

A NEW HISTORY OF VIOLIN PLAYING

**A NEW HISTORY OF
VIOLIN PLAYING:**
the vibrato and
Lambert Massart's revolutionary discovery

Zdenko Silvela

Universal Publishers
USA • 2001

A New History Of Violin Playing

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To my daughter ELENA

*May this book contribute
to compensate for the unjust neglect
inflicted upon LAMBERT MASSART
and, at the same time, be a token of perennial
homage to the founder of the modern
era of violin playing.*

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FOREWORD

This book will deal only with the most superlative violinists and teachers. This decision has been taken, basically, for two reasons:

- a) By selecting only the most salient violinists, we have an advantage: that they concentrate in themselves all the main features and characteristics of violin playing of their time, be them performers, or teachers. It is only by concentrating on the main aspects of performing that we can trace the historical evolution of the art of playing the violin, avoiding to be distracted by minor fiddlers whose style of playing is not always evident.
- b) It is from them that we have more data, more anecdotes and more interesting things to tell. Thus the book keeps always awakened the attention of the reader, and facilitates the task to understand the historical changes of this sublime art. By going from top to top, from peak to peak, from tower to tower, from summit to summit, we will have a very bright image on what has been the style of playing on a certain period of time. This book will be the concentrated broth, the “*consommé*” of the violin. Now, if we join with a line these summits from the beginning to the end we will draw a most interesting sky-line of the violin, which will give the reader more than one surprise. But this will come on due course. I cannot reveal it now, for it would be a crime, as if your bookseller would tell you who is the assassin in an Agatha Christie’s detective novel you are about to buy.

Nevertheless, should the reader like to have a thorough (but superficial) account of all the fiddlers that played on a certain lapse of time, or on a particular country, or on the whole history, I recommend him to look up in the “*yellow pages*” of the violin, i.e. the voluminous *The History of the Violin* by E. van der Straeten.

The book contains a list of cassette’s albums that I have recorded for my personal and exclusive use. They provide me an easy way to identify the works I want to listen to, and in the order that suites me better. But they are not available to anybody for law forbids to dub or duplicate records or cassettes.

Notwithstanding, I have maintained their list and references, for it will give the reader the suggestion of a good recording, adequate, in my view, to illustrate each musician studied herein. To have an absolute understanding on how our fiddlers play, it is indispensable to hear them play. For those

violinist that played before the gramophone was invented, I thought it might be a good idea to have, at least, a piece of their composition, to be more familiarised with their musical ideas.

I must admit that some of the recordings are not very easy to find, but if I have managed to find them, so can do my reader.

I have included at the end an ENCYCLOPAEDIA of names and terms used in this book that might be of interest. World-wide known composers, such as Brahms or Tchaikovsky are not included, in the understanding that they are well known by the reader. Names and terms entered in this encyclopaedia are marked with an asterisk in the book text. As for the terms, I have entered the most specific ones, taking for granted that the more general musical terms are known by the reader. Done with loving care it emulates and sometimes excels, its parent, the book.

Names with two asterisks (**) mean that they have their own article in the book.

Finally, this book is within everybody's reach. Written in a plain language, easy to understand, lacking complicated and esoteric musical terminology, it is designed to be understood by everyone, in particular by those who, having little knowledge of music, love, nevertheless, the violin.

A last minute warning: this book is written in English so that it might have the greatest possible spreading all over the world. Written in English by a Spaniard, the reader should not expect a perfectly drafted work with a flawless English-native wording. But this lack of grammatical accuracy adds to it a certain exotic touch, and I would not let it be revised and rewritten by a native English for love or money. The reader, on certain occasions, might have the impression he is reading the owner's manual of a Japanese product, but I do not mind, it is the salt to it, and everybody, English, American or any one who has a certain knowledge of English can easily understand it.

