstrating technical advances not seen in any other cello writing from the seventeenth century (and longer than any other comparable piece for cello), significantly alters our perception of seventeenth-century cello repertory.

Florid, melodic writing for cello had already been common prior to the appearance of solo works. From about 1665, the cello at times assumed a role that was significantly more independent from the basso continuo; operatic arias, ensemble sonatas, and trumpet sonatas all began to feature a bass line that was distinctly separate from the basso continuo.

In opera, this was commonly referred to as a "basso solo obbligato" (as Benedetto Marcello described it in *Il teatro alla moda* [1723]), or otherwise known as the "basso obbligato aria," and predated the conventional treble obbligato.<sup>53</sup> In this role, the obbligato cello line shares in the presentation of melodic material. This could be accomplished in a ritornello-like form, wherein the cello provides an introduction, melodic interludes, and perhaps the final melodic statement (while

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<sup>51</sup> Cowling, 78-79.

<sup>52</sup> Lindgren, viii.

<sup>53</sup> Borgir, 39.

taking a subservient role during the vocal sections) or by treating the cello and voice as equal partners throughout the aria (in imitative counterpoint) or by giving the cello an *ostinato* bass line, which could be quite elaborate. Examples from the literature include arias from Alessandro Stradella's oratorio *San Giovanni Battista* (1675),<sup>54</sup> Domenico Gabrielli's operas *Flavio Cuniberto* (1682) and *Muarizio* (1686),<sup>55</sup> and Francesco Ballerotti's opera *Ottavio in Sicilia* (1692).<sup>56</sup> The basso obbligato aria appeared soon after in the solo cantata as well. Outstanding examples may be found in the cantatas of Antonio Bononcini.<sup>57</sup>

Jacchini and Gabrielli, both prolific writers for the trumpet, incorporated in many of their trumpet sonatas a very active and at times virtuosic cello line, creating in effect a trio sonata that featured the trumpet and cello as the two principal melodic lines (or, in the case of two-trumpet sonatas, three melodic lines).<sup>58</sup> Independent cello lines also occurred in ensemble sonatas, the cello often assuming a *concertante* role (with the designations "violoncello obbligato" or "violoncello ad lib." or simply "violoncello"). Early examples of this ornate writing occur in Giulio Cesare Arrestì's *Sonate à 2, 3, vc ad lib, bc*, op. 4 (1665), two collections of Giovanni Bononcini, the *Sinfonie à 5, 6, 7, e 8 Istromenti* (I-Bc X 124: 1685) and

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<sup>54</sup> Borgir, 40-41.

<sup>55</sup> Cowling, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Steven Packer, "Emergence of the Cello as a Solo Instrument in Late Seventeenth-Century Bologna" (M.M thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1978), 72-73.

<sup>57</sup> Lindgren, viii.

<sup>58</sup> Anne Schnoebelen, "Jacchini, Giuseppe Maria" *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 22 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

the *Sinfonie da Chiesa à 4...con Violoncello Obbligato* (I-Bc. X 126: 1687),<sup>59</sup> and throughout Giuseppe Torelli's *Sinfonie à 2, 3, e 4 Istromenti*, Op. 3 (1687). It is significant to note that in the last example, Torelli even designates "Vcl. non obl." when the cello part duplicates the basso continuo line, underscoring the frequent occurrence of independent cello parts. Writing for obbligato cello continued to appear well into the 1690s, particularly in many of Jacchini's published ensemble sonatas.<sup>60</sup> It is not a coincidence that many of these composers, such as the Bononcini brothers, Jacchini, and Gabrielli, were concertizing cellists as well and it must be assumed that these parts were written for their own performances.

#### The *Ricercari* of Antoni and Gabrielli

The works that will be examined in more detail, the unaccompanied *ricercari* of Antoni and Gabrielli, are the first extant solo pieces written for cello. As there are no treatises from the seventeenth century that describe cello technique or even give a general view of the instrument, these *ricercari* provide valuable insight into the highly imaginative and often virtuosic writing that appeared for solo cello in the late seventeenth century.

The term *ricercare* has many meanings. The most common use of this term in the seventeenth century applied to an instrumental work of fugal texture (the imitative *ricercare*), although originally it applied to a monodic prelude for lute or

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<sup>59</sup> Packer, 14-15.

