

*Violone da braccio, Violoncello da braccio, Bassa Viola*  
*Viola da spalla, Schulter-Viole* etc.: a four-string C-G-d-a cello.  
by Lambert Smit.

*Throughout this article eighteenth-century terms and texts are in italics.*

*'Met de speeltuigen is het een verwarde boedel'*  
"The names of instruments are an untidy mess".

This paper offers more unanswerable questions<sup>2</sup> than solutions. It will discuss those Violoncello variants that were played in a more or less 'horizontal'<sup>3</sup> position.

The smallest form of Violoncello instruments that were played in this way is the Bach-Hoffmann 5-string C-G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup> *Violoncello piccolo*<sup>4</sup> with a body length of 45 to 46 cm, whether it is presented as *Viola pomposa* or *(Violoncello / Viola) da spalla* or *violone piccolo da braccio*.

The following arguments, derived from old texts, show that the player who simply removes the e<sup>1</sup>-string from a Hoffmann C-G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup> five-string instrument cannot present the result as a kind of standard 18<sup>th</sup>-century violoncello.

### **I. Recent documents compared with old texts.**

Let us compare statements in modern lexica and 18<sup>th</sup>-century German sources about *Violoncello (piccolo)*, *Viola da spalla*, *Viola pomposa*, *Schulter-Viole* &c.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by Mattheson's pupil Jacob Wilhelm Lustig (1706-1796) Dutch theorist, organist and composer of German descent, in "Inleiding tot de Muziekkunde, TWEDE DRUK, 1771." in "HET VIERDE KAPITTEL *Van de MUZIKAALE INSTRUMENTEN*" §. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Joelle Morton's articles ([www.earlybass.com](http://www.earlybass.com)).

<sup>3</sup> Not strictly 'horizontally': the scroll of the instrument points diagonally to the ground at the player's left.

See photo of the author playing one of his 5-string C-G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup> Hoffmann copies and the figure in the Torelli *Violoncello* partbook.

<sup>4</sup> see articles by Ulrich Drüner and Mark Smith (in *Bach-Jahrbuch* 1987 and 1998).

Forkel (1782) and Hiller (1784) wrote about Bach's „*Viola Pomposa*“<sup>5</sup> (=violoncello piccolo?): „...Es wird wie ein Violoncell gestimmt, hat aber in der Höhe eine Saite mehr, ist etwas grösser als eine Bratsche, und wird mit einem Bande so befestigt, dass man es vor der Brust und auf dem Arme halten kann.“<sup>6</sup>

The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians (1998) states: ‘violoncello piccolo’ was probably the term used for a five-string instrument held vertically that was a little smaller than the normal cello.” **Probably**: there is no proof offered for this statement !

The modern term Violoncello piccolo indicates a cello of nearly normal size. So it is confusing to apply this term to Bach's much smaller *Violoncello piccolo*; to the best of my knowledge Bach was the first to use the term *Violoncello piccolo*.<sup>7</sup>

For a player of a small *Violoncello piccolo* (Hoffmann copy), putting the instrument on top of the right shoulder would be inefficient: the

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<sup>5</sup> In this article no further attention is paid to the term *Viola Pomposa*. See Mark M. Smith's article THE VIOLA POMPOSA (FoMRHI Comm. 186) and my article in Chelys Vol. 32 (2004), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Bach Dokumente III, Nr 731, 856

<sup>7</sup> for the *obbligato* parts in BWV 6, 41, 49, 68, 85, 115, 175, 180, 183, 199.

In two of these cantatas (BWV 6 and 41) Bach had the *Violoncello piccolo* music notated in *Violino I* parts.

The part in BWV 5 (3<sup>rd</sup> movement) that Bach notated in the score without further specification in the *Violino I* staff was possibly also intended for *Violoncello piccolo*. In the score and the *Violino I* performance part the music (with a range from g to e flat<sup>2</sup>) is notated in alto clef. This part, if intended for a violin, would be an exceptional one for the complete avoidance of the e<sup>2</sup> string. We may assume that Bach intended this part for a different instrument: his *Violoncello piccolo*, then perhaps played without an e<sup>1</sup> string, so that the Leader could imagine that he played a viola of supernormal size (*Viola Pomposa*!).

The next Sunday (22 Oct. 1724) the Leader had to play a *Violoncello piccolo* part with a range from c to b<sup>1</sup>.

