

# I. The Violin



Hans Memling ca. 1480

Five centuries ago, in 16<sup>th</sup> century northern Italy, when Western civilization was finding a new modern identity, and expressing this in a brilliant outburst of artistic, scientific, and social development, the modern violin first evolved. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, a few master violin makers in Cremona had brought the instrument to a state of development, which we still describe in awe, as perfection. No other human artifact has, before or since, won or held that description for so long. The wonder of this is that the term perfection can be used to describe both the violin's visual physical beauty and its function as an acoustic medium to express our most profound needs and emotions in our music.<sup>36</sup> After half a millennium of unbroken tradition, these great violins are still among our most noble accomplishments. Archaeologists from a distant future, or from an extra-terrestrial civilization, could probably extract as much or more knowledge about us from a violin and its modern strings and accessories, as from any other single object. The violin describes, perhaps better than any other human artifact, quite a lot about our sensory apparatus, the state of our technology, and about our most loved, most basic, and most abstract art. The classic Cremonese violin is one of our monumental achievements.

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<sup>36</sup> Boyden (1978) p.184 "The violin, which originated in the sixteenth century, was the new instrument par excellence of the seventeenth century, and the violin family rapidly displaced the older family of viols. In general, the idiomatic development of the violin took the form of two different styles: first, a *cantabile* (song) style modeled on the voice; and second, and more peculiar to the instrument, a style of running passages based on its technical capabilities."

The Violin



1647 N. Amati violin

## Why Cremona?

From the mid-1500s to the mid-1700s, the Amati family and their immediate followers made violins in Cremona. Most violin histories begin with that information; this one will end there, but hopefully will first offer a fascinating and perhaps surprising prologue to the Amati achievement.

Although we really know very little about him, and almost nothing about his family background<sup>37</sup>, Andrea Amati (ca.1505 - ca. 1578) is usually credited

<sup>37</sup> Even today, Amati is not an uncommon surname in Barcelona, Valencia, or Sardinia but it apparently was in Italy (before the Borgias arrived ?) A similar question arises with Meucci's comment "We know from this document that Andrea's father's name was Gottardo. This is not a common name in Cremona," Meucce (2005) Vol. I, p.97. Gotthard however, is a common name in Germanic regions of Europe.



with founding the Amati dynasty<sup>38</sup> which led to Cremona's fame and prestige<sup>39</sup>. Not far away, in Brescia, other talented craftsmen, Zanetto Micheli (ca.1489 after 1560), his successful son Pellegrino Micheli (ca.1520 ca.1606), and Gasparo di Bertolotti (1542 - 1609), born in Salò, and better known as Gasparo da Salò, were working with similar ideas<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Andrea's two sons, Antonio (c. 1537-1607) and Girolamo I (c.1550-1630), better known as the "Brothers Amati", from about 1580 used the label Antonius & Hieronimus Amati both as partners and later when working separately. Girolamo's son Nicolo (1596-1684), was the only major maker to survive the famine of 1628-29 and the plague of 1630. Until 1740 when Nicolo's son Girolamo II died, the Amati workshop continued production.

<sup>39</sup> "It seems that the Cremonese school passed directly from the lute to the newborn violin without developing its bowed predecessors[...]. Another significant fact is that makers of bowed instruments have always been called liutai (lute makers) in Cremona." Meucce (2005) Vol. II, p. 101

<sup>40</sup> Munrow, (1976) p.90, "Today we must be content with placing the emergence of the violin as c.1550 in Italy, after some twenty or thirty years of experimental designs. The earliest representations of the new instrument are found in paintings executed by Gaudenzio Ferrari (c.1480-1546) in the early 1530s."