<sup>60</sup> Schnoebelen, "Jacchini, Giuseppe Maria."



keyboard instrument.<sup>61</sup> Another type of *ricercare*, that which is free and non-imitative, was typically through-composed and rhapsodic in character, sometimes with purely didactic connotations. Examples of this latter type are found in instructional books demonstrating, for instance, the technique of setting a cantus firmus for lute players.<sup>62</sup> Most of the *ricercari* of Antoni and Gabrielli are the free, non-imitative type, not unusual for an essentially monophonic instrument.

There are only two modern publications of Giovanni Battista Degli Antoni's *Ricercate*, Op. 1. One was published in 1976 by G. Zanibon and edited by Lauro Malusi. It is not an authentic version of the original print, containing liberal editorial markings such as slurs and dynamics while providing no clarification or explanation as to what is original and what is edited. Inherent discrepancies commonly found in original seventeenth-century editions, such as the use of accidentals, are thus unreliably treated in this source. A more recent publication is a reprint of the original 1687 edition.<sup>63</sup>

The information available on Antoni's *ricercari* is difficult to reconcile. It appears that these *ricercari* survive in two distinct settings. One is a printed version from 1687, published as unaccompanied cello music and titled *Ricercate sopra il Violoncello ò Clavicembalo*. However, this publication is an exact replica of the *basso* part-book from a manuscript of *Ricercate* for violin and *basso* that is in the

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<sup>61</sup> John Caldwell, "Ricerca: Introduction," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 November 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>62</sup> Gordon James Kinney, *The Musical Literature for Unaccompanied Violoncello* (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 1962), 201.

<sup>63</sup> Giovanni Battista Degli Antonii, *Ricercate sopra il Violoncello ò Clavicembalo, Opera Prima* (Wyton: King's Music, 1999).

Estense collection in Modena.<sup>64</sup> In this manuscript the violin assumes the principal line while the cello part alternates from a melodic role to one that is more accompanimental. These two versions prevent the modern scholar from providing an accurate historical account. Since the manuscript of duos is undated, it is not clear if the violin part was added after the printing of the solo cello version or if the *basso* part was printed as an alternate version. The solo *ricercari* are successful on their own, demonstrating a bravura-style writing for the cello and compositional craftsmanship. In examining the duo manuscript, however, the title pages of the violin and *basso* part-books confirm that the violin is the principal voice, for the violin part reads *Ricercate per il Violino* and the cello part reads *Basso delle Ricercate per il Violino*.

There are two plausible solutions for the perplexing circumstances surrounding this work. One, that Antoni originally wrote these pieces as unaccompanied duos for violin and *basso*, a frequent combination for that period (Giuseppe Torelli, Bartolomeo Laurenti, and Tomaso Pegolotti all wrote violin/cello duos), and then later printed the *basso* part as an instructional work. Another possibility is that Antoni originally wrote these *ricercari* for solo cello and added a violin part at a later date, perhaps for Duke Francesco II, a violinist and recipient of the dedication in the published version.<sup>65</sup>

Another source of confusion arises in the published version with the presence of figured bass symbols in *Ricercari I, II, VI, VII, IX, and X*. We can look

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<sup>64</sup> Barnett, *Musical Issues of the Late Seicento*, 134.

<sup>65</sup> Barnett, 135.

to the title for assistance, for it suggests an option to perform these on the harpsichord (*sopra il Violoncello ò Clavicembalo*). The words “ò Clavicembalo” are in smaller print than the rest of the title, implying perhaps that this was the less-preferred option. Nevertheless, confusion remains as to the intent of these compositions. It might be that these solo cello works were also meant to be played on the harpsichord, taking the place of the cello, and that the figures are provided to aid in the realization. This is all the more possible since Antoni was not a cellist but a keyboard player and it would be very natural for him to play these *ricercari* on one of his primary instruments, the harpsichord, although it is unusual that only music for the left hand is provided. A second possibility is that Antoni intended for the solo cello line to be accompanied by a harpsichord realization, the figures being provided to aid in an *ad libitum* accompaniment. It is also possible that the figures are meant for the cellist to improvise upon. A fourth possibility is that these works were originally intended as accompanied violin *ricercari* and the printed version is an instructional publication that provided practice material for the continuo ensemble. This would correspond with one of the meanings of the term “ricercare,” a work for didactic purposes.