BOOK ONE:

THE BEGINNINGS

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The violin is considered to be one of the most perfect instruments in music. In versatility and in its most attractive musicality it is, indeed, at the top of all instruments. The violin is another human voice, its model, being able to reproduce all kinds of moods, that go from the sorrow and pathetic to lyrical happiness and exhilarating joy. When we arrive to them, we will see how Massart and Kreisler could make their violins cry. It is able to emulate almost all the rest of musical instruments, and depending on the skill of the player, it can produce the most varied emotional feelings. Within the range of its four octaves*, it can play all the tones and microtones of the scale*, and it is within its power to play chords*, as well. The violin is able, also, to imitate all sort of bird singing and animal noises, and in general any other imaginable sound.

It is audible farther off than the gigantic pianoforte, and its tones in a master's hand go to the heart of man. (Charles Reade*. Cremona Violins. Four Letters Descriptive of Those Exhibited in 1872 at the South Kensington Museum. Alexander Broude Inc. New York. N.Y. 1873. p. 6)

To all these possibilities we must add its faculty for brilliant, agile figurations that go far beyond the faculties of the human voice. Its treble, soprano sound, and its deep bass, make of it an authentic replica of the nightingale, to which it resembles even more than to the human voice. Everything in it is attractive, and its sweet, enchanting voice together with its round sensuous curves, resembling those of a pretty young lady, make of it an object to woo rather than an instrument to play. (Reade*, more poetic than me, calls them “the wafer-like sides of its wooden shell” Op. cit. p 5) As he himself says: *Violins are heard by the eye*¹.

They can also stir up ardent passions in connoisseurs, as shown in this anecdote by Charles Reade*: (Op. cit. pag 17)

<One of the most mythical luthiers*, Luigi Tarisio*, knowing that the legendary cello “Bass of Spain” of 1713 by Stradivarius was

¹ Charles Reade: Op. cit. Pag. 29.

in Madrid, came here and after many difficult negotiations he managed to buy it for about four thousand francs. And Reade writes: *“He sailed exultant for Paris with the Spanish Bass in a case. He never let it out of his sight. The pair were caught by a storm in the Bay of Biscay. The ship rolled; Tarisio clasped his bass tight, and trembled. It was a terrible gale, and for one whole day they were in real danger. Tarisio spoke of it to me with a shudder. I will give you his real words, for they struck me at the time, and I have often thought of them since:*

- *“Ah, my poor Mr. Reade, the Bass of Spain was all but lost”*

Was not this a true connoisseur? A genuine enthusiast? Observe! There was also an ephemeral insect called Luigi Tarisio, who would have gone down with the bass: but that made no impression on his mind. De minimis non curat Ludovicus.” [Ludovicus (Luigi) couldn't care less about minimal things.]>

To those who might have a certain apprehension to share Reade's view, I recommend them to have a look at web-sites:

- sheila's corner + Soil Stradivari

- sheila's corner + Sauret* Guarneri

And also the spectacular “Prado Museum” in site:

- peterbiddulph.com/publications/violinpics1.htm

In the latter you will see, walking majestically in procession, while they display their ravishing beauty in all its splendour and magic, the following Guarneri del Gesu:

Baltic 1731.

Carrodus 1743.

Dancla* 1727.

D'Egville 1735.

Doyen 1744.

Haddock 1734.

Heifetz**, ex David 1740.

Joachim** 1737.

Kemp 1738.

King 1735.

King Joseph 1737.

Konchanski 1741.

Kortschak 1739.

Kreisler** 1730.

Leduc* 1745.

Lord Wilton 1742. which has been sold in November 1999 for an approximate amount of 4,800,000 dollars (four million, eight hundred thousand), the highest amount ever paid for a violin. It is now called the “*ex Lehudi Menuhin*”.

Ole Bull** 1744.

Paganini (Canon) 1743.

Plauden 1735.

Sauret* 1743.

Stern**, ex Panette 1737.

Stretton 1729.

Vieuxtemps** 1741.

Violon du Diable 1743.

Ysaye** 1740

If after contemplating all these masterpieces of craftsmanship and sheer beauty, the reader does not share Charles Reade*'s opinion, he must stop reading this book now !!