Two weeks later (5 Nov. 1724) the *Violoncello piccolo* part in BWV 115 went from C# to c<sup>2</sup>. Was it Bach's intention to introduce his new instrument step by step?

place of the bridge would be - in relation to the bowing arm - too far to the right, which makes it impossible to get the bow in the correct position on the strings.

Perhaps we should avoid also the terms *Viola/ Violoncello da spalla*, to refer to Bach's 'invention', a so called *Viola Pomposa*, as described by Hiller and Forkel.

I have altered Vitali's term '*Violone da braccio*' to '*Violoncello da braccio*' for the purposes of the following suggested nomenclature, which I have attempted to make as clear as possible:

**Violoncello da braccio:** a relatively small (sounding string length < 50 cm) C-G-d-a bass instrument that is held in front of the chest with a band (around the neck) in such a way that the bridge is almost directly in front of the player's nose, or somewhat to the left; in this position the player can without difficulty - or with only slight difficulty, if the strings are longer - use violin fingerings.

**Violoncello piccolo da braccio:** a small (C)-G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup> instrument, based on the originals of Hoffmann, on which violin fingerings are quite easily possible.

This instrument can be used for *Violoncello piccolo* obligato parts from the period 1724-26, for the 6th cello suite, without the e<sup>1</sup>-string for BWV 234, and without the C-string for BWV 71.

If according to my hypothesis the 4-string celli in Bach's works (including Cello suites I-V) were indeed instruments intermediate in size between 'da gamba' played celli and Hoffmann's small original 5-string *Violoncelli piccoli* (alias *Viola Pomposa*), then all cello forms that Bach originally might have had in mind can be subsumed under the

unequivocal term '*Violoncello **da braccio***' to distinguish them from the normal sized celli and violoncelli piccoli of modern lexica.

Old documents do not prove that '*da spalla*' meant only or mainly 5-string instruments. Even the term *Violoncello **piccolo*** did not always indicate 5-string C-G-d-a- e<sup>1</sup> instruments.<sup>8</sup>

In **1708** Walther mentioned only the 4-string C-G-d-a-instrument ("played like a violin..., owing to its weight, it is attached to the button of the frockcoat"); later, in **1732**, both Walther and Majer give only the tuning of the 4-string type.

The high-soaring *Violoncello* part in BWV 71 (performed 4 February 1708) avoids notes below G: this suggests that Bach composed it for a G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup> *Violoncello*: this instrument, the first *Violoncello* mentioned in original Bach sources, had only **four** strings. This first documented use by Bach of the term *Violoncello* refers to a type that clearly differed from Walther's C-G-d-a *Violoncello* and from 'our' cello.

*Violoncello* Suite V clearly was not composed for a 5-string C-G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup> instrument: the scordatura, indicated in three manuscripts, shows **four** strings to be tuned C-G-d-g to favor the c-minor tonality. An unspecified 5<sup>th</sup> string tuned to e<sup>1</sup> would be a nuisance. For this reason we may assume that Suites I-IV were also composed with a **four**-string instrument in mind.

Mattheson's phrase 'with five or even six strings' is quoted by Walther and Zedler, both of whom give only a tuning for the **four**-string variant. Majer quotes Mattheson's three instrument names, viz. *Violoncello*, *Bassa Viola* and *Viola di Spala* and replaces Mattheson's

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<sup>8</sup> Bach-Jahrbuch 1905, p 38-43: "*Ein Violon Cello Pic. mit vier Seiten von J.H.Ruppert. 1724.*"

phrase 'with five or even six strings' with the statement: "gemeinlich mit 4. starken Saiten bezogen".

Apart from the tuning C-G-d-a-e<sup>1</sup> for a five-string *Violoncello piccolo* there is only one other documented tuning for a 5-string Violoncello: C-G-d-a-d<sup>1</sup> (in *Laborde, Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* [1780]).

Eisel (1737) who mentions in Num.V, 3 the 5/6 string possibility, writes in Num.V, 4: „Wir wollen nun bey den gemeinen viersaitigten bleiben.“

Hiller's and Forkel's wording „Es wird wie ein Violoncell gestimmt, hat **aber** in der Höhe eine Saite mehr“ suggests that for them a *Violoncello* normally had only four strings, like Eisel's "gemeinen viersaitigten".

