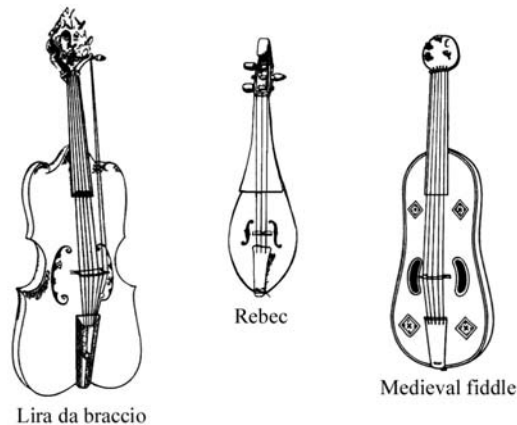


A Brief History of the Violin

The violin is a descendant from the Viol family of instruments. This includes any stringed instrument that is fretted and/or bowed. Its predecessors include the medieval fiddle, rebec, and lira da braccio. We can assume by paintings from that era, that the three string violin was in existence by at least 1520. By 1550, the top E string had been added and the Viola and Cello had emerged as part of the family of bowed string instruments still in use today.



It is thought by many that the violin probably went through its greatest transformation in Italy from 1520 through 1650. Famous violin makers such as the Amati family were pivotal in establishing the basic proportions of the violin, viola, and cello. This family's contributions to the art of violin making were evident not only in the improvement of the instrument itself, but also in the apprenticeships of subsequent gifted makers including Andrea Guarneri, Francesco Rugeri, and Antonio Stradivari.

Stradivari, recognized as the greatest violin maker in history, went on to finalize and refine the violin's form and symmetry. Makers including Stradivari, however, continued to experiment through the 19th century with archings, overall length, the angle of the neck, and bridge height. As violin repertoire became more demanding, the instrument evolved to meet the requirements of the soloist and larger concert hall. The changing styles in music played off of the advancement of the instrument and visa versa.

In the 19th century, the modern violin became established. The modern bow had been invented by Francois Tourte (1747-1835). Its weight, length, and balance allowed the player to produce power and brilliance in the higher ranges. It was Louis Spohr's invention of the chin rest around 1820 that made it possible for the player to hold the violin comfortably and play in the higher positions. Spohr's chin rest also resulted in the significant advancement of playing technique and allowed the violin repertoire to reach its virtuoso level. The advent of the shoulder rest (no known date) was also an important contribution to the ease of playing.

Players in Bach's day held the violin by placing a chamois on their shoulder so the violin would not slip, but stay in place by gentle pressure from the chin and shoulder. The instrument was angled towards the floor constricting movement of the arm underneath the neck and thereby prohibiting playing in the upper positions. The Bach E Major Violin Concerto was composed at a time (ca. 1720) when the violin had no chin or shoulder rest, had a shorter fingerboard, and was strung entirely of gut strings. Players also used little or no vibrato. All this combined with the bow in use (shorter and lighter than the present day Tourte bow), made for a soft, muddy, rough sound. Today's performances sound louder in volume, but softer in texture. The sound has a brilliance and clarity to it that would not have been possible in Bach's day.

Despite the fact that violins in Bach's time were not "modern" by today's standards, his solo string instrument compositions are some of the most challenging repertoire for any serious student of the violin, viola, or cello.