

The Viola da Mano in Renaissance Italy: A Synopsis

by Hiro Minamino

A Flemish theorist and composer, Johannes Tinctoris, in his treatise *De inventione et usu musicae*, written in Naples about 1480 and published there between 1481 and 1483, described the origin and physiognomy of an instrument he called *viola* thus: "Indeed the invention of the Spaniards, the instrument which they and the Italians call *viola* and the French *demi-luth* is descended from the lute. However, it differs from the lute in that the lute is larger and shaped like a tortoise-shell whereas it [the *viola*] is flat and in most cases curved inwards on each side."

The artists from the Kingdom of Aragon in Valencia began from the mid fifteenth century onwards to depict such stringed instruments. One of the earliest depiction of the new Spanish instrument may be found in an anonymous painting of "Madonna and Child" from the province of Aragon in the mid fifteenth century that shows a body of an instrument with a curved waist, a sound-hole, double-strung strings attached to a flat bridge, and a plectrum being played with a plectrum. Another type of Spanish *viola* with a gently incurving waist began to appear in increasing numbers in the Spanish paintings of the late fifteenth century. A clear instance of such instrument may be seen in "The Coronation of the Virgin," an early sixteenth-century Valencian painting that shows an instrument with a thin body, a sound-hole with a small decoration near the joint, a flat bridge, a long fingerboard with seven strings, a reverse lute-like peg-box, and several tied frets. The player plucks the strings with the thumb and index finger, indicating the polyphonic manner of playing. The change of constructional details, such as the shape of the sound-board, may have been due to the change of playing method from the plectrum-plucking technique to the finger-plucking technique (therefore resulting in the change of musical style from the monophonic ensemble practice to the polyphonic solo practice) and to the separation of the *viola* into two distinctive types, a plucked *viola* and a bowed *viola*.

During the last two decades of the fifteenth century and the first two decades of the sixteenth century, there were abundant references to the plucked *viola*, referred to by various names (generically called *vihuela de mano* in Spain and *viola da mano* in Italy), from several major Italian courts such as Naples, Rome, Mantua, Venice, Ferrara, and Urbino. The *viola da mano* quickly became a quite fashionable musical instrument among professional instrumentalists and amateur dilettanti. The Roman humanist Paolo Cortesi in his treatise *De cardinalatu* of 1510 called it "lyra hispanica" and pointed out its popularity, although he dis-

liked the instrument because of its sound. Naples produced the legendary virtuoso Luis de Guzman, who was described as "the greatest player of his time on the vihuela." Isabella d'Este had the instrument-maker Lorenzo da Pavia make for her a "lute" in authentic Spanish fashion, both in form and in sound. The Mantuan lutenist Giovanni Angelo Testagrossa stole two "vyolonj spagnolj" that belonged to Isabella when he left the Mantuan service. Cardinal Ippolito I d'Este possessed four "violonj alla napolitana." The lutenist Giovan Maria Hebreo is documented as having played the "viola." Baldassare Castiglione in his *Il libro de cortegiano* advocated vocal music, of which the most artistic was the solo singing of poetry accompanied by the *viola*.

There is abundant iconographical evidence for the presence of two types of *viola da mano*, one with a sharply cornered waist, the other with a gently incurving waist. Bernardino Pinturicchio

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mention the addition of ornaments which many sixteenth-century instrumentalists regarded as a necessary process for making the final form of intabulation. This suggests that Panhormitano's main concern in his treatise is a theoretical application of intabulation for the *viola da mano* and that his knowledge on this subject was limited to the fundamentals and was not based entirely on his practical experience. The absence of reference to any instrument he may have had some ability to play points to only a casual acquaintance with the very instruments for which the treatise is written. Although the prime reason in the treatise is to instruct the beginners the rudiments of intabulation, the lack of instructions on the art of ornamentation and other emendation techniques necessary to make performing versions certainly diminishes its usefulness for advanced players. The publication of the *Dialogo quarto di musica* was in all probability a local affair, which did not perhaps have much impact on players of the *viola da mano* or the lute in other parts of Europe.