G.F. Wolf, *Lexicon* 1782 & 1792: „Violoncello (oder Cello, Baßgeige,) fängt von C an, und geht ohne höhere eingesetzte Applikatur bis d<sup>1</sup> und e<sup>1</sup>; doch findet man häufig Stücke, in welchen bis g<sup>1</sup> gesetzt ist.“

In the Danish translation (1801 & 1813): „Fiolonsel, Violoncello eller Cello, Bisfiol (sic!), begynder i Dybden fra store C; og gaaer uden højere indsat Applikatur til d<sup>1</sup> eller e<sup>1</sup>; dog finder man hyppig Sager, i hvilke er sat til g<sup>1</sup>.“  
Wolf's *Violoncello* "goes to d<sup>1</sup> and e<sup>1</sup> without shifting": this implies that shifting on the a string was inevitable for reaching g<sup>1</sup> which means that the instrument had no e<sup>1</sup> string.

Gerber (1790) on Bach's *Viola Pomposa* (=violoncello piccolo?): "...welche zu den vier Saiten des Violoncells, noch eine Quinte, e, hatte."

### **Some conclusions:**

1) the **words** "da spalla" were never connected with 5- or 4-string **small** cello forms.

2) All 18<sup>th</sup>-century German texts (except Mattheson's) suggest that a *Violoncello* normally had only **four** strings. Walther's (1732) and Zedler's texts (1746), after their quote from Mattheson, both conclude with a mention of the **four**-string instrument, tuned C-G-d-a.

Mattheson took over the reference to 5/ 6 strings from Brossard's cello entry. Perhaps Mattheson's reverence for Brossard was so great, that he did not dare to suppress this dubious detail. Anyway, there seems to be no convincing organological explanation for 6-string cellos.

See my text *Violoncello 'mit 5 auch wol 6 Saiten', Mattheson's mysterious text*.

3) The **four**-string type dominates in relevant documents for more than a century: from 13 March 1708 (cello definition by Bach's relative, Johann Gottfried Walther, in '*Praecepta der Musicalischen Composition*') to the 1813 Danish edition of Wolf's Lexicon.

## II. The 'Violons de Braz' of the Thomaskirche.

Philipp Spitta, J.S. Bach, Band II, p. 774: 'Das Inventar der im Besitz der Thomasschule befindlichen Instrumente lautet während der Jahre 1723 bis 1750 so:

1. *Regal*, so alt und ganz eingegangen.

1. *ditto* aô 1696. Angeschaffet.

1. *Violon* aô 1711.

1 *Violon* aô 1735. In der *Auction* erstanden [fehlt natürlich in den Jahren vorher.]

2 *Violons de Braz*

2 *Violinen* aô 1706 *repariret* ....'

The 2 *Violons de Braz* are listed between *Violon* (1711 & 1735) and *Violinen*: the logical place (in the list) for the in-between size of 'horizontally' held celli. N.B. *Brazzo* is Venetian for *Braccio*.

Arnold Schering, J.S. Bachs Leipziger Kirchenmusik, p. 131:

Kuhnau klagte 1709 der *Schul-Violon* sei "sehr in Stücken und durch denen zum *Exercitio Musico* gewidmeten Stunden übel zugerichtet".

We may assume that the *Violon* aô 1711 was bought as replacement of the *Schul-Violon* that in 1709 was 'in pieces'.

Were the 2 ***Violons de Braz*** of the Thomaskirche identical with bass bowed instruments, held 'horizontally' and sometimes called: ***violone da braccio***: did Bach have such 'Violoncelli' at his disposal for the Kirchenmusik?

In recent years much enthusiastic publicity has been made (by others than Lambert Smit) for the 'Viola / Violoncello da spalla' and for new insights into the nature of Bach's cello: on the internet, in concerts, program notes, radio and newspaper interviews, journals &c. This was all caused by my research published in Chelys 2004.

It was my essential error and a big mistake in the argumentation to connect Hoffmann's minicello and Bach's *Violoncello* with the concept of 'Viola da spalla'.

This shaky or even incorrect terminology in my research, accepted as correct by some musicians who play minicellos that they want to call 'Viola / Violoncello da spalla', is now used around the world.

However the case may be, it has not been demonstrated that Bach's *Violoncello* was a 'Viola da spalla'.