

Masters of the bow - Biber to Bach

Most of you will have heard some virtuoso music whether you know the name of the composer or not, but before going any further I should give you something of a definition of what the word virtuoso means. In various dictionaries it's described in the following way;

one who excels in the technique of an art for example, a highly skilled musical performer...

A virtuoso was originally someone who was a highly accomplished performer or composer. However, by the nineteenth century the term became restricted mainly to performers, both vocal and instrumental, whose technical accomplishments were so pronounced as to dazzle the public.

As I think you will see and hear in this presentation, the virtuoso understands that while there is no "definitive" performance, that one can create, in that "existing in the moment" of the live concert experience a performance whose communicative and emotional power renders it "perfect". As a member of the audience one can know this too – these are those performances during which we enter a state of wonder and there is sometimes a feeling of risk in such performances rather like watching someone on a high wire and the feeling that they could fall off.

I have really enjoyed researching this topic and sharing my enthusiasms. My only challenge has been there is so much that I have had to leave out. The point of these classes is to give you some ideas as to where to look if you are curious and if you

want any more guidance I'm happy to be asked. Now to introduce you to Biber, sorry to disappoint, the original one and spelt slightly differently.



Whereas most of the major developments in string playing happened in Italy during the 17th and 18th centuries and included familiar names like Vivaldi, Corelli and Tartini, more of them later, we have to go to Bohemian-Austria to meet one of the first great violinists and composers, **Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber 1644 - 1704**. His violin technique allowed him to easily reach the 6th and 7th positions, which was very unusual at the time and he could play multiple double stops and liked exploring the various possibilities of scordatura, which is where the open strings are tuned to different notes than the fifths we're used to. It can be quite complicated. Biber was also famous for writing descriptive music like his Battalia. It's remarkable because it re-creates the battle sounds of muskets and cannons using strings alone, and includes a discordant passage in which the musicians play in several keys simultaneously which really sounds very strange.

Here are the **New York Baroque Incorporated** playing the Battle from Battalia

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8YN26FOTGU

A little later in 1695 in Bergamo Italy **Pietro Antonio Locatelli** was born. He was clearly an unusual talent and at the age of 11 ended up in Rome having lessons with Corelli and already developing his career and. During his lifetime he travelled

The story behind sonata starts with a dream. Tartini allegedly told the French



astronomer Jerome Lalande that he dreamt the devil appeared to him and asked to be his servant and teacher. At the end of their lesson he gave the devil his violin and asked him to play to test his skill- the devil began to play with such veracity that

Tartini felt his breath taken away. When the composer awoke he immediately jotted down the sonata, desperately trying to recapture what he had heard in his dream. Despite the sonata being successful with all his audiences, Tartini lamented that the piece was still far from what he heard in his dream. In his words: "So inferior to what I've heard, that if I could have subsisted upon other means, I would have broken my violin and abandon music forever. Here is the cadenza played by **Anne Sophie Mutter with Lambert Orkis**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kz0LJe-4efk&frags=pl%2Cwn>



Of course we are all very familiar with the music of **Antonio Vivaldi** who lived from **1678 - 1741**. He was a composer, a virtuoso violinist, a teacher, and a Roman Catholic priest. Born in Venice, the capital of the Venetian Republic, he is regarded as one of the greatest and most famous of the Italian baroque composers and his influence during his lifetime was



widespread across Europe.

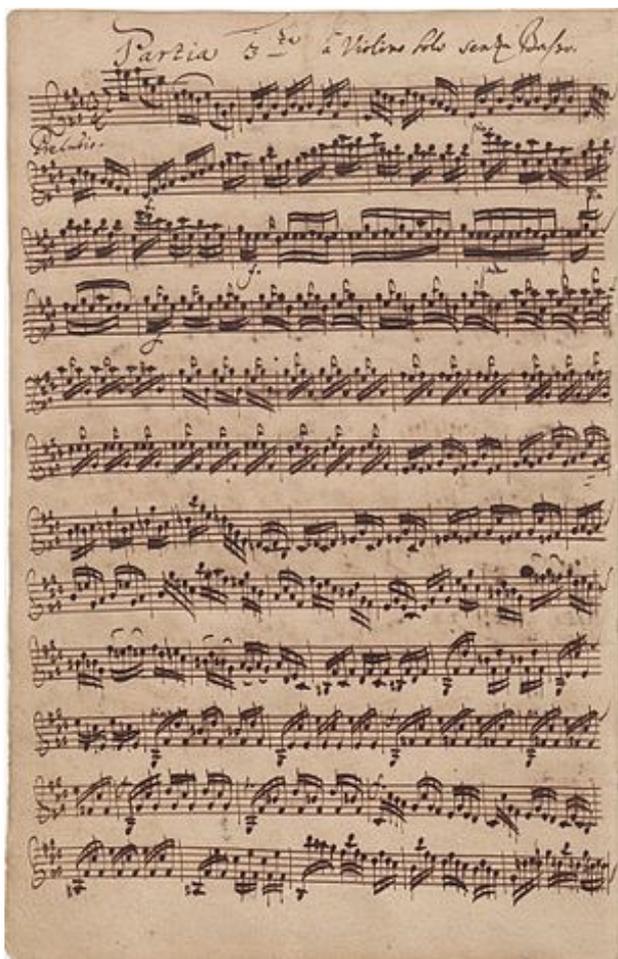
We are all very familiar with the Four Seasons but what I'd like you to hear is one of his many other violin concertos, he wrote over 300! Here is a marvellous performance on the baroque violin by **Giuliano Carmignola** who gives us a real red bloodied idea of the virtuosity that people of the period might really have heard.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvauBuYeQ2I>