This last possibility might hold the most potential, for in his dedication, Antoni referred to these *ricercari* as “harmonic studies,” implying perhaps that these pieces were instructional works. Without the violin part, what remains are examples of typical basso continuo parts that a cellist would encounter and standard bass lines, figured and unfigured, that a harpsichordist might be required to realize.

However, this view is not conclusive, for it was the unaccompanied version that was dedicated to nobility and published, not the duo version.<sup>66</sup>

Although playable on a normal four-stringed cello, these *ricercari* present many specific challenges that make it seem an unlikely choice. The range (often as high as  $a^1$  or even  $c^2$ ), the relative awkwardness of many passages, the situations that clearly necessitate another timbre of string to bring out a contrapuntal texture, and those passages beyond the scope of typical seventeenth century string writing seemingly demonstrate that these works were intended for an instrument with more than four strings. Gordon Kinney provides a convincing argument for a six-stringed cello tuned like a viol, either  $C-G-c-e-a-d'$  or  $D-G-c-e-a-d'$  depending on the key of the *ricercare*.<sup>67</sup> Such an instrument would be successful in meeting the challenges listed above, although it is virtually impossible to prove his theory. With this proposed tuning, these pieces would become much more idiomatic to the instrument, the majority of notes being in the lower positions where there is more sonority and more facility.

Antoni's arrangement of the twelve *ricercari* is curious. They alternate between those with perpetual-motion eighth notes (the odd-numbered *ricercari*) and those that are sectional (the even-numbered *ricercari*). Those that are sectional tend to be longer and each new section is marked with a change in time signature, resembling separate movements. The first half of the twelve *ricercari* is arranged in

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<sup>66</sup> Kinney, 200.

<sup>67</sup> Kinney, 196.

pairs that share the same key but are contrasting in form. Numbers I and II are in D minor, III and IV are in F major, and V and VI are in A minor.

Those *ricercari* that exhibit constant eighth notes use imitative techniques similar to those found in polyphonic writing. For instance, *Ricercare IX* begins as a fugue would, with a direct and forthright statement in C major (meas. 1-4) answered by another voice in the dominant (meas. 4-8):



Example 1: Antoni, *Ricercare IX*, meas. 1-8

Throughout this *ricercare*, a two-voice, imitative dialogue in *style brisé* dominates the texture, as in the following example:



Example 2: Antoni, *Ricercare IX*, meas. 68-71

This example is one of many that are similar to passages in the J.S. Bach *Suites for Solo Cello*, such as the following example:



Example 3: Gigue from J.S. Bach, *Suite in C Major*, meas. 8-21

Both composers show a preference for providing an essentially single-line, monophonic instrument with compound melodies. These melodic lines represent two or more implied voices that create a multilinear, polyphonic texture.

Sequences in *Ricercare IX* are pervasive, as seen in this passage:



Example 4: Antoni, *Ricercare IX*, meas. 35-43

Implied counterpoint and use of sequential passages are often combined, as the opening of *Ricercare XI* demonstrates:



Example 5: Antoni, *Ricercare XI*, meas. 1-5

The *ricercari* that are sectional all exhibit the use of a recurring theme. These ritornellos occur within the framework of a single movement but each time they appear they are a free variant of the original. *Ricercare II* demonstrates this

well. The original theme (meas. 1-3) is subjected to a continual evolution throughout the *ricercare*, sometimes ornamented (meas. 3-6) and sometimes as an inverted variation (meas. 10-12):

Example 6: Antoni, *Ricercare II*, meas. 1-12

Later, the theme appears in augmentation:

Example 7: Antoni, *Ricercare II*, meas. 97-102

At the beginning of a new section, the theme is reworked within a compound meter:

Example 8: Antoni, *Ricercare II*, meas. 74-75

Domenico Gabrielli's *ricercari* for unaccompanied cello have had a more substantial publishing history than those by Antoni. Although never printed in Gabrielli's lifetime, several modern editions of these works exist. Arnold Schering printed the seventh *ricercare* in *Geschichte der Musik in Beispielen* (1931).<sup>68</sup> Leeds Music and MCA Music both published the *ricercari* in 1965, followed by Schott Music (1975)<sup>69</sup> and a collected works edition by Bärenreiter (2001).<sup>70</sup>

A challenge for any editor of these works is that, because they originate from a manuscript source, scribal errors are certain to be encountered. In the case of accidentals, Bettina Hoffmann, in the Bärenreiter edition (2001), seems to cross the line a bit when she justifies the addition of accidentals for the following reasons: "...to add necessary chromatic alterations, to correct obvious scribal slips and oversights, and to clarify ambiguous passages in accordance with modern expectations [emphasis added]."<sup>71</sup> Dieter Staehelin, editor of the 1975 Schott edition, has an equally assertive approach to editing these *ricercari*. In the Preface, Staehelin claims that "a few passages in the movements would seem to demand the

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<sup>68</sup> Arnold Schering, *Geschichte der Musik in Beispielen* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1931), p. 302.