Naples was the only major center for the cultivation of the *viola da mano* during the rest of the sixteenth century. One reason for this may be "nationalism," for the *vihuela de mano* was invented in Valencia and first exported to places, such as Naples and Rome, where there were political and family ties with Valencia, and at a time when the Spanish held political powers over these places. It may not be surprising that musicians of the courts where the *viola da mano* was once enthusiastically sought lost their interest after the Aragon and the Borgias lost their political influence. The lasting popularity of the *viola da mano* in Naples is the shadow of a once shining instrument, made possible by the continuous governing of the Kingdom of Naples by the viceroyalty of the Holy Roman Empire. The attitude of Neapolitan instrumentalists is similar to that of their Spanish counterparts who overwhelmingly accepted the *vihuela de mano* instead gravitating towards the lute, which was the dominant plucked stringed instrument in other countries.

There appears to have been no vigorous activity of the Neapolitan *viola da mano* players during the second half of the sixteenth century; there was a lack of music composed or intended for the *viola da mano* after Sultzbach's two books of tablature in 1536, and there was a seemingly restricted dissemination of Panhormitano's intabulation treatise of 1559 to other parts of Italy. The biographies of Luigi Dentice, Fabrizio Dentice, and Giulio Severino, however, suggest that there was a constant flow of Neapolitan instrumentalists to Spain. We may safely assume that these musicians acquired the latest production in music (manuscripts or prints) and encountered the newest fashion in performance practices on the *vihuela de mano*. They must undoubtedly have brought back their findings to Naples and disseminated these to the wider public.

The life of the *viola da mano* in Renaissance Italy was a brief and limited one. Unlike the dominant position held by the *vihuela de mano* among the secular instruments of Spain during the sixteenth century, the *viola da mano* in Italy took the role of a peripheral instrument to the lute and the bowed viol. The scarcity of available instruments outside Naples must have imposed limitations on what otherwise might have been the wide and lasting popularity of the *viola da mano* in other parts of Italy. The Italian instrumentalists who had a desire to play the *viola da mano* had to

content themselves with the lute, which was more easily accessible. The interchangeability of music composed for the *viola da mano* and music composed for the lute certainly made this easy. The interchangeability was also made possible by the fact that musical style, playing techniques, notation, performance practices, tuning and intabulation method are quite similar between these two instruments. It was not a mere historical coincidence but a conscious interaction between lutenists and *viola da mano* players in exchanging the ideas, facilitated both by geographical proximity and because these instrumentalists (who may have cultivated both instruments) sometimes were hired by the same patrons and worked side by side.

The traces of the *viola da mano* began to disappear in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century. Few references to the possession and cultivation of the *viola da mano* at the beginning of the seventeenth century indicates that in general the instrument had lost its popularity by then. The decline of the *viola da mano* in Italy coincided with the decline of the *vihuela de mano* in Spain. The instrumentalists of the time favored more the instruments that could provide a chordal foundation, rather than those that were apt for realizing the finesse of the contrapuntal fabric. The instrument that performed a single line of music by plucking the strings with a plectrum when it was first invented, and later modified to cope with the simultaneous production of polyphonic voices by plucking the strings with fingers, was not the one best suited to the new musical style. Therefore, it is understandable that the declining cultivation of the *viola da mano* was due to changes in musical style and taste and that the *viola da mano* lost its support and popularity as it came to be seen as an archaic instrument.

The instrument that replaced the *viola da mano* was the guitar. Professional and amateur musicians sought on the guitar the technical ease of strumming chords and its effectiveness as an ostinato instrument. The guitar was likely to have been invented in Spain, modeled on the modified version of the *vihuela de mano*, in the early part of the sixteenth century. Therefore, it is quite ironic that the decline of the *viola da mano* was partially due to the rise of an instrument that was a subspecies of the *viola da mano*. Or, perhaps we should say that the *viola da mano* survived in another form.

Hiroyuki Minamino

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