Now slightly out of the field of the virtuoso player and composer is Johann Sebastian Bach 1685 - 1750. But I couldn't really talk about string music of the baroque period without including something of the The Six Unaccompanied Partitas and Sonatas for Solo Violin or The Six Cello Suites.

The manuscript that you can see is that written by Bach's second wife Anna Magdalena and I think its remarkable for it's sheer beauty. If you go online you can see the entire Partitas and Sonatas written in this elegant and loving hand.



You have to imagine that this was painstakingly written straight down in ink by someone, probably by a time in her life without the greatest eyesight and copied at best, only by daylight or in the evenings by candlelight, absolutely remarkable. Of course these iconic works deserve a whole presentation to themselves but right now I'm just going to play you a couple of movements.

The first is by a wonderful Dutch cellist and recognised Bach pioneer **Anner Bylsma** and

he is playing the Prelude from the first Cello Suite in G major BWV 1007. Then we have the great Latvian violinist **Gidon Kremer** playing the Double Presto from the B minor Partita BWV 1002

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWX_mohRkQ4&frags=pl%2Cwn

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XL95vwU92qo>

Masters of the bow 2 - Into the 19th century

Luigi Boccherini 1743 – 1805 was an Italian composer and cellist. As a virtuoso cellist, Boccherini often played violin repertoire on the cello, at pitch, very difficult to do, it was a skill he developed by substituting for ailing violinists while touring. This supreme command of the instrument brought him much praise from his contemporaries and his fame was cemented by his cello concertos and string



quintets which were vehicles for the extra cello to shine whilst being accompanied by the other players. Boccherini settled in Spain in 1761 and one can hear a strong Spanish influence in his quintets.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekkgb64Rdqw&frags=pl%2Cwn>

Undoubted virtuosos from the classical period, but not so interesting in terms of developing violin technique are people like Rode who wrote 13 violin concertos, Kreutzer, with 19 violin concertos and Viotti with 22 violin concertos. Those who had gone before and those who we are about to discover were certainly more groundbreaking and their music is certainly charming but perhaps not so thrilling and we've only got time for thrilling here !



The 19th century was next golden era in the development of the repertoire for the violin and for those virtuosos that took the world by storm and none more so than the Italian from Genoa - **Niccolò Paganini** 1782 1840.

His great success as a touring virtuoso came quite late in his career and he was in his early 30's when he started his enormous concert tours playing throughout

Europe and visiting this county more than once. Thousands of people would line the streets to see him arrive in a city and his concerts would sell out within minutes. Paganini was known as the devils violinist with his stunned audiences believing that they had seen the devil by his side whilst he was playing. Now I will let his music speak for itself played by a rather unusual South Korean violinist called **Roman Kim** playing God save the King Variations.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GflrUhvIWU4&frags=pl%2Cwn>

Not to leave our viola players out of things here is the very great Scottish viola player **William Primrose** playing the 24th Caprice.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn3RYzDuQcE>

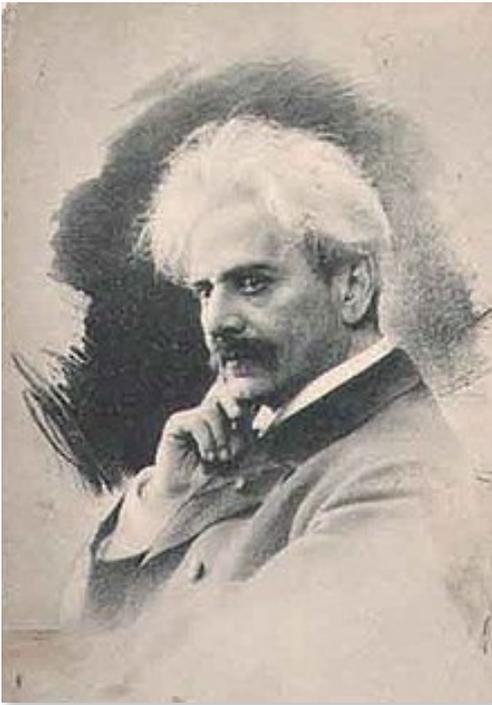


Not to leave our cellist friends out I'd like to include **Jacques Offenbach 1819 –1880** who was a German-French composer, cellist and impresario. He is probably most famous for his Galop Infernal from operetta Orpheus in the Underworld otherwise known as the Can Can. He was known to have a great sense of humour which often got him into trouble. He regularly messed around when he was employed to play the cello in the Paris Opera and had his pay docked for playing pranks during performances; on one occasion, he and the principal cellist played alternate notes of the printed score, and on another they sabotaged some of their colleagues' music stands to make them collapse in mid-performance. Anyway, here is some rather fiendishly difficult cello



playing from the young **Edgar Moreau** recording part of the 3rd movement from the Grand Concerto in G Major.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGsTqAYPiYE>



