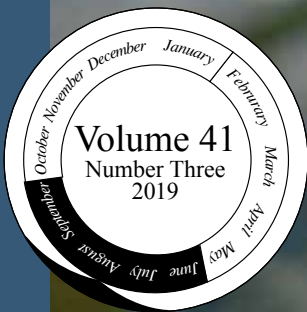


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BASS WORLD



The English Greate Dooble Basse, 1600s

by Joëlle Morton

Most have an inkling that England was an important place for the history and development of the double bass. There are many beautiful instruments owned and played today that were made by 19th century English luthiers – basses by Fendt, Forster, Hawkes, Lott and Panormo are particularly sought and cherished. And of course, Domenico Dragonetti's name and importance is directly linked to London since he spent most of his life there after arriving in 1794. But what about the English 'bass scene' during the Baroque era, prior to Mozart and Haydn and Beethoven's time? Very little has been written on this subject, so I thought I'd step back about two centuries to try to lay out the history of the first 'large' English instruments since they were very different from later classical and romantic incarnations.

The music:

The earliest English music that requires an instrument larger and lower than a bass viol or cello dates roughly from ca. 1610-1710, and represents at least five composers. From Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) and Giovanni Coperario (ca. 1570-1626), there are nine *fantasias* and one *galliard* for viol consort where the bottom part is labeled 'Double Base' or 'The great Dooble Basse', and these lines descend to low AA. Eight of the pieces are for an ensemble of three viol players and the remaining two pieces are for four. From George Jeffreys (ca. 1610-1685), there is a cantata titled *Felice pastorella*, dated ca. 1669, that has an opening *Simphonia* with a part for the 'Greate Basse' that goes to low BBflat. John Blow (1649-1708) wrote an anthem, 'Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle', ca. 1680 with a part for 'Double Base' that is shared with a 'Base Flute' (recorder) going down to low C#. And from Jeremiah Clarke (ca. 1674-1707), there are four songs that are part of odes or masques composed for performances between 1694 and 1703 that go to low AAs or GGs: 'Song on the Assumption,' 'Tell the World,' 'The Four Seasons, or Love in every Age,' and the 'Barbados Song.'

Very important: ALL of the music just described was intended to be played AT its NOTATED PITCH. And in each and every case, these bass parts are the main and only bass parts, they are NOT doubling instruments. They function in a way we would nowadays assign to the cello or bass viol. You can't quibble about that kind of detail. Even if you love the sound of super-low parts

more than an octave away from the next part higher, these parts go down to low BBflats, AAs and GGs, and there is simply no bowed instrument (then or now) that would have been capable of playing/sounding those parts an octave lower!

Tunings/Treatises:

There are almost no English treatises or encyclopedias to describe what types of string instruments existed, or how they were tuned. Even for the viola da gamba family, which was so widely played and written for by English composers, the materials are ridiculously sparse. The only English viol manual is by Christopher Simpson, 1659, but he only speaks about the bass viol, nothing smaller, or larger. Thomas Mace's **Musick's Monument** of 1676 is also no help. The only thing of use to us is a handwritten manuscript by James Talbot, thought to date to ca. 1694. Talbot lists two large instruments: a "Double Bass Viol or Violone or Double Bass with 6 strings" tuned: GG C F A d g, and a "German Gross Contra Bass Geig or Double Bass with 5 strings" tuned: FF/GG AA D F# A. In modern terms, we'd call these instruments the G violone and the Viennese bass. Talbot's manuscript was compiled about 85 years after the pieces by Gibbons and Coperario, and only a decade or two after the very first mention of Viennese tuning on the continent (1677). But the low nature of Viennese tuning means it almost certainly played its parts sounding an octave lower than written. To play music discussed above in its correct octave would put the player in a high region of the instrument that was not considered idiomatic for any string instrument at that time. However, the musical parts do fit entirely logically and idiomatically on a G violone.

