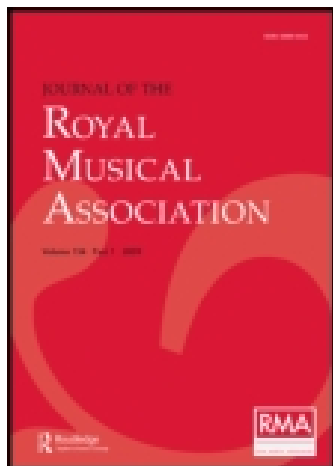


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The Tenor Viol or Violten

Mr. Thomas Strevens
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The following communication on Mr. Thomas Strevens' Tenor Viol or Violten was then read :—

Mr. Strevens wishes to make it clear that he takes no credit to himself for the introduction of an instrument of the violin class to come between the violoncello and the viola ; that question has been promulgated and discussed in various musical journals for many years, the idea of many of the correspondents being that the instrument required should take a similar form to the violoncello, and be played between the knees ; and it is largely owing to these discussions that Mr. Strevens first conceived the idea of making an instrument as an experiment ; but by far the weightier inducement was found in the study of harmony, wherein the imperativeness of the four voices in four-part harmony is so unmistakably and splendidly exemplified. Why then were there not four voices in the string family ? Where was the tenor instrument ? Why should a bass instrument play tenor passages without reference to the degree of its resonance, &c., simply because it is able to do so ? Might we not as well ascribe the tenor part in a chorus of four parts to a bass singer if he be able to sing the music, as many bass or baritone vocalists are ? These were the questions with others of a like tendency which presented themselves to the patentee's mind, and which satisfied him that a "Tenor" instrument was required to stand in the same relation to the quartet of strings as the tenor voice in vocal quartets.

It is no sufficient reason to say that we have done without the instrument for so many years ! That there is no music written for it ! And that we can still do without it ! It is not Mr. Strevens' idea to displace or supplant any other instrument of the string family, but to supplement and augment such instruments, and he humbly believes that the one he is introducing will be found an admirable and very desirable addition to the orchestra, as well as to all concerted music for strings, to say nothing of its beauties as a solo instrument, and he deferentially submits that the hiatus hitherto existing in the strings is now bridged over, and that the quartet of strings is now complete.

The "family of strings" as hitherto constituted consisted only of basses (contra basso and violoncello), viola and violin, in other words, bass, alto and treble, but no tenor—consequently one of the most important voices was missing. (Some of the old masters, Bach to wit, made strenuous efforts to bring into use other instruments, and wrote music for the viol da gamba, violoncello, piccolo, &c.) Composers hitherto have had to depend to a large extent upon the beauty and flexibility of tone of that magnificent instrument the violoncello in introducing tenor passages in a string

orchestra, but the patentee deferentially submits that this can at most but be considered a baritone, and not by any fantasy of the imagination can it be looked upon as a tenor instrument; and no other tenor stringed instrument is at present in use in orchestras.

The viola is often termed a tenor, but this is erroneous, as it is undoubtedly an alto instrument, and as such is invariably considered and treated by composers, music for it being always written in the alto clef; and to see band parts for it headed "tenor" and written in the alto clef is simply absurd. France and other countries call it the "alto," and by our own eminent English violin makers it is usually described as the "Viola" or "Alto"—and why it has ever been styled a tenor is inexplicable. Nature itself is a controversion of any such hypothesis; it falls as naturally into the alto clef as a violin into the treble clef, or the violoncello into the bass clef; and the new instrument, which the patentee has designated a "Tenor Viol" or "Violten," falls just as naturally into the tenor clef—to ally it with which has of course been the aim of the patentee. From the foregoing it will be seen that music for it will require to be written in the tenor clef—a new experience for composers, so far as regards strings (except occasional passages for violoncello).

