

What Size Viola?

VIOLA EXPERIMENTA

By Robert Dolejsi

When the Violin finally reached her destiny in the ideal instrument that knows no peer today, and was recognized as the stringed mistress of the soprano family, it fell to the unfortunate lot of that hapless maiden Viola to become the subject of avid experimentation.

In their search for an instrument of identical design and superb characteristics, makers, luthiers, artisans and, (indirectly through suggestion) composers and players, conducted intense experiments to find a medium of deeper register that would represent the alto and tenor voice and thus complete the quartet of strings. There is ample ground in all instrumental bibliography to support the theory that experimentation was one of the chief causes for the numerous sizes in fiddles that marked instrument making in the viola category from the 17th century onward.

That generic English term *Viol* designated the instrument that succeeded the medieval fiddle. In literature at least, though not in actual invention, it preceded the violin family; for it must be emphasized that contrary to general conception, the viol was more the precursor and not the predecessor or direct ancestor of the violin. This distinction in progenitorship belongs to that branch of the instrumental tree represented by the rebec and Iyra—and all three branches were growing and developing simultaneously side by side.

The experimental premise had already been laid in the highly variegated family of viols. Oddly enough, and paradoxically too, it appears that the viola or tenor (the names were interchangeable during a period when great confusion in sizes and types existed), was the first of the viol family to adopt changes in tuning and string number. This was during that period of bitter conflict when the soft-toned viols were obviously being pushed into the background by the more powerful and brilliant members of the violin family.

We need to consider only some of the following types and specimens of the makers' art to realize what confusion existed among artisans when the instrument next in size to the perfected 14 inch violin was the subject. Some of these examples were played normally; i.e., held up by the arm; some adopted a strap holding device; and others were held between the knees. But there definitely was a trend to create an instrument possessing an alto or tenor quality which would fit into the middle voicing of music that separated the soprano from the bass.

The list below (and it is only partial) enumerates a conglomerate family that approached the viola in measurements as they are known today.

Tenor violin, total length 22 ½ body - 16 21/32”.

Viola da braccio, total length 27 7/8 body 17 7/8 “.

Viola Bastarda, made in five different pitches.

Viola di Fagotto, different tuning and sizes—one of the smaller members, possibly the forerunner of the viola d'amore.

Viola da Spalla, slightly smaller than the pomposa.

Viola Pomposa, total length 30 ½ body 17 7/8 “.

Violet, sometimes called viole d'amour. Violetta Marina, a viola with sympathetic strings.

Violotta, total length 28 1/8—body 16”.

The experimental influence of the family of viols and their close and distant cousins in the Iyra and rebec clans therefore must be taken into serious consideration, since here was expounded the theory to create an instrument that would sound ideally within its respective tonal range. Different tunings, different sizes (with and without the sympathetic strings) multi-stringed experiments (I named four) establish further the confusion in makers' doctrines.

There were at one time different instruments of even the violin family with various tunings. A writer in 1636 reproduced a fantasia by Henri Le Jeune, where different clefs were used, and the tunings were known as the Dessus, the Cinquieme, Haute Contre and the Taille. Eventually the Haute Contre became the alto and the Taille the Tenor. The mere fact that various makers were inspired to create different kinds, types and sizes of instruments of the violin family by the whims of different composers is substantiated from the time and compositions of Bach and Handel who designated tenor violins in their compositions—(John Christian Bach has a long viola passage in his Overture Opus 18 No. 3. The register indicates a tenor violin with a low tuning). Again, Max Schillings made effective use of a tenor violin or violotta in his opera “Der Pfeifertag”. Among the makers we find Vuillaume (Paris 1855), Dubois (Paris, 1833), Hopf (Josephstadt, Bohemia, 1800) and Zorzi in Florence as late as 1908, conducting experiments with the tenor violin family. Thus we see that the practice was spread all over Europe.

Today, in the finding of many sized violas from the shop of the same maker we must reason of course that all examples do not represent the original measurements of their respective creators, for they have suffered through deformative operations (some of them certainly of a criminal nature) by various subsequent artisans.

Literature of the times too had its effect on viola sizes, for the parts indicated for the viola player (incidentally a violist is not a player of the viola but a performer on a viol) of a century or more ago did not by a great degree require the technical dexterity that must be the viola performer’s today. Hence we may say that a large instrument would have offered no obstacles in the performance of any of the old works—excepting, perhaps, in an extended chamber music session, when the arm would indeed have felt its burden.