All these possibilities have been profited by composers to write profusely for it, to the extent that we may say that no other instrument has had as many compositions devoted to it, if we consider all the solo and the ensemble music written specifically for it. And it is so indeed because the violins are the main group of the orchestra, and we must take into account all the symphonic literature, as well.

THE ORIGINS

Me préserve Apolon, dieu des arts et de la poésie, d'avoir la téméraire audace de tenter même une simple esquisse, un modeste croquis pouvant ressembler à une histoire générale du violon et des ses origines. <May Apollo, god of arts and poetry, prevent me from having the temerarious audacity to try even to make a simple draft, a modest sketch that might resemble to a general history of the violin and its origins>.

With these words, filled with awe and restrain, begins Arthur Pougin* the chapter devoted to the origins of the violin in his book *Le violon, les violonistes et la musique de violon*, Paris 1924, pag 17.

The violin and the cello have both the same origins, for they belong to the same family. There is, however, a most important difference: whereas the cello is noble by birth, that is to say, that it was accepted straightaway by the courts of nobility, the violin had to struggle his way into them or, what is tantamount, into classical music. As a matter of fact, the violin, until the second half of the 17th century, was an instrument of lowly origin, used

mainly by Arabs, gypsies and drunken peasants in their merrymaking (dancing and singing) in the open air; an equivalent of today's mandolin. The beginnings of the violin have much in common with those of jazz and tango, music and dances that were exclusively performed by Negroes, being absolutely forbidden in high society, which considered both most "un-chic" (The film *High Society*, featuring Louis Armstrong and Bing Crosby, tells us this story) Later tango and jazz acquired universal esteem, thanks to Carlos Gardel* and Louis Armstrong, respectively. In their turn, jazz and tango have exactly the same origins:

Both originate in the mouth of a great river: Mississippi for jazz, Rio de la Plata for tango.

Both are performed only by Black-slaves and have the same dotted, syncopated rhythm.¹

The idea that the high society and nobility (the consumers of classical music in those days) had on Arabs, gypsies and peasants, was very different than the one we have today, imbued as we are with egalitarian, democratic, tolerant, antiracist and secular elevated principles. In the 17th century these people were thought to be most disgusting and abominable, and the principles of non-discrimination, equality, and the struggle against xenophobia and racism, simply didn't exist. A most accurate account on what gypsies, for example, meant to the well born is given in these Verlaine's* sublime verses:

GROTESQUES (Poèmes Saturniens, V)

*Leurs jambes pour toutes montures,
Pour tous biens l'or de leurs regards,
Par le chemin des aventures,
Ils vont haillonneux et hagards.*

*Le sage, indigné, les harangue;
Le sot plaint ces fous hasardeux;
Les enfants leur tire la langue
Et les filles se moquent d'eux.*

¹ To savour this assertion hear the tango recordings of Horacio Salgan (p) and Hubaldo de Lio (guit) contained in cas 21, side B. They play classical old tangos but with such a rhythm that one simply cannot say where is tango and where is jazz.

*C'est qu'odieux et ridicules,
Et maléfiqes en effect,
Ils ont l'air, sur les crépuscules,
D'un mauvais rêve que l'ont fait;*

*C'est que, sur leurs aigres guitarras
Crispant la main des libertés,
Ils nasilles des chants bizarres,
Nostalgiques et révoltés;*

*C'est en fin que dans leur prunelles
Rit et pleure-fastidieux-
L'amour des choses éternelles
Des vieux morts et des anciens dieux!*

*-Donc, allez, vagabonds sans trêves
Errez, funestes et maudits,
Le long de gouffres et des grèves,
Sous l'oeuil fermé des paradis!*

*La nature à l'homme s'allie
Pour châtier comme il le faut
L'orgueilleuse mélancolie
Qui vous fait marcher le front haut*

*Et vengeant sur vous le blasphème
Des vastes espoirs véhéments,
Meurtrit votre front anathème
Au choc rude des éléments.*