The pitch of the instrument comes between the violoncello and viola, a fifth above the former and a fourth below the latter instrument, which is itself, as is well known, a fifth below the violin. The "Violten" is therefore exactly an octave lower than the violin, and stands precisely in the same relation to that instrument as a man's tenor voice does to a lady's or boy's treble; and the patentee claims for his instrument that it absolutely fills a gap, and a large and eminently important one, in the Great Stave, which previously, so far as a tenor stringed instrument is concerned, was void. It is musically and scientifically in conformity with the laws of nature and acoustics, and a perfect plenary of what in orchestras was hitherto wanting. It may be expedient to call the attention of musicians to the singular fact that as military and brass bands have no such gap in their Gamut on the Great Stave, but have instruments of every conceivable description, contra bassos, baritones, tenors, altos, trebles, &c., surely this alone is sufficient to show the need, the importance and efficacy of the "Violten" in a string orchestra. As a solo instrument it will certainly rank super-excellent.

The instrument was then played upon by Mr. James T. Lockyer, a student of the Royal Academy of Music.

DISCUSSION.

Mr. COBBETT.—Can Mr. Strevens tell us the name of the maker?

Mr. STREVENs.—Thibouville-Lamy.

Mr. CROGER.—May I ask what is its length?

Mr. STREVENs.—Seventeen-and-a-half inches.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—I should be glad to know what is the exact intent of this instrument. Do I understand that it is to take the place of one of the instruments of the string quartet, or is it an additional instrument to be used with these? In the latter case the quartet would have to be turned into a quintet. Then, with regard to that piece we have just heard, I should be glad to know whether the inventor has had an opportunity of hearing it played on the 'cello by a 'cello-player; because, so far as my remembrance goes of the tone of the 'cello, it would give out the piece with considerably greater resonance. Of course, this is a new instrument, and has not had the advantage that a good instrument gains with time. But the main thing that we want to know is whether it is suggested that this be added to the string quartet or not. With regard to the statement that was made as to the second violin not being a true alto, that did not quite accord with what we were told in the Paper as to the natural pitch of the voices, because after all the second violin goes down to G, and you will find very little alto music which goes below that. If the violin can play alto music, that objection seems to fall to the ground. As I take it that the low G string is put on for use, we should be glad, I think, to hear a passage played on the G string alone. Of course, the amount of tone we should get from a 'cello playing within the same range would be very much more.

Mr. LOCKYER then played a passage on the G string.

Mr. STREVENs.—I certainly have had no idea of doing away with any other instrument in the string quartet. My idea has been to supplement it and to strengthen the strings. As I say in my pamphlet, it is in my opinion required just as much as the tenor is in a quartet of voices. I do not deny that the 'cello is decidedly more resonant and more powerful, but so is the baritone voice more powerful than the tenor. My idea is to support it in every way and to supplement it; and I do not wish it to be thought that it has been my idea to do away with any instrument in the orchestra. I think the new violten will be more useful in an orchestra than in a quartet; as was justly observed, that would have to be a quintet. I do not think we can take it into use for the old Masters; I think we shall have to compose music suitable for it. With regard to the

fourth string, it may be that we have not yet got quite the right gauge. We were obliged to have the strings made on purpose, and I am afraid this fourth string is a very bad one.

Dr. MACLEAN.—This is rather rough on the young performer, because they do not teach this instrument at the Royal Academy of Music. I think we may congratulate him on managing these long stops so well as he does.

Mr. CROGER.—Both parties are right, and both are wrong, when they say the second violin is or is not the alto. If you play the second violin on the lower strings in the first position then no doubt it will be an alto. The alto voice seldom goes below G; if it does it is not very effective. But it is seldom that the violin is played on the lower strings; it plays mostly an octave above the voice. Therefore it appears to me that the second violin is truly the alto of the quartet if it is played on the lower strings; but if you are always playing in the higher positions, it is at least an octave higher. As the inventor says, you cannot use this instrument for the existing music; music will have to be written for it. You are going to the trouble of making this instrument and writing music for it for the sake of the bottom octave. The viola goes down to C, the 'cello to C an octave lower. You are making an instrument to fill this up. At the same time the 'cello can quite well play those notes which are between the two bottom notes; so I think really, with all deference to the inventor, we are rather striving at a task that will be unprofitable, inasmuch as there will not be enough for the new instrument to do. But the point to which I wish to call attention is that the strings are generally playing an octave above the voices.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—I think in the Quartets of the great Masters you will find that the second violin is largely played on the lower part of its compass.