<sup>69</sup> Domenico Gabrielli, *Sieben Ricercari: Violoncello Solo*, ed. Dieter Staehelin (New York: Schott Music Corp., 1975).

<sup>70</sup> Domenico Gabrielli, *Sämtliche Werke für Violoncello*, ed. Bettina Hoffmann (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> Bettina Hoffmann, foreword to Domenico Gabrielli, *Sämtliche Werke für Violoncello* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2001), ix.



addition of arpeggiated chords, figurations, or other types of embellishment.”<sup>72</sup>

Thankfully, these are included in an appendix, not in the music itself.

There are two separate manuscripts of Gabrielli’s cello works, both preserved in the Estense library in Modena. The earlier version (labeled G. 79) contains seven *ricercari*, a canon for two cellos, and one continuo sonata. In the sonata, the first three movements are titled “ricercare.”<sup>73</sup> This manuscript is indiscriminate in its organization, leading some scholars to speculate that it was intended for Gabrielli’s private use, perhaps to circulate among his students.<sup>74</sup> A later manuscript (labeled F. 416) is much more orderly and written with precision. It is in two volumes and contains two continuo sonatas for cello, the first merely a reworking of the one found in the G. 79 manuscript and the second a new sonata in A major.

It would be interesting to know how Gabrielli viewed his collection of *ricercari*. In the G. 79 manuscript, the first *ricercare* is originally labeled “Lezioni,” a word that is later marked over with the title “Ricerca Primo.” This may imply that these pieces were originally meant for instructional purposes and later evolved into works for performance.<sup>75</sup> However, this is speculative and, considering the fact that they were never printed, it may also be possible that these pieces were written for

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<sup>72</sup> Dieter Staehelin, foreword to Domenico Gabrielli, *Sieben Ricercari: Violoncello Solo* (New York: Schott Music Corp., 1975), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Barnett, *Musical Issues of the Late Seicento*, 132.

<sup>74</sup> Hoffmann, viii.

<sup>75</sup> Kinney, 232-33.



instance, third position on the D string is no longer necessary (since the notes can be played instead on the top G string) and second position is minimized. This is significant for a bass instrument with gut strings, for playing in the upper positions tends to produce a muddy, inarticulate sound on lower-pitched strings. One example of how a *C-G-d-g* tuning is advantageous occurs in *Ricercare IV* where the recurrent *a-flats* can be played on the top string, whereas with a *C-G-d-a* tuning (that which is customary today) the cellist must play those notes in fourth position on the D string.

In regard to character, form, and style, each of the seven *ricercare* is quite distinct from one another. Kinney provides an insightful view to analyzing Gabrielli's style when he says,

Because of the very spontaneity of this music, in which new ideas are continually spun, with effortless ease, out of the previous ones in endless profusion, it poses difficulties to the analyst; for here material and structure are so amalgamated as to resemble organic growth rather than construction.<sup>78</sup>

The first *ricercare* resembles closely a *basso continuo* line with ascending and descending sequences to create a somewhat wandering, leisurely character. The pulse occasionally shifts into a hemiola but the overall effect of this short *ricercare* is rather peaceful and unassuming. *Ricercare II*, however, is by far the longest of the seven and one that Kinney describes as a "patchwork canzona" that foreshadows the four-movement Baroque sonata.<sup>79</sup> Similar to some of the Antoni *ricercari*, each section is marked by a sudden and decisive change of meter, such as 4/4 time changing to 3/2 (which gives the new meter a strident, almost raucous quality) or

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<sup>78</sup> Kinney, 235.

<sup>79</sup> Kinney, 236.

4/4 turning into 12/8 (which creates a rapid, virtuosic effect). Each section bears little resemblance to one another, as in a “patchwork” canzona.