*Les juins brûlent et les décembres
Gèlent votre chair jusq'aux os,
Et la fièvre envahit vos membres
qui se déchirent au roseaux.*

*Tous vous repousse et vous navre,
Et quand la mort viendra pour vous,
Maigre et froide, votre cadavre
Sera dédaigné par les loups!*

<GROTESQUES (Poèmes Saturniens, V)

Their legs as their only mount
their only fortune their golden glance
they go ragged and haggard
down the adventure lane

The wise man, indignant, harangues them,
the foul feels sorry for these crazy adventurers
children put out their tongue at them
and girls mock them

And the reason is that hateful and ridiculous
and maleficent indeed,
they look, at dawn,
as if they were a bad nightmare one had

It is also that on their sour guitars
with their liberty clenched hands
they snuffle strange, nostalgic
and rebellious songs

It is, finally, that in the apple of their eyes
it smiles and weep -irksome-
the love for eternal things
for old defunct and ancient gods!

Go, then, truceless rovers,
wander, disastrous and damned,
along chasms and sand banks
under the hidden sun of paradise!

Nature allies to man
to punish, as you deserve,
your proud melancholy
that make you walk with your head high

and avenging on you your blasphemous,
vehement, vast hopes,
bruises your anathematized forehead
with the shocks of the raging elements

Junes burn and Decembers freeze
your flesh to the bones,
and fever invades your limbs that
tear by the reeds.

Everything rejects and grieves you
And when death, thin and cold,
will come to take you, your cadaver
will be by the wolves disdained!>

The first primitive violins, were strung with three strings tuned as the lowest strings of the “true” violin: g, d, a.; the first evidence of it could well be a wall painting by Garofalo* in 1506 in the Sala del Tesoro at the Palazzo di Ludovico il Moro. The existence of the violin and its family is also well evidenced in frescoes by Gaudenzio Ferrari*. The earliest of which is “La madonna degli aranci” in S. Christoforo, in Vercelli, near Milan, painted around 1530. In this painting we can see a little child (an angel) playing a primitive violin, strung with three strings. Ferrari* painted also the whole violin family, cello, viola and the said three strings violin in the cupola of the Saronno cathedral in 1535. But soon this primitive violin will leave way to the modern true one.

The first written account of the true violin, strung with four strings tuned g, d, a, e, is the Epitomé musical des tons, sons et accordz by Philibert Jambe-de-Fer* in 1556.: *“Le violon est fort contraire à la viole...Nous appelons viole c’elles desquelles les gentils hommes, marchantz et autres gents de vertuz passent leur temps...L’autre s’appelle violon et c’est celuy duquel ont use en dancieries ...”*

<The violin is quite opposite to the viols...We call viol those with which gentlemen, merchants and other virtuous people pass their time...The other is called violin and is used commonly for dancing...> [”A sensu contrario”, those who played the violin must have been for him “non virtuous” i.e. debauched and vicious.]

By the time of Jambe-de-Fer’s* Epitomé, the true violin was well know in Europe, but used only for open air dancing.

It is impossible to assert, with absolute certainty, who was the inventor of the violin such as we know it today. This topic has been the source of countless writings and discussions, and oceans of ink have been wasted in defending each of the different ideas on the subject, but there is no evidence of any of the theories that have been stated. This complexity, the absence of written documentation, and the non existence of compositions and scores devoted to the violin, not needed, for it had the simple role to double the vocal parts, that is to say, to play the same notes as the singer, have led to the most varied theories and complex arguments.

The great majority attribute not one but many different predecessors to the violin. So, for example, the New Grove Dictionary says it has evolved from the rebec, the Renaissance fiddle and the lira da braccio. Others like Pasquali and Principe in “il violino” (Edizioni Curci Milano 1926) list nothing less than 20 ancestors of the king of instruments, and similarly Arthur Pougin* in his *Le violon, les violonistes...* believes it has evolved in a two centuries process of improvements of other ancestors that include the crowth, rubebe, rebec, bow vielle, and the viol.