Salò's pupil, Giovanni Paolo Maggini (c. 1580 - c. 1630), was perhaps the most important violin maker of the Brescian school but the 1630 plague took Girolamo (Hieronymus) and several others of the Amati family, and Maggini not long after. With great good fortune, the then 34-year-old Nicolo Amati was spared otherwise violin history would be very different; Nicolo assumed responsibility for the workshop. Those were difficult times, there was much to disturb progress, they had to deal with foreign armies, the plague (which killed Maggini and some of the Amati family), famine, disease, and war, but a market for violins existed and under his leadership, the Amati workshop became and remained in qualified hands. Not yet married and without his own sons, he needed assistance and decided to accept apprentices; that decision changed the history of music. For some time, a competitive rivalry for market dominance had existed between Cremona and Brescia but after Maggini's death, the supremacy of Cremona was unchallenged and the Amati monopoly of the quality violin market was secure<sup>41</sup>. The Amati workshop and the "apprentices" who emerged from it<sup>42</sup> succeeded grandly. The basic design of the violin has remained essentially stable for centuries. Radical changes have been suggested, and sometimes tried, but the essential Cremonese shape and size remains as the standard. When the violin emerged from the Amati workshop, five centuries ago in Cremona, it altered the world of music forever. But, how did it get to the Amati workshop, and from where?

There was no violinistic "big bang"; the violin did not suddenly spring into existence out of nothing to find an anxious and prepared musical world awaiting its arrival<sup>43</sup>. Before being transformed in the Amati workshop it had undergone a long

period of evolution and even more importantly, it had awaited the growth of a musical need<sup>44</sup>. Both an instrument and its music require economic support to survive and evolve and from the very beginning, violin makers with professional ambition needed to sell their production, and professional violinists needed to sell their talents. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century however, a commercial market for violins and violinists did not yet exist. For more than the first two centuries of its existence, the supporting economy for violin development was essentially dependent upon patronage<sup>45</sup> from the only two institutions who at that time had the power and resources to support interest in the instrument and its music: the Church and the Aristocracy<sup>46</sup>.

The geographic location of Cremona might be considered an unlikely place for such innovative development to emerge. The people of northern Italy lived and worked in a battle ground and were frequently trampled by the foreign armies and allies of France, Spain, and Austria. During the period of the violin's development, Italy as a unified and independent country, did not exist. Instead, the peninsula consisted of politically independent regions in a state of constant change under foreign rule. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian peninsula was controlled by five major powers: Naples, Venice, Milan, Florence, and the Papacy, which were subject to the effects of temporary political alliances, threats of foreign invasion, and dynastic domination by Europe's ruling families. From 1494, when Charles VIII of France invaded Italy, a period of foreign domination began

<sup>41</sup> Referring to a correspondence between the astronomer Galileo and Fulgenzio Micanzio, a Venetian priest, concerning the choice of a violin for his nephew, "Father Micanzio, relying on the opinion of Monteverdi, strongly recommends the "incomparably better" Cremona violins rather than those from Brescia, and he cites prices as an indication: twelve ducats for a Cremona violin but four or less for one from Brescia." Boyden (1965) p.109

<sup>42</sup> Andrea Guarneri and Francesco Rugeri among others

<sup>43</sup> "Before the advent of the violin family there were three main types of bowed instruments played on the arm: the rebec, [...]the renaissance fiddle (a matured version of the medieval fiddle) and the lira da braccio which may be regarded as an offshoot of the fiddle." Munrow, (1976) p.89-90

<sup>44</sup> "Unless it was in unwritten and improvised music, the real potential of the violin was not developed until the seventeenth century when the Italians began to exploit its idiom in the sonata and related forms independent of the dance." Boyden (1965) p. 53

<sup>45</sup> Patronage is a key concept to understanding artistic development. Music invites participation, either active or passive, and is dependent upon both to continue its development. That development is usually guided by the collective judgment, sometimes of a dominant elite segment of a culture, other times by popularity among its broader and less formal segments. Historical studies reveal that evolving art forms tend to reflect the interests of the supporting patrons more than the taste of the practitioners who create it. Essentially... who pays, decides. An "artist" with professional ambitions must either receive specific commissions for new works or rely upon his ability to attract sufficient interest from the general public to provide commercial support.