*Ricercare III* opens with loose references to fugal writing: a strong, rhythmic opening subject followed by a contrasting countersubject that serves as a transition to a tonal answer in the dominant. An episode follows that exploits motives from the countersubject. Although certainly not a fugue, Gabrielli presents the opening theme by implying fugal imitation. A favorite compositional technique that Gabrielli uses is an ornamented outline of an ascending or descending scale. This can be observed in many passages, of which one is given below:



Example 11: Gabrielli, *Ricercare III*, meas. 55-57

*Ricercari V* and *VI* are the most virtuosic of the group. *Ricercare V* is marked by incredible intervallic leaps that range from 5ths and 6ths to an astonishing 19<sup>th</sup> (C to g<sup>1</sup>) in measure 26! This *ricercare* is in an unmistakable two-voice texture in *style brisé*, the voices often separated by an octave or more, and contains a memorable use of a pedal point in measures 23-26:



Example 12: Gabrielli, *Ricercare V*, meas. 23-26

The lower voice often acts as the bass line, articulating the harmonic motion. In the opening measures, for instance, the lower voice outlines a basic I-V-I-IV-V-I progression in C major:



Example 13: Gabrielli, *Ricercare V*, meas. 1-3

This lower voice then assists in a modulation to the dominant by providing a pedal D, signifying the V chord in G major:



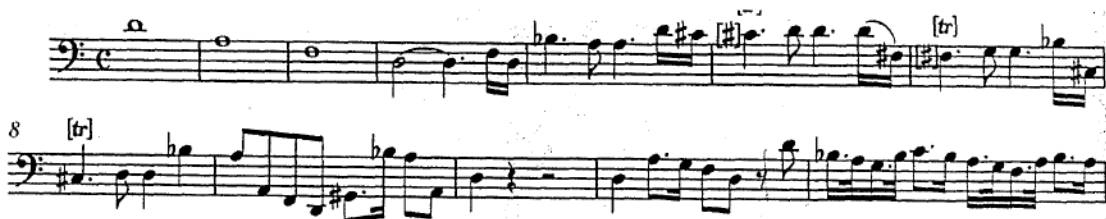
Example 14: Gabrielli, *Ricercare V*, meas. 4

This strong bass line is always present (except in the middle section) and anticipates by over thirty years Bach's use of this same approach in the Courante from *Suite I*. It is remarkable how similar this courante is to the fifth *ricercare*, the opening measures also using a strong bass line that articulates the harmonic motion in much the same way:



Example 15: J.S. Bach, *Suite in G Major*, meas. 1-4

*Ricercare VII* is by far the most reflective and profound of the group. It is in the style of a prelude, the music constantly evolving through motivic development and pervasive use of sequential patterns. The opening three phrases demonstrate ascending and descending sequences move the phrases to points of high and low tension:



Example 16: Gabrielli, *Ricercare VIII*, meas. 1-12

Compare this approach to the opening of the Prelude to Bach's second suite for cello, where sequences are also used to develop the phrase:



Example 17: J.S. Bach, *Suite in D minor*, meas. 1-6

My interest in researching the earliest music for solo cello has been a steady development, starting with the years I spent as an undergraduate cellist at the Oberlin Conservatory and continuing to the present. It stems from a curiosity not only of the subject matter itself, but also from the relative ignorance that I (and many other cellists) have in regard to the origins of our literature. This ignorance, of

course, is understandable since our training, aside from the Bach suites and Haydn concertos, usually begins with the Op. 5 sonatas of Beethoven, written over one hundred years after the first solo literature appeared. We play the occasional sonata by Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741), Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739), or Jean Baptiste Breval (1756-1825) and the stock transcription of a Baroque sonata, but in my experience, many cellists know very little about the solo literature before 1800.

It was not until I came across a recording of seventeenth century cello music by Anner Bylsma that I realized how much affinity I have toward this literature.<sup>80</sup> Having now performed these works on Baroque cello, I am continually fascinated by their buoyant, often naïve spirit. Each performance is like a new experience, for their spontaneity overwhelms any hint of formulaic principles and encourages the performer to original and fresh interpretations each time they are played. The charm of these works is that they have a strong feeling of improvisation within a genre that was still undefined and highly flexible. It is remarkable to consider the incredible wealth of literature that is available to the cellist—research into the genesis of our literature only encourages further exploration and fuels a desire to pass on these discoveries to one's students.