During the last decades of the 20th century a fever for ever more complicated procedures has invaded us in all respects; our civilisation becomes more and more complicated by the day. This complication, often artificial and needless, affects personal computers, cell phones, motorcars, video tape recorders, etc. Even the simplest things have been complicated on purpose without any plausible reason, and thus we have that a fan has become an *electric-fan*, and a witness is not any more a witness but an *eye-witness*. Things have become so complicated that it is estimated that the use we make of modern high technology instruments is only a ten per cent of their possibilities, because we are not able to keep in mind all of them. Our world has become so complex that the man with one of the highest salaries in the world in the present time, interviewed by the BBC in its program *Hard Talk*, whose services are eagerly wanted by all governments and multinational enterprises alike, is one who is specialised in simplifying procedures and bureaucracies of all kinds.

To fight complexity we must practise *simplicity, simplicity, simplicity*. Following this axiom we may say that the cradle of the “true” violin is Cremona (Italy) and that the violin came out of a single act of volition made by the first great luthier* ANDREA AMATI (b.1510 Cremona; d. Id 1580) followed by his two sons ANTONIO (b. Cremona c1540; d. Id ?) and GIROLAMO (b. Cremona 1561; d. Id 1630), by Girolamo’s son NICOLO AMATI (b. Cremona 1596; d. Id 1684) and by Nicolo Amati’s pupil ANTONIO STRADIVARI (1644-1737).

The use of an additional string towards the treble (E), fourth in the total number of strings used, but called the first, is explained by the need the luthiers* had to give their violins an expanded range of sound, that would counteract the poor response of the lowest (G) string made of gut. [On the violin, strings are call in a descendent order from highest to lowest, (E) first; (A) second; (D) is the third; and (G) is the fourth). The E string will prove to be the most important on the violin, giving it its characteristic soprano, sprightly tone. The French call it “la chanterelle”* (the singing string). La cantarela in Spanish.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

The violin has three characteristics: a) It is like a lover, who demands all our attention and devotion. You have to dedicate it the 100% of your time. b) It must become another limb of the body or, as Isaac Stern puts it, a "third arm". c) Amazingly, a significant number of the very, very great fiddlers loose their capabilities, particularly intonation, around the age of 50.

a) The violin as a lover: This statement is almost a truism, for any Art demands our 100% attention.

i) Nietzsche in his “Human too Human”, chapter four, paragraph 163, says: *"Avoid speaking of natural gifts, innate talents. We can name great people of all kinds who were little gifted. But they acquired their grandeur, became "genius" (as it is normally said) by means of qualities that those who lack them do not like to speak of them; they all had that robust conscience of artisans, which begins by learning the parts, before risking to make a big ensemble; they took their time for this purpose, because they enjoyed more in the success of the little detail, of the accessory, than in the effect of a dazzling ensemble. [See in the Encyclopaedia LESCHETIZKY, who had declared: “conducting is not difficult. It is harder to play six bars well on the piano than conducting the whole of Bthvn 9th symphony”]. “The prescription, for example, for somebody to become a good writer, is easy to deliver, but its fulfilment requires qualities that one usually forgets when it is said: -"I have not enough talent"-*

Devise one hundred or more novel schemes, none of them surpassing two pages, but of such neatness that every single word be necessary; put every day anecdotes in writing, until you learn to give them the fullest form, the most efficient; be indefatigable in recollecting and describing the human types and characters. First of all tell, as often as possible, stories,

and listen to the stories of the others, both with a penetrating eye and ear, to catch the effect produced in the others; travel like a landscape painter and like a dress-designer as well; extract for your own use out of every science what, if it is put clearly, produces artistic effects; consider, finally, the causes of human actions without disdaining the slightest indication that might instruct you, and become a collector of such things day and night: Let go by, in this multiple exercise, some ten years; now, what you will create in your atelier can proudly go out to the streets. On the contrary, what does the majority? They do not start by the little part but straightaway by the ensemble. It is possible that once they might succeed in making a hit, drawing the attention on them, and from then on, their works will be worse and worse, for very natural reasons. Sometimes when the intelligence and character lack to conform such an artistic life plan, it is DESTINY and NECESSITY that take their place and carry step by step the future maestro all the way through all the demanding requirements of his métier". (He had in mind Perlman in advance)