So we may assume that the premise for experimentation was firmly established and was constantly the vogue when we arrive at the period of Herman Ritter of Wurzburg (1849-1926), and his then famous but now obsolete viola alta—a mammoth instrument with a total length of 26 inches and a body measurement of 18 7/8 inches. These instruments were constructed according to the instructions of Ritter by K. A. Horlein in Wurzburg from 1872 to 1875. (Dr. Taylor omitted a Ritter viola from his interesting list). Ritter claimed the viola alta as his own invention, although really it was but a revival of the large tenor viol, and, as we know, Stradivari, already in 1690, had built a tenor viola of exactly the same body length which Ritter adopted—18 7/8 inches. Perhaps the great master too was seeking the ideal 3:2 ratio (discussed later) that a viola tuning theoretically demands, but realized the impracticability of the theory because of its unfitness from a physical standpoint.

Ritter’s desire to improve the muffled tone of the viola incited him to create an instrument that should possess all the ideally resonant tone of the violin. His inspiration and enlightenment undoubtedly was derived from a pamphlet by Antonio Bagatella which was called *Regole per la costruzione di violini, viole e violoncelli*. A German translation of this work which originally was published in Padua in 1783 appeared in Leipzig in 1806.

Ritter’s performances on his instrument attracted Wagner at the time he was at work on the Ring des Nibelungen, and also brought into his classes at Wurzburg, where he was professor of music, a vast number of pupils. It is said that in 1889 five of his students were members of the orchestra at Bayreuth. That the viola alta was of practical worth however is hard to believe because of its enormous measurements. It may have allowed long, sustained melodic passages to be negotiated successfully—but for the technical demands of modern literature and the difficult viola transactions in Wagnerian scores it must have been a clumsy medium indeed.

But Ritter did have in mind a sound theory when he sought to emulate the brilliance of violin quality on a larger instrument. He undoubtedly propounded the theory of the intervallic ratio; i.e. since viola tuning is one fifth lower than that of the violin and the fifth indicates a vibratory ratio of 3:2, it would naturally follow that an instrument built in proper proportion should have a body measurement of 21 inches ($3:2 = 21:14$). The utter impossibility of playing an instrument of such dimensions violinwise undoubtedly induced Ritter to construct what to him would be an example representing the nearest playable ratio. The 187/8 measurement was the result. That this instrument proved to be too large for all practical purposes is evinced in its relegation to obsolescence.

We now come to Dr. Taylor’s pertinent query—What size then is ideal for a viola? It is manifestly improper to enter the small viola into the category of ideal sizes—by small I mean under 16 ½ inches- for if we admit that the 3:2 ratio in theory is ideal we get much too far from it in the creation of a short stringed viola with all its undesirable characteristics, chief of which is a stiff, tubby and wooden tone. This latter deficiency is not enhanced in the least by the use of thin gauged strings, for the tone then becomes shrill, reedy, and nasal. Berlioz recognized this fact and remonstrated against the diminutive viola in orchestral works. Naturally its employment in chamber music should be looked upon with dismay.

I must not neglect to point out that, curiously enough, the small viola today serves a highly practical purpose (albeit some may say not a very noble one), in its adaptation by the numerous fiddlers in “name bands”, and some radio stations where the player “doubles”—that is, changes frequently from the violin to the viola. He finds that the use of the small viola does not impair his efficiency on the violin. I need not emphasize that it also does not greatly enhance the viola’s representation—or reputation!

Concerning Dr. Taylor’s third query as to whose opinion and recommendation would be considered authoritative to define proper viola dimensions, I would not hesitate to state that those of us who have spent a lifetime with the viola under all the trying conditions of symphony, opera, chamber music and solo engagements, constitute a group of criteria worthy to form a definite opinion on the subject.

The viola of from 16 to 17 inches is ideal from all viewpoints. I consider even my Carlo Tononi with a measurement of 17 1/8 inches slightly too large. If therefore we must specify a smaller instrument for players of short reach and fingers, and a larger one for the more fortunately endowed to play their chosen medium, then the measurement should be limited from 16 5/8 to 17 inches. This allows for sufficient elasticity in size to provide for the physical limitations of any individual who plans to make the viola his chosen instrument.

The demands of the solo, orchestral, and chamber music literature of today preclude the usage of an instrument either too small for essential sonority and quality or too large to allow adequate technical accomplishment.