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<sup>80</sup> *Das Violoncello im 17. Jahrhundert*, Anner Bylsma, violoncello; Lidewy Scheifes, violoncello; Bob van Asperen, organ and harpsichord, BMG 77978, 1989.

## Appendix:

### A Brief Assessment of the State of Research for the Bass Violin

A recent consensus has emerged that views the early cello as having two basic sizes.<sup>81</sup> The variance often lies in how a particular scholar interprets the evidence available for study. One author, Tharald Borgir, maintains that the bass violin came in a small version, the lowest string tuned to *F* or *G*, and a larger one with the lowest string tuned to *B-flat*<sub>1</sub> or *C*. According to Borgir, the small bass violin

has been virtually ignored since the time it went out of use. The instrument was the principal bass of the violin family in the early part of the seventeenth century. This fact explains why the violone became the dominating bowed bass instrument at that time: the bass violin simply did not have sufficient range in the low register. As larger bass violins became available after the middle of the century the smaller version was recycled and surfaced under new names such as *bassetto* and *violoncello da spalla*.<sup>82</sup>

This small bass violin and its tuning is mentioned by theorists Cerone (in *El melopeo y maestro*) in 1612 and Praetorius (in *Syntagma musicum*) in 1619, the latter citing it as an alternative to the one in *C*. Adriano Banchieri, a contemporary of Cerone and Praetorius, is also cited frequently to support this theory. His *Conclusioni* describing the *violone* as the principal bass instrument and a small bass violin tuned with *G* as its lowest string that did not have the low range of the *violone*. In a later treatise, *L'organo suonarino*, Banchieri refers to the alto and bass

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<sup>81</sup> Stephen Bonta, "Violoncello: Origins and History to c1700," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 12 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>82</sup> Tharald Borgir, *The Performance of the Basso Continuo in Italian Baroque Music*, (Ann Arbor, Mi.: UMI Research Press, 1987), 83.



instruments of the violin family as *violette* and lists the lowest as tuned to *G*. Similarly, Kircher's *Musurgia universalis* (1650) and Bartolomeo Bismantova's *Compendio musicale* (1677), the latter calling it a *violoncello da spalla*, mention a small bass violin with this tuning.<sup>83</sup> Borgir goes on to say, citing examples, that the small bass violin had diminutive names such as *basso violetta*, *bassetto*, and *viola da spalla* or *violoncello da spalla*. Listing printed works from the 1620s to the 1670s, he further substantiates the existence of a small bass violin by matching the diminutive terms listed above with printed scores and parts whose range never falls below *G*.

The large bass violin, according to Borgir, later became known as the *violoncello*.<sup>84</sup> He claims that the large bass violin was ignored by early seventeenth-century Italian theorists in favor of the small instrument described above. He rationalizes that this happened because the larger instrument simply did not exist prior to 1650 since it was not asked for in printed music (the *violone* and those diminutive terms listed previously dominating print music in the first half of the seventeenth century). This, however, is inaccurate, for there are extant bass violins made prior to 1650, such as the "King" Amati, that qualify as large bass violins.<sup>85</sup> He concludes his theory by suggesting that a large bass violin only became common in the 1650s (referred to as a "violoncino") and that this led directly to the adoption of the term "violoncello".

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<sup>83</sup> Borgir, 83.

<sup>84</sup> Borgir, 86.

<sup>85</sup> Laird, 6-7.

Because very few instruments have survived, one may speculate that few large cellos had been made up to this time. There are no records of sixteenth-century luthiers making cellos [i.e. large bass violin] in large numbers as they did in the case of violins and double basses.<sup>86</sup>

An interpretation such as Borgir's relies heavily on data that is circumstantial. We cannot determine the actual size of any bass instrument played in the seventeenth century since cutting down the size of an instrument has been commonplace, nor can we trust that any name given a bass instrument is consistent and uniform. (Was a "bassetto," for instance, always one particular instrument or a generic term for any type of bass violin?) Examining part-books to determine the range of an instrument is not reliable, for there is no way of knowing if the composer was writing for the lowest note of the instrument.

