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The 'cello' in the Low Countries : the instrument and its practical use in the 17th and 18th centuries

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Conclusions

In the Introduction it was shown that in the 20th century hardly anything was written about the 17th and 18th-century cello in the Low Countries. For the early history of the cello and its music, reference books concentrated mainly on Italy and some other European countries around the Low Countries. According to this modern literature, the history of the cello in this country started properly not until the 19th century.

Several of these reference books, however, were illustrated with Dutch paintings from the 17th century which made me wonder what the situation in the Low Countries actually was during that period until about 1800. The obvious paradox in 19th and 20th-century reference books between the lack of written information and the presence of Dutch images in these books relevant to the subject made me formulate the following research question: *What was the name, the appearance, development and the playing technique of the cello and was music composed for this instrument?* My research has shown that there is not one simple answer to this question.

The combination of sources used for this research and the (combined) results from the different chapters show unequivocally that the bass violin and cello were used in the Low Countries in the 17th and 18th centuries.

As far as the name, the appearance and the way of playing was concerned, there was a lot of variation. My research has shown that the Dutch 'cello' did not have one specific shape, that it was not played in one specific way and that people used several different names for the 8' bass instrument of the violin family (and these names could sometimes also be used for the viol). It was also shown that over two centuries the cello developed from a large instrument (with a few exceptions) playing a simple bass line to an instrument of more or less modern dimensions playing solo sonatas (and basso continuo!).

Furthermore I came across many names of cellists performing and studying in the NN, and among them were also many Dutch cellists. My research has shown that Dutch composers wrote (solo) music for the cello as well as Dutch violin makers were building cellos.

In the following paragraphs I will elaborate on a few striking results.

I was amazed that especially in the 17th century so very many paintings and other works of art (including luxury consumer goods) with representations of cellos and cellists had been created. The amount of images I found during the years of research went beyond expectations. These images, however, would be 'worthless' for my research in case they would not have been realistic. In Sub-chapter 2.1 I have quoted several authoritative art historians (Westermann, Dibbitts, Hoogsteder) who stated that 17th-century visual art was indeed quite precise. Of course one image is more realistic than the other: as shown in the Section on tiles a left-handed bowing cellist could well have been a mistake by the artist using the transfer pattern the wrong way round and not a left-handed cellist taken from real life. In this sense especially the find of the collection of drawings made for Baron de Joursanvault was valuable. I was able to compare the pictured cello technique in these drawings with that found in all the images in my research corpus. Also from this point of view it was shown that many images are indeed very realistic even though they are often not as pronounced as the Joursanvault instruction drawings. Their precision was also confirmed by quotes from several cello methods and treatises and (parts of) remaining instruments.

In both NN and ZN quite some images of mixed shape instruments were produced. These instruments did not completely look like the 18th-century cello, but they could possibly still be considered a 8' bass instrument of the violin family. It was shown that the tuning of the strings was a decisive factor in determining whether an instrument belongs to the da braccio or the da gamba family. Since this cannot be deduced from images, many representations of mixed shape instruments were added to the research corpus.

The mixed shape instruments were mainly depicted in the 17th century and with larger numbers in the ZN than in the NN. In the ZN there were also some 18th-century examples. These mixed shape instruments could also explain the confusing array of names found in written sources. In Chapter 1 I explained that some names by themselves did not make clear what instrument was actually referred to.

It has been common knowledge that cellos used to have four and sometimes five strings, but I have also found a few images and (mostly non-Dutch: German, French and English) descriptions of 6-string cellos. A few times I got the reaction from my supervisor Ton Koopman that the 6-string instruments were not cellos but viols, even though they completely looked like a cello. Since I have also found descriptions of 6-string instruments, I am convinced that the few images I found of 6-string instrument are meant to be cellos. Regrettably these descriptions did not offer information about the tuning of the strings. And especially the tuning of the strings matters for the cellist: a tuning in fourths requires a different fingering and also different thinking than a tuning in fifths (as has been normal on the cello since the 18th century). An extra string with a complete tuning in fifths is less complicated than extra strings along with a tuning in, for example, fourths.

Even though some researchers had already written about underhand playing, as was shown in the Introduction, it was not clear whether playing with underhand grip was a common practice in the 17th century or that just some cellists played like that. My research has shown that at least in the Low Countries many cellists in fact did play with an underhand bow grip. The overwhelming evidence came from images supported by European written sources.

In the Introduction I shortly discussed the words "return" and "adopted", which, in my opinion, both pointed into the direction that before the 17th century quite possibly cellists used to play with overhand grip. Since the amount of images from the 16th century is so small, I am not able to draw definite conclusions. The very few images I have found, however, indeed show this trend: most 16th-century cellists in my research corpus do in fact play with an overhand grip. What does it say about all the depicted cellists in the 17th century playing with underhand grip, if it is true that in the beginning cellists played with an overhand grip, and not until viol players started playing cello as well does one find the underhand grip? Does it mean that all these cellists were in fact viol players switching to the cello? This is something which cannot be deduced from images and I have not found any convincing evidence in the matter. As a result this aspect remains inconclusive and more research is needed. From my own playing experience, however, I can say that changing a lifelong habit is not the easiest thing to do. Playing overhand or underhand requires a completely different technique.