Mr. COBBETT.—The unfortunate thing about the viola is that it varies so much in size. I have not a very large viola at home, but I have seen many, particularly one of Gaspar di Salo belonging to my friend Troutbeck. I think it is about sixteen inches long. With regard to the use of the lower strings, they are used more than Mr. Croger thinks. In my opinion the second violin parts might well be called the soprano and alto of the string quartet.

Mr. CROGER.—A so-called 'lady's' viola measures fifteen inches along the back; the ordinary viola measures sixteen-and-a-quarter inches. I have a Gaspar di Salo measuring seventeen inches.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—Then there is a difference of only half-an-inch between this new instrument and the old violas. If so, that instrument is not large enough for the depth of the strings that it carries.

Mr. COBBETT.—I agree with that, for I think the inventor is obliged to use too large a fourth string.

Mr. STREVEN'S.—It is on the third string that the wolf is.

Mr. COBBETT.—I did not mean the wolf, but I mean that the string does not speak so clearly as one would like.

Mr. CROGER.—The Ritter viola measures eighteen-and-a-half inches.

THE CHAIRMAN.—Mr. Strevens began by modestly saying that he did not claim much originality for this instrument. As a matter of fact, developments in this direction have been going on in Germany for thirty years past at the hands of Professor Hermann Ritter, of Würzburg, who has devised new instruments and written in all sorts of periodicals, &c., about them. He began with an extra large viola called *Viola Alta*; this not altering the pitch or tuning of the strings, but simply enlarging the body, for it is well known, as Mr. Southgate observes, that the ordinary viola, though a little larger than the violin, is still much too small for its pitch and stringing. Four years ago Ritter invented another instrument, called *Violetta*, of the same pitch as Mr. Strevens', but with a very much larger body, and used as a knee-instrument. His idea herein, like Mr. Strevens', is to split the two C's of the viola and violoncello respectively, and get an instrument which lies in pitch between the two; in other words, which lies an octave below the violin. I confess I do not follow the necessity. The analogy of the harmonic chord, and the experiences of harmony, show large intervals at bottom, which is at any rate not *prima facie* in favour of filling in the octave in question. In the orchestra the present universal practice of dividing the violoncellos provides for all contingencies of occasional thick harmony, while giving free scope to the melodial powers of the first violoncello, with which I do not suppose that Ritter's *Violetta* could for a moment compete. He evidently intends it for the orchestra, for I saw it the other day in a score of Max Schillings', the "Pfeiffertag," where it gives a murmuring accompaniment to the song of the girl sitting in the tower. In chamber music the *Violetta* might occasionally give a necessary low thickening, but how it would fit in with the scale of the upper strings in quartets, &c., I do not know. In last month's "Journal" of the International Musical Society is an account of Ritter's latest arrangements, in the way of a working quartet of instruments disposed thus:—(a) a violin, down to G; (b) a five-string *viola alta*, *i.e.*, with E string added, down to C; (c) a knee-*violetta*, down to G; (d) a large-sized violoncello, down to C. The idea here is to have four instruments of four separate tones. The writer of the article, Dr. Obrist, Keeper of the Liszt Museum at Weimar, praises the combination, but not, apparently, after having heard it. To revert to

Mr. STREVS' "Violten," I am afraid I must agree with Mr. Southgate in doubting its efficacy. It is an arm-instrument, and greatly exaggerates the existing drawback of the viola, in that it has a body very much too small for the compass and stringing. Ritter's changes, whatever they are worth, are at any rate in the opposite direction to this.

Mr. COBBETT. - May I say that I am heartily in agreement with the Chairman that if the instrument could be made larger and played between the knees, objections to it would vanish.

Mr. STREVS.—As regards the length of the body of the instrument it is seventeen-and-a-half inches. There are violas of seventeen inches, I know; but here is where the length is, from the nut to the tail-piece. This is about two or one-and-a-half inches longer than an ordinary viola, and it is a good inch longer than a viola of seventeen inches. Also it is much deeper.

Mr. COBBETT.—But it is the length of the body of the instrument that determines the quality of the tone.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—If the discussion is concluded I should like to say how much we are indebted to the gentleman (Mr. Lockyer) who has come to play the instrument. None but those who have taken up a new instrument requiring a different length of stop know what this involves.