<sup>46</sup> Schoenbaum (2013) P. 231 "Unlike Stradivari, an icon in his lifetime, Guarneri was discovered a whole lifetime after his death. Stradivari sold his product to the great and good. Guarneri sold his to the not so great and not so good."



which lasted for over 300 years. Soon most of the peninsula was under the Hapsburg rule of Charles V, and in 1556 his son Phillip II, King of Spain, inherited Italy. Spain retained control of Italy until 1713 when Austrian rule replaced the Spanish, and then Napoleon invaded in 1796 and imposed French domination until 1814. Finally, in 1815, Italy once more became a fragmented collection of small kingdoms and Duchies; but Venice was no longer a republic and much of the north remained under Austrian rule. It should not be assumed that all of these changes were peacefully achieved.

Southern Italy also had long contended with “foreign” influence. Some familiar examples particularly relevant to this discussion are: the history and threat of Islamic invasion, a Spanish Pope, the dispersal of Sephardic Jews, and activity of the Crown of Asturias.<sup>47</sup>

Recent studies, such as Woodfield’s “The Early History of the Viol”, and Bisson’s “The Medieval Crown of Aragon”,<sup>48</sup> draw our attention to how Aragonese cultural interests (and musical instrument technology) were transferred from the

Iberian to the Italian peninsula, which is verified in part by the documented activity of Pope Alexander VI. But it should be remembered that through its trading activity and contacts, especially after the events of 1453, Venice received perhaps as much Byzantine musical stimulation as did Naples<sup>49</sup> and Rome from Spain. Stefano Pio, in his “Violin and Lute Makers of Venice 1640 - 1769”, provides a strong alternative argument to the theory that the origin of the Viola da Gamba was exclusively an Iberian contribution. He points out that the lira da braccio and other members of the viola family were already known and used in Venice<sup>50</sup> in the early 1500’s<sup>51</sup>. Byzantine interest in instrumental music prior to 1453 has not been drawn to our attention, perhaps because as Farmer informed us:

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*“Byzantium contributed very little to musical culture. What the Arabs got from Byzantium were the ancient treatises on Greek theory of music, which were practically unknown to the Byzantines save by name. Indeed, it was not until the Syrian and Arab translators turned these treasures into Arabic that the East revived its interest in them.”*<sup>52</sup>  
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Meccue comments:

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*“[...] we can infer that the lira da braccio was nothing but a late and “Specialized” variant of the fiddle, not an ancestor but a contemporary of the violin;” Meucce (2005) Vol. II, p 53*  
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and

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*“[...] it was the violin which gave the lira da braccio its shape and not the other way around [...], a unitary physiognomy anticipating that of the violin cannot be*

<sup>47</sup> Referring to the Aragonese conquest of Naples in 1442, the Borgia Popes (Callisto in 1445 and Alessandro VI in 1492), and “[...]the imposing migration of Separdite Jews [...] in 1492, Italy experienced a real full-scale Spanish invasion. This obviously included musicians (players and probably instrument makers) who in the second part of the 15th century introduced the vihuela, an instrument the size of a large guitar played by plucking (vihuela de mano) or with a bow (vihuela de arco)” Meucce (2005) Vol. I, p. 25

<sup>48</sup> “La escasez de informaciones concretas sobre los violeros españoles del siglo XV contrasta con sus notables aportaciones en la creación de novedosas tipologías instrumentales que más adelante se desarrollarían en Italia y otros países europeos. Son abrumadores los estudios publicados respecto a las influencias que los instrumentos españoles ejercieron en Italia, como vimos en el estado de la cuestión. Entre un grupo de musicólogos italianos se está extendiendo la teoría de que los judíos expulsados en 1492 y algunos moriscos que se trasladaron a Italia, fueron en gran medida, los responsables de un trasiego de influencias claves para el surgimiento del arte de la violería en aquellos territorios. De momento, no tenemos informaciones que acrediten esta práctica entre los judíos, por lo que sería conveniente conocer las fuentes que han podido dar base a estas afirmaciones. Los instrumentos de origen ibérico citados por Tinctoris, las influencias culturales y estéticas ejercidas a través de las cortes aragonesas en sus territorios mediterráneos, el entorno cortesano y musical de la familia Borja, o Borgia, las cartas de Isabel D’Este encargando instrumentos musicales contruidos “alla spagnola” y la abundantísima iconografía que refleja el desarrollo de estas tipologías en Italia, son evidencias que parecen confirmar la certeza de una influencia intensa. En sucesivos apartados de este trabajo, redundaremos en estas fuentes de enorme interés para nuestras búsquedas.” Martínez (2015) p. 68-9

<sup>49</sup> Naples was “Spanish” for almost the entire 16th century, from 1503 to 1707.