Therefore the fact that in the 17th century apparently so many cellists played with underhand grip is new for many. When nowadays playing music from this century with an overhand grip, we, baroque cellists, should be aware that we might not be playing 'authentically'. I write 'might', because not all images show an underhand grip, but the majority of cellists is indeed depicted playing in this way.

Instead of 'authentically' I think at present one prefers the term: 'historically informed'. To say, as a cellist, "I am aware that cellists in the 17th century often played with an underhand grip, but I prefer the overhand grip" is one way of dealing with the information and in a way it is 'historically informed'. But in my own practice I very much prefer to also try and possibly use the underhand bow grip. There is definitely a difference between the sound and articulation produced by players bowing underhand and overhand. I am still in the process of learning this new technique, but it makes me, without doubt, a more versatile cellist to be able to play both underhand and overhand.

Regarding size, my research has shown that in the Low Countries more than a third of all depicted 17th-century instruments were larger than the instrument we play today. Quite often, however, baroque cellists in our times play both 17th and 18th-century music on the same (smaller) instrument. Apart from the difference in sound due to different tunings of the strings, instruments of different sizes sound differently as well. The sound of my bass violin (a modern copy of a large size Stradivari cello) is much rougher than the warm sound of my (original) 18th-century (English) cello. In the past, when I did not yet have this bass violin available, I used to play 17th-century repertoire on my baroque cello. This is possible since the music is technically not difficult, and even in case the music requires a somewhat lower tuning it is possible to play it on a cello tuned CGda by transposing some passages an octave higher. However, since I now own this bass violin, I have experienced a clearly audible sensation when noticing the changed sound of the ensemble. For mid-17th-century repertoire I will definitely use my bass violin more often.

In Chapter 4 I discussed the scordatura sonatas (opus 1 and opus 2 no. 6) composed by Jacob Klein. All sonatas were notated in grip notation, which shows what, at least for Klein, was the frame of thinking: a string tuning: CGda. It is very interesting that Klein's sonatas were composed around the same time as the scordatura suite composed by Johann Sebastian Bach.

As the different sizes of instrument influence the sound, also the scordatura tunings influence the sound and resonance of the cello. I find it a 'must' to use the intended tuning, in order to do justice to the evidence from the relevant period (and not, as is often done out of practical reasons, to play in 'modern' tuning). I have experienced myself that the resonance changes completely and that the piece of music undergoes a significant change.

When I started my research it was my hope that I would find conclusive evidence for the Dutch name of the 17th-century bass violin. My research, however, has shown that many different names for the 8' bass instrument of the violin family were used in treatises and other written sources. Some of these names were used for both bass violin and bass viol, and of some names the meaning was even indecipherable. Many of the names mentioned in the written sources, however, were not used in sheet music. Here other indications were used, for example: 'laeghste- geluid', a name not even specifically meant for bass violin.

The name used the most was: 'basviool'. In the future I will use this name when discussing the 17th-century instrument.

Apart from the instrument in Klein's opus 1 and Mr Carolo's sonatas, in the 18th century the instrument was always called: violoncello.

It was very surprising to find that a member of the well-known 18th-century Magito family was practically forgotten in modern times. Whereas Pieter Magito is still known today as the first Dutch circus director, the cellist-composer-engraver Alexis Magito is almost unknown. By chance I found his sonatas, music which is technically not extremely demanding but very entertaining and often really beautiful. I have been able to date the sonatas better than was done by others before and I have managed to find quite some details about Magito's life here and in England. His music is a very valuable addition to the cello music composed by other Dutch baroque composers.

I started this study by saying that until now hardly any research had been done on the cello in the Low Countries before 1800. The marginal references to music composed here and the Dutch images used in reference books indicated that the cello must have been used in the Low Countries. My research has revealed a large amount of new knowledge and information. The assumption that the cello hardly existed in the Low Countries in the 17th and 18th centuries and that only Willem de Fesch composed cello sonatas has been proven wrong. In short: over 850 images of cellos and cellists were retrieved: images showing what the instrument looked like and how cellists used to play in the Low Countries; the Dutch names for the 8' bass instrument of the violin family and several sets of cello sonatas were found (partly only references to, now lost, music).

The outcome of my research has changed me as a baroque cellist. Working as a historically informed cellist I will vary more the instruments I use for playing music of different periods (even though having more instruments is an expensive 'hobby') and I will experiment with playing with an underhand grip. Apart from the De Fesch cello sonatas, now also sonatas by for example Jacob Klein and Alexis Magito are available. In this respect I hope this research will also be inspiring and informative for the field of early music, i.e. my cello colleagues.

In the Introduction I stated that this research could only be done by a Dutch cellist. This has indeed been proven to be the case. I had to read many Dutch sources, and above all, many technical issues had to be tried out, for example fingerings and the way the cello was supposed to be held. I shall also be able now to show the results of my research in concerts and pre-concert talks.

My dissertation has become voluminous, but in order to get the best results I had to combine the written evidence with their pictorial, musical and instrumental counterparts.

I hope that my dissertation has changed the overall picture. My research will go on!