Instrument(s):

There is a single known English instrument of 'large size' that dates to the 17th century, of the period for the music that was just described. Sadly, the table, ribs and head of that instrument do not match its back, and it is only the 3-piece flat back with a characteristic viol-family bend. That back is in itself clear evidence that at least one English builder made instruments of this magnitude! The maker, Edward Lewis (living and working in London 1687-ca. 1740), is very well known (10 bass viols in particular). This large instrument has a body length of 115.3cm, width(s) of 49.3/37.4/61.3cm, rib depth of 16.4cm, and a current string length of 106.7cm. The neck is thought to be original, although the fingerboard, tailpiece, bridge and pegs are new. The head is also not



Violone back, by Edward Lewis
(photo provided by the author)

original, although it is 'old.' So the current set-up with 5 strings is conjectural, as is a date of 1695 (erroneously published in at least one double bass history book). Assuming this instrument originally had an appropriately sized top and sides, how many strings would it have had and how would it have been tuned? At 115.3cm, the body length of this instrument is 'just short' but also 'just long' enough to allow for a variety of options.

From the viol family: D violone would be surprising, given that tuning is rarely mentioned on the continent, and not in any English sources, and that instrument's tuning relegates it to sounding its part down an octave, which is not appropriate for the music we've been discussing. And an A-tuned violone would be very unlikely by the last part of the 17th century, plus the large size would make it difficult to obtain a good sounding top string. So that leaves the G violone, which to my mind is extremely plausible. The G violone tuning would be by far the most logical assumption for this instrument, if not the only real possibility, given how exceedingly common it was during this period on the continent, and the fact that it's range exactly suits the pitches for these pieces. But it's also possible that Lewis used a 5-string setup, forsaking the G (or A) violone's top string. Large 5-string viols are sometimes depicted in iconography, and even without the top string, this instrument would still have an adequate range for the extant music.

This instrument is also large enough to take a genuine double bass tuning, even if I find that less likely. By double bass tuning I mean three or four strings in either 4ths or 5ths. But like the D violone, the strings would be so low as to require a player to realize its parts an octave lower than notated. A second problem arises in the lack of English documentation for double bass tunings – there isn't any documentation of that nature from England during the 17th century.

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Peter Lely (1618-1680), *The Concert*, ca. 1650. Oil on canvas 123.1 x 234 cm. The Courtauld Gallery, London.

Returning to Lewis's reputation as a viol builder, and evidence that 17th century English music required a large bass to play its part at pitch and sometimes functioned as part of a proper viol consort, my guess is that in its original orientation, the large Lewis instrument was probably crafted as a G violone, with either 5 or 6 strings.

Iconography:

There are two good, albeit differing, sources of English paintings from the period under discussion:

Peter Lely (1618-1680) was a Dutch painter, who moved to England ca. 1641, and was appointed Principal Painter to Charles II in 1661. Lely himself played the lute, and liked to have live music played in his studio while he painted.

The Concert (ca. 1650) is a self-portrait, showing a twilight, wooded landscape where Lely plays a large, 5-string violin-shaped instrument. Though no frets can be made out in the painting, the instrument is almost certainly a member of the viol family, since at this time viols held specific class connotations, being commonly played by well-to-do amateurs, whereas violin family instruments were played by lower status professionals. The size of this instrument suggests it's a G or A violone.

Marco Ricci (1676-1730), Italian, traveled to England in 1708 to collaborate with Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini (1675-1741) for the staging and sets of Italian works at the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket. There are three paintings by Ricci of rehearsals for the 1708 production of Alessandro Scarlatti and Nicola Haym's opera *Pyrus and Demetrius*, with large bass instruments depicted. It is difficult to make out precise details of the instruments in his paintings, but in all three, the bass lurks in the background next to a cellist and harpsichord. One painting seems to have a 3-string instrument, and both others 4-string instruments.



Marco Ricci (1676-1730), *Opera Rehearsal* (Wikimedia)

The establishment of an Italian opera orchestra in London took place in 1705-1706, and the first personnel roster lists 'Saggione' (real name Giuseppe Fedeli, an Italian, and composer, who died 1733) as the player of the 'Double Base.' Fedeli's opera *The Temple of Love* was produced at the Haymarket Theatre, London, in March 1706. By 1715 he settled in Paris, where he acquired some following as a composer of chamber



Marco Ricci (1676-1730), *Riunione musicale*, ca. 1708. Oil on canvas 46.5 x 58 cm. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.



Marco Ricci (1676-1730), *Rehearsal of an Opera*, ca. 1709. Oil on canvas 464 x 578 mm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

music. He and Montéclair are credited by Corrette (1781) with having introduced the contrabass at the Paris Opéra. I find this interesting, given that the very earliest known French true double bass parts sounding an octave lower than written were composed by Marin Marais, in 1701. In

any case, the Ricci paintings would seem to imply that by the first decade of the 18th century the English had some use for a true doubling bass instrument, with a function that starts to approach what we now consider standard for a double bass. But this type of instrument (and approach)

would seem to be something entirely different from that required for the music of the 1600s that was described earlier.