Tharald Borgir's theory on the origins of the cello, outlined above, represents only one of many conflicting views, some of which are neatly packaged and specific like his and require a good amount of subjective interpretation. (Stephen Bonta formulates an equally precise opinion, although with radically different conclusions, in his article "Terminology for the Bass Violin in Seventeenth-Century Italy" and Elizabeth Cowling, in her book *The Cello*, asserts that the cello existed from the very beginning of the violin family, sometime in the early sixteenth century.) Other scholars allow for greater flexibility in interpreting the available facts and thus are more cautious in their conclusions, as Peter Allsop demonstrates in *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello* (in the chapter entitled

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<sup>86</sup> Borgir, 86.

“Ensemble music: in the chamber and the orchestra”) and as Marc Vanscheeuwijck observes in his article *The Baroque Cello and Its Performance*.

Our limitation to describe accurately the cello’s forerunners crystallizes in the case of the *violone*, a bass instrument common in the seventeenth century that has so far defied an accurate, definitive description. Tharald Borgir summarizes this disparity:

The term ‘violone’ without doubt causes the most complex terminological dilemma in that it was used for three of the four instruments just mentioned [bass gamba, the double bass gamba, and two kinds of bass violins]. Stephen Bonta (1977, 1978) argues that the term, after the first decade of the seventeenth century, refers to the bass violin. Alfred Planyavsky (1970) holds that the term principally refers to the double bass. The view taken here is that during the seventeenth century in Italy the term refers mostly to the Italian bass gamba, and at times to the cello and the double bass.<sup>87</sup>

This common yet enigmatic instrument has produced a fascinating array of contemporary opinion, each dissimilar and often contradictory. We know that *violone* referred in the sixteenth century to any instrument in the viol family, but following this use of the term there is disagreement, as the following recent quotes illustrate.

Some scholars (usually cellists) show a preference for regarding the cello as a dominant instrument throughout the seventeenth century:

This, at least, is evidence that no member of the da gamba family is implied by this term [violone]...nor, I believe, the double bass of the violin family. In other words ‘violone’ = ‘basso’, and abbreviation for ‘basse da braccio’ = cello.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Borgir, 69.

<sup>88</sup> Cowling, 58.

As violino is the diminutive of viola, violoncino and violoncello are the diminutive of 'violone'.<sup>89</sup>

While others (usually bassists) prefer to view the double bass as dominant:

The increase in evidence from the end of the sixteenth century adds continuing support to the identity of the violone as a double bass instrument.<sup>90</sup>

Some are all-inclusive:

One of the problems with the term violone is that, in addition to referring to both the bass and the double bass gamba, it also at times stands for cello.<sup>91</sup>

A possible solution could be to accept that in some cases *violone* can indicate a large bass violin (especially in chamber music and most often in Rome), but that in other cases it can be a double bass viol (e.g., in church music) or even a third type of instrument, perhaps Banchieri's *violone da gamba* or Praetorius's *Gross Quint-Bass (F<sub>1</sub>-C-G-d-a)*.<sup>92</sup>

There is evidence to suggest that in the final decades of the seventeenth century, 'violone' in Italian usage was a generic term for a bass violin playing in roughly the same range as a modern violoncello.<sup>93</sup>

While others are very specific:

In Italy, until the early years of the eighteenth century and with the exception of Venice, the term 'violone' probably indicated bass violin.<sup>94</sup>

Outside of Rome, however, it is doubtful that the term violone referred to the bass violin until sometime after 1700.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, *The Violoncello and Its History*, trans. Isobella S.E. Stigand (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), 39.

<sup>90</sup> Alfred Planyavsky, *The Baroque Double Bass Violone*, trans. James Barkett (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>91</sup> Borgir, 80.

<sup>92</sup> Vanscheeuwijck, *The Baroque Cello and Its Performance*, 83.

<sup>93</sup> Barnett, *Musical Issues of the Late Seicento*, 279.

<sup>94</sup> Bonta, "Violoncello: Origins and History to c1700."

<sup>95</sup> Borgir, 81.

The term *violone* undoubtedly belongs to the long list of ambiguous names that were used for the bass instrument of the violin family. Any definition of this word that attempts to be more specific is an assumption that lacks adequate proof. When part-books for both the *violoncello* and the *violone* appeared in the late seventeenth century (for example, G.A. Perti's *Messa à 5 concertate con instramenti* c1675–1685), a distinction was made between two separate instruments, but this fact does little to provide conclusive proof to any of the above theories.

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