ii) Padre Martini* gives us another example: In a letter to Mozart dated in Bologna 18 December 1776, when Mozart was 20, in his prime, and after having received Mozart's latest and best compositions, he says: "*I am delighted particularly to verify that after the day I had the privilege to hear you in Bologna on the harpsichord you have made such enormous progress in composition. But it is necessary that you continue indefatigably to exercise, for it is the nature of music to demand deep exercise and study, for as long as one lives*"

b) On that the violin must become another limb of the body I have a most delightful anecdote: I had an intimate friend, Fernando Paz Heinz, may he rest in peace, who studied the violin for more than 30 years without much progress. He was dilettante, and blamed his lack of improvement to his teachers who, he said, didn't understand him. Until, at last, he decided to go to the most renowned, and most expensive, too, teacher in Madrid. This man told him that if he really wanted to learn how to play the violin he should make this daily easy routine: *go to bed with his violin and leave it on his bed table as near as possible to him. (a close vicinity was essential during the sleeping hours!); on waking up, he should, first of all, hold the violin in the usual way tucked between chin and collarbone, and go in this manner to the bathroom; there, without releasing the violin so held, he should shave the exposed half of his face, then hold the violin on the right hand side, and shave the other half of the face!!*.

My indignant friend, exasperated beyond measure by such a preposterous nonsense to introduce shaving into a violin teaching method,

understood clearly that all violinists were absolutely mad, and that the best thing he could do was to give up his studies at once!

“E pur si muove” as Galileo said: this exercise is, as his teacher rightly told him, ESSENTIAL to become used to hold the violin inadvertently, as if it were a third arm. Giulio Pasquali and Remy Principe, for instance, recommend, specifically, to walk and to do squats frequently everyday with your hands clasped behind you, and the violin tucked under your chin¹

c) That the large majority of superlatives violinists loose their faculties, particularly intonation, when they approach the 50s is only the result of statistical observation. (On the contrary, old humble violinists, like the typical ragged fiddler beggar in the street, play reasonably in tune, despite their old age) The only plausible reason that occurs to me, might be that by dint of exercising at the maximum their ear to play with such virtuosity and perfect intonation, it gets worn-out, whereas the beggar never did such a titanic effort, and therefore his ear remains almost intact.

The useful musical life of a violinist is very short indeed, and, at best, it won't last more than the span between 25 and the said 50 years of age, that is, 25 years only. Before 25, the violinist is not musically mature enough, and would play only “virtuoso show pieces”, and after 50 he loses his faculties. I say that the limit is 50 years of age, to allow a wide margin, but the reader will see, as the book unfolds, first class violinists losing their faculties much sooner than that.² In order to assert firmly this “assertion”, we will specifically observe it in all the violinists here studied; those affected by this shortcoming will be called “victim of the 50s”. I will give only two examples:

1) Wagner, in his book "My life" (second part, years 1842-1850), when in the year 1843 he is appointed Kapellmeister* of the Dresden orchestra, on the insistent requests of Weber's widow, says that “no sooner had he started, than he elicited the most intense and passionate jealousy of the one who had been, at his epoch, famous virtuoso of the violin, Karol Lipinski, the concertino* of the Dresden orchestra". Lipinski was born in 1790, so when Wagner speaks of him as an ancient virtuoso, it means that by then he was no longer a virtuoso. The words "at his epoch" refer, clearly, to a “remote” past. Lipinski was then 53 years old.

¹ Il violino. Edizioni Curci. Milano 1926. Chap. V, pag 107.

² This explains why, for instance, it is impossible to appreciate through the gramophone the real quality of certain violinists who recorded after their 50s, such as Szigeti, Sarasate and Thibaud, not to speak of Joachim or Auer.