<sup>50</sup> Referring to the 16th century Venetian viols, John Dillworth says, “Although it is tempting to see these as forerunners of the violin, developments probably occurred simultaneously in all three types, viol, lyra, and violin[...].” Ed.Stowell (1996) p.8

<sup>51</sup> “The lira da braccio must not be regarded merely as a toy of theorists and dilettantes. It occupied a central position in the musical performances of Italian courtly life, particularly in the first part of the sixteenth century.” Munrow, (1976) p.90

<sup>52</sup> Farmer (1929) p.105

attributed to the primitive *lira da braccio*, neither as regards morphology nor tuning." Meucce (2005) Vol. II, p.59

Meucce informs us:

"Although it did not occupy the same role as Brescia and Cremona, Venice was of some importance in the violin-making field in the second half of the 1500s. The lagoon town was home to a considerable number of German craftsmen involved in making lutes, as well as others producing bowed instruments."<sup>53</sup>... and further, "While Brescia, Cremona, and Venice were centres of excellence and great importance in the early history of the violin, it is nonetheless evident that the fashion for the new violin consorts was a general phenomenon that spread all over northern Italy[...]"<sup>54</sup>

"The Italians developed a musical style central to which was the cantabile of the solo voice reinforced by a passionate mode of expression and by a harmony and rhythm that sought to illuminate the text."<sup>55</sup>

## 1492, a very eventful year

"History sooner or later takes back her gifts."<sup>56</sup>

In 711 CE, Tariq ibn Ziyad led an Islamic army from North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula and defeated the Visigothic King Roderic. Within a decade, Muslim armies dominated Iberia and had spread well into France, but were troubled by internal divisions. By 760 they had withdrawn to the Iberian side of the Pyrenees. For the next seven centuries, much of the peninsula was their homeland and with the aid of distance from Middle Eastern political dominance, their culture flourished even as their territorial control diminished.

<sup>53</sup> Meucce (2005) Vol. I, p.71

<sup>54</sup> Ibid p. 73

<sup>55</sup> Boyden (1965) p.101-2

<sup>56</sup> Braudel (1995) p 147

"The Moorish lands of Majorca and Valencia had existed for generations on borrowed time. Both lands had come under Roman rule in the second century BC. The Balearic Islands (chiefly Majorca and Menorca) fell to the Vandals in the fifth century AD, were conquered by the Byzantines in 534, and while not untouched by early Muslim incursions passed definitively to the emirate of Còrdoba only in 903-4.

Valencia's Roman – Visigothic history was uninterrupted until the Muslim invasions, which culminated after troubled centuries in a remarkable prosperity in the eleventh century. Menaced by the Castilians from 1065 and later subject to the Cid and his allies, Valencia submitted to the Almoravids in 1102. After the conquests of Ramon Berenguer IV, she remained the lone bastion of Moorish power in the eastern peninsula, weakened by struggles of Muslim chieftains in which independence of the Almohads required the purchase of protection from the count-kings."<sup>57</sup>

Near the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a number of important factors in European history, some resulting from previous exclusion and defeat, reached their peak. The marriage of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile united Spanish power enough to significantly alter history. After eight centuries of Islamic occupation of the Iberian peninsula, in 1492 the last Islamic part of Spain, Granada, was captured and Muslims unwilling to convert to Christianity were subjected to expulsion. When that concept was expanded to include all non-Christians, Jews were also listed for expulsion in the Alhambra Decree of 1492. Since al-Andalus had become a center of Jewish life in the early Medieval period, thousands of Jews emigrated, and many trade centers in North Africa, Portugal<sup>58</sup>, the Netherlands, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire were pleased to accept highly skilled, well connected, and often wealthy tradesmen. Spain's loss was not immediately noticed; the effect of losing such an important economic segment of its citizenry

