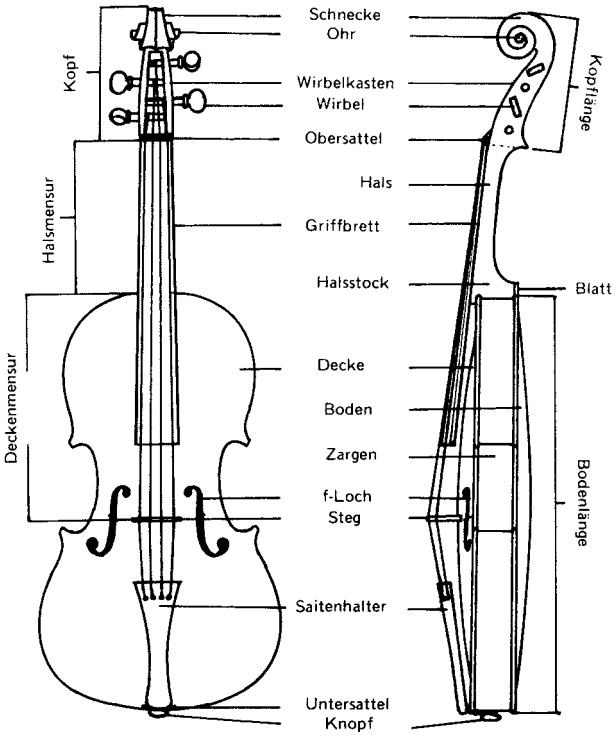
The Violin



Structure of the violin © MIM, Illustration: Olga Adelmann

The violin is the soprano in a family of instruments developed in Northern Italy at the beginning of the 16th century. The violin and its sister instruments, the viola and the violoncello, cannot be traced back to one sole inventor. They are the early culmination of a multi-stage development. The terminological diversity that continues into the 18th century bears witness to this. An early iconographic source for the violin is a painting by Gaudenzio Ferrari, which was painted around 1530. It displays the typical body shape, though not all of the features that resemble the violin we know today.

Just one century later, the violin was such a famous musical instrument that the composer and music theorist Michael Praetorius declared in his treatise *Syntagma Musicum* (1619) that it was unnecessary to »expound upon and write about them anymore« as they were »known to every man«. From then until now with our avant-garde music, the violin has been an essential component of the orchestra and, along with the piano and guitar, the most popular instrument in Western musical culture.

The standard features of the instruments in the violin family are, in short, as follows:

1. Characteristic rounding of the body with protruding corners in the middle
2. Heavy bout and base arching
3. Scroll above the peg box
4. Two sound holes in the shape of an f
5. Bout and base edges reach out over the rib
6. Four strings in fifths tuning, in g d^1 a^1 e^2 on the violin

There have hardly ever been any changes to these features – much unlike the viola da gamba, which were made very differently by instrument makers. The violin consists of around 70 parts. Its modest appearance is opposed by its acoustic complexity. The base and ribs are mostly made from sycamore, while spruce is used for the bout. The neck and head are usually made from sycamore; ebony has regularly been used for the fingerboard since the early 19th century. Nowadays, the strings are usually made from gut wrapped in steel or silver, with the E string – the highest – being made only from metal for better durability and a more brilliant sound. Synthetic strings have been gaining popularity over the past few decades.

At first glance, the violin, the viola and the violoncello have remained largely unchanged since the 16th century. However, the violin – like actually many other instruments – has been substantially modified throughout its history. The reasons for this are to be interpreted as less technical in terms of perfection and rationalisation, and much more due to the social shifts in the music world from the mid-18th century onward. This is when bourgeois concerts emerged. Not only did the aristocracy see musical performances, but the middle classes also began to attend such concerts. The public grew stronger – the power of the people. Anybody could attend a concert providing that they had a ticket. And many came. Concert halls were constructed, civilian orchestras were founded. These conditions sprouted virtuosity, whose the legendary ambassador was Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840).

Until then, the violin was soloistic and used in chamber music and as a tutti instrument in orchestras. The violin compositions of the Baroque period are more like concerti grossi, and are not actually considered virtuosic. With the arrival of public concerts emerged the profession of the traveling virtuosi. Now, the violin

Violin, Gennaro (Januarius) Gagliano, Naples, 1750, cat. no. 5446
© MIM, photo: Jürgen Liepe

had to perform at concerts in this setting as well. Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824) was one of those composing violinists who gave new accents to playing the instrument. His compositions, which include 29 violin concertos, required greater position playing, meaning that the fingers touch the strings on a larger area of the fingerboard than before. This created the need for the fingerboards to be extended. However, a new fingerboard alone was not enough for the violin to hold its own in an orchestra. In order to produce a more powerful sound, the existing instruments were redesigned; the neck was replaced with a new one, which was approximately 5 to 10 mm longer, but the original scroll with the peg box was retained. A new kind of attachment of the neck to the body of the violin ensured a stronger hold; the neck was embedded into the top block, a reinforcement which is glued onto the rib, and not just from the outside. This kind of neck extension was already being done before the year 1800, but it wasn't until after then that new instruments were being made with necks that had the new scale. The bridge was raised by 5 to 6 mm. This enhanced the volume of the sound. To offset the greater string tension, the bass bar needed to dip lower into the bout. The sound post, a cylindrical piece of wood fastened between the base and the bout, was reinforced as well.
In addition to this, the violin bow was modified. The technical, stylistic changes in articulation and phrasing were compensated for by extending the bow and changing the weight distribution.
Only a few old violins with no changes to the neck have been passed down. Two examples of violins with the old scale include one attributed to the Alemannic luthier Joseph Meyer (cat. no. 4519) – restored to its historical condition – and one violin from the Mittenwald-based luthier Joseph Klotz, dated 1788 (cat. no. 5382). This instrument still has an original neck.
Characteristic examples of two (of many) schools of violin making are an instrument by Antonio Stradivari (1644–1737) from his so-called »golden period« (cat. no. 4467) – it is one of approximately 600 preserved violins by the renowned old luthier whose instruments are the model for countless imitations – and the violin by Jakob Stainer (1621–1683) from Absam, a town north of Innsbruck, the founder of the so-called German school (cat. no. 5176). Typical of Stainer is the much higher arch in the base and the top in contrast to Stradivari and others. Stainer violins are also perpetually imitated.
The most famous imitator of old masters is the Parisian luthier Jean Baptiste Vuillaume (1798–1875). He replicated the instruments with extraordinary skill. Of his works, the museum possesses a violin with a man's head (in place of the scroll) and base inlays that Vuillaume produced in the apparent style of the legendary Gaspard Tieffenbrucker (cat. no. 5261).

Detailed descriptions can be found in our *Katalog der Streichinstrumente* (Catalogue of string instruments) by Irmgard Otto in collaboration with Olga Adelmann (Berlin 1975).

Musikinstrumenten-Museum SIM PK
Guide Sheet No. 8, 2nd revised edition 2013
Author: Martin Elste
Translation by Ü-Werk GmbH