Historical/Literary documentation:

From the early part of the 1600s, both Orlando Gibbons and Giovanni Coperario were employed by Prince Charles, and also by the Hatton family at their estate in Northamptonshire. Orlando Gibbons was in the service of Prince Henry by 1608, and remained there until the prince's death in 1612. There is also evidence at court among Prince Henry's musicians in the period 1610-12, for "Thacompte of Sir David Murray" ["the accounting of Sir David Murray"] records a payment for "Voyalls twoe greate ons" ["Viols two great ones"]. Also at court, wind player Jerome Lanier was paid £20 'for a greate base Vyall' in 1624/5, and Alfonso Ferrabosco II was paid the same amount for 'a greate Bass Vyall and a greate Lyra' in 1626/7. Sir Christopher Hatton (1581-1619) was a wealthy English politician, and married to Alice Fanshawe, with the family estate in Ware, Hertfordshire. The Hatton family were patrons of Orlando Gibbons and later George Jeffreys (starting 1650s), so it's plausible that they both composed for a particular instrument that was owned by the Hatton family.

There are three other English literary references for large instruments: A 'Greate Base Violl', valued £15, is listed in a 1638 inventory of Ingatestone Hall in Essex. The English composer and organist/viol player John Hingeston (ca. 1606-1683) left a 'great double Basse' to William Gregory Jr. in his will of 1683. And Claver Morris (1659-1727), a doctor and amateur musician in Wells, is known (from information he wrote in the 1680s) to have owned an instrument by Lewis that he referred to in different sources variously as a 'great Bass-Violin,' a 'large Bass-Violin' and 'my Double-Bass.' (Wouldn't it be 'great' if it was the back of Claver Morris' instrument that still exists?! Nothing to prove that, however.)

Conclusion:

During the 1600s, there is ample documentation and evidence to suggest that English composers and players knew and wrote for a member of the viola da gamba family that was larger than the standard bass viol, descending to low AAs and GGs. Using modern terminology, we would call this instrument a G or A violone, but in original English sources, it was labeled in a variety of ways, such as 'great bass viol,' 'great dooble basse' or 'double bass.' No matter the name, we should not confuse this 17th century instrument with the modern double bass because it seems to have stood on its own as the primary bowed bass instrument, playing its parts at notated pitch, instead of doubling another instrument and sounding an octave lower.

By the 1700s, things likely started to change. Italian opera reached England during the first decade of the new century

and Ricci's paintings suggest that English practice in that type of dramatic setting matched contemporary practices on the continent. By 1724, J.C. Pepusch defined for his English readers a 'violone' as: "A very large Bass Violin, or Double Bass, it being as large again in every Way as a common Bass Violin, and the strings twice as thick and twice as long, renders the Sound just an Octave lower than the common Bass Violin. This instrument is used only in Great Consorts, as Operas, and other publick Musick."



Joëlle Morton (photo provided by the author)

Joëlle Morton is a widely sought performer and teacher, specializing in violas da gamba, violoni and historical double basses. Active primarily as a soloist and chamber musician, Joëlle directs the Scaramella chamber music series in Toronto, and is a regular guest continuo player for a wide variety of chamber music projects the world over. For many years, she was the Editor of *Bass World* for the ISB; and during her tenure as such, she established and oversaw the design and implementation of their Online Journal of Bass Research (www.ojbr.com). Joëlle is the recipient of Special Recognition Awards from the ISB for Historical Performance (2017) and Scholarship (2005). Since 2005, Joëlle has been teaching at the University of Toronto where her viol consort meets weekly at Hart House, using their spectacular collection of antique viols. At UofT, Joëlle also teaches historical basses — G and D violone, contrabasses tuned in both 4ths and 5ths (underhand and overhand bows, as desired) and Viennese bass. Before discovering and turning to a specialty in early music as a graduate student at the University of Southern California, Joëlle studied double bass with Joel Quarrington, John Gowen, Thomas Martin, Roger Scott, Ludwig Streicher, František Pošta and Paul Ellison. 🎻