David Popper 1843 -1913 was a Bohemian cellist and composer. He studied the cello under Julius Goltermann and soon attracted public attention making his first tour in 1863; in Germany he was praised by Hans von Bülow, son-in-law Liszt who recommended Popper for a teaching position at the newly opened string department at the Conservatory at Budapest. In Budapest, he played in the Budapest Quartet with the famous violinist Jenő Hubay and he often played chamber music occasion

with Brahms. Here is the wonderful **Emanuel Feuermann** playing Popper's Spinning Song.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8r4UOGkIYUk&frags=pl%2Cwn>



That brings us to **Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst** 1812 – 1865 a Moravian-Jewish violinist, violist and composer. He was widely seen as the outstanding violinist of his time and certainly one of Niccolò Paganini's greatest successors. Not only did he contribute to polyphonic playing, but he also discovered new idiomatic ways to compose polyphonically conceived violin music. Here is **Vilde Frang** playing his

transcription of the Schubert song The Erlking where the solo violin part incorporates both the piano part and that of the singer. The song tells the tragic story of anxious young boy being carried on horseback at night by his father rushing to find medical aid being followed by the demon Erlking threatening to take the boys life.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3h9K4gR2LE&frags=pl%2Cwn>

Following that I thought I have to show you this next performance in which you will hear an instrumentalist and a singer except in this case they are both the same person and I have to tell you that this is quite remarkable. Here's **Nathaniel Pierce**.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=na5O3Ock9zs&frags=pl%2Cwn>



Henri Vieuxtemps 1820 - 1881 the Belgian composer and was yet another child prodigy making his debut in Paris at the age of nine having been taken there by another of the great violinists of the time and a name which some of you will be familiar with, Charles de Beriot , whose concertos you might have played, and with whom he studied. By the age of 13 he

was being compared to Paganini and indeed met the legendary violinist who came to his London debut in 1834. He wrote 7 violin concertos, some string quartets and various other pieces for viola and cello but right now I'd like to play you a more recent child prodigy, **Lela Josefovicz** playing the end of his 5th violin concerto in A minor.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKxFk4yclCA&frags=pl%2Cwn>



The Polish violinist and composer's **Henryk Wieniawski** 1835-1880 remarkable talent was evident by the time he was nine when he was exceptionally, as he was a foreigner, accepted into the Paris Conservatoire. He studied there for three years before embarking on extensive tours with his brother as his accompanist. By the time he was 17 he was having his compositions published and they are still hugely popular today. Here's one of my favourite violinists **Ivry Gitlis** playing the Polonaise in D major Opus 4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_gDPe6IcE4

Heifetz plays Wieniawski Scherzo Tarantelle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bv5XZbgNWEo&frags=pl%2Cwn>



Pablo de Sarasate 1844 – 1908 was a Spanish violin virtuoso and composer. Apparently, after seeing his father struggle trying to play a difficult passage for a long time, he picked up the violin and played it perfectly. By the age of eight he had made his first public appearance in La Coruna. Like Wieniawski was also sent to Paris to study at the Conservatoire and made his debut there in



1860 and in London a year later. During his career he played all over Europe, North and South America. He wrote many marvellous works for the violin but I have to say I have one thing against him. He refused to play the Brahms violin concerto saying “why should I stand and listen to oboe solo at the beginning of the second movement when I am the soloist” Anyway, he is one of those players from the 19th century whose playing was recorded at the very beginning of

the recording age, so here is **Sarasate** playing Tarantella from 1903.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khKbYQLqYRc>



Eugène-Auguste Ysaÿe 1858 – 1931 was another Belgian violinist, composer and conductor and during his lifetime was regarded as "The King of the Violin". He entered the Conservatoire at Liège but soon afterwards he was asked to leave because of lack of progress. This was due to the fact that, in order to support his family, the young Eugène had to play full-time in two local orchestras, one of which



was conducted by his father. In his story two names that we are now familiar with come together. The story goes that the young Ysaÿe was practising in his cellar one day when none other than Henri Vieuxtemps was passing by and took an interest in what he heard. As he taught at the conservatoire he got him readmitted and sent him to study with his assistant, one Henryk Wieniawski ! Ysaÿe was also a marvellous composer and wrote six solo sonatas for the violin in which you can hear he must have

been an incredible violinist himself. I'm going to play you part of the third sonata in D minor which is my favourite played here by **Maxim Vengerov** and after that, as Ysaÿe lived into the age of recording I think it's fascinating to hear what someone sounded like who was born when Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Schumann and many other of the great romantic composers were alive. Here he is playing part of the 3rd movement of the Mendelssohn concerto.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc-j4ftH2X4&frags=pl%2Cwn>

Vengerov Ballade

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9Zk66YL24c> Mendelssohn