<sup>57</sup> Bisson (1986) p. 63

<sup>58</sup> Portuguese history was changing; Vasco da Gama returned from his successful voyage around Africa to India in September 1499, the Portuguese fleet under Pedro Cabral claimed Brazil in April 1500, and although Jews were initially welcomed, they were expelled as the Portuguese Inquisition developed in 1536.

was offset by the discovery of the “New World” in 1492 by Columbus, and the enormous wealth that soon poured into Spain. Not immediately apparent to Europe’s political leadership at the time were other changes taking place; a newly united Spain provides an excellent example. Although the voyage of Columbus had Asia and an alternative to the Silk Road (and all of its intermediate commercial handling) as its goal, the discovery of the Americas in essence turned attention to the Atlantic rather than the Mediterranean. Instead of Barcelona and the Crown of Aragon as Spain’s major economic capital, Seville with its American trade gained precedence. European economic, military, and political power began shifting northwards, from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. A necessary effort was made to augment Spanish administrative competence:

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*“The emergence of a unified Spain in the later fifteenth century created a need for well-educated royal officials. The first rulers of the unified country, Ferdinand and Isabella, as well as their successors, Charles V and Philip II, recognized this need and promoted higher learning.” Nauert continues, “After 1493, appointment to the highest administrative offices was restricted by law to those who had studied civil or canon law for at least ten years.”*<sup>59</sup>  
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Also significant in 1492 was the election of a music loving Spaniard as Pope Alexander VI.

<sup>59</sup> Nauert (1995) p. 123

## A modest beginning

Players of the viola da gamba had already developed advanced bow techniques<sup>60</sup>, and the instrument had spread through several of Europe’s aristocratic courts, but when the violin first appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the lute was still the most prominent stringed instrument in use. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Italy was the home of many well-known lute makers. Venice, Padua, and Bologna in particular were well known for their fine lutes. Less well known is that almost all 16<sup>th</sup> century and most 17<sup>th</sup> century “Italian” lute makers came from a small German town called Füssen; the famous lute makers of Venice<sup>61</sup> and Bologna such as the Sellas family, Laux and Sigismund Maler, Hans Frei, and Nicola Sconvelt were German immigrants. For instrument makers, Füssen has a special place in history. In 1562, when the lute maker’s guild was founded there, the town of about 2,000 inhabitants already had over 20 master workshops. Eventually, more than 80 master workshops made Füssen an important source of instrument making, and violins became a major product. A most interesting fact is that there was no “local” market to provide the necessary economic support for so much activity: exports were essential. From the beginning, Füssen exported instruments to foreign markets, but before long the makers themselves were moving to the cultural centers of Europe. Many northern Italian cities, but also Prague, Lyons, and especially Vienna, whose workshops were dominated by Füssen makers, owe their prominence as centers of instrument making to this migration. Matthias Klotz (1653 - 1743) brought violin making from Füssen to nearby Mittenwald, and founded a still existing tradition of violin making there. Klotz studied with one of the Railich family who had good connections in Italy; Giacomo Reilich, for example studied with Nicolò Amati in 1683 - 1685. The Klotz family led Mittenwald to become a major violin production center. From nearby Absam in the Tyrol, Jacob Stainer (1617 - 1683) gained great fame and influenced many 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian makers as well as most

<sup>60</sup> Diego Ortiz published *Trattado de glossas sobre clausulas y otros generos de puntos en la musica de violones nuevamente puestos en luz* in 1553 in Rome, he was in Naples from about 1553 until his death in 1570.

<sup>61</sup> Pio (2004) p.139 points out that the plague of 1630 created an opportunity for Tyrolean liuteri in Venice.