

Violin Cases of the Baroque Period

GLENN P. WOOD

Historical violin cases constitute a small subset of antique collectibles and have hitherto received very little attention even from the violin enthusiast community whom they have served for centuries. Violin cases dating to the baroque period (approximately 1600 -1750AD) are very rare and are mostly to be found in museum vaults or private collections. Here, for the first time, Dr. Wood presents his registry of all the specimens of baroque violin cases he has encountered during 15 years of research. All are from Europe, most are from Italy and some are believed to be from the workshop of Stradivari. These silent sentinels of history have survived wars, pestilence and the ravages of time in their duty of protecting valuable violins.

The baroque period in Europe is loosely defined as the century and a half from 1600 to 1750. This period corresponds to the emergence of the violin as the dominant successor to the viols for concerted and soloist work. Its form was more or less established by the Amati family in Northern Italy in the 16th century and came to a glorious culmination a century later in the Cremonese workshop of Antonio Stradivari.

Our knowledge of this evolution is still evolving through careful scholarship and study of the instruments and documents which have survived. It is reasonable to suppose that bows and cases were made in similar quantities to accompany the violins but much less is known about them. This is because neither of them were regarded as highly as the violin itself. Bows broke easily and cases suffered in their line of duty which was to protect the instrument from the seven perils that traditionally threaten antiques; namely, thermal shock, humidity changes, light, pests such as boring insects and rodents, humans and their careless handling, air pollutants, and oxidation.

The client base would have been drawn largely from the nobility and the church because that is where the wealth and culture of the age was concentrated.

Most of these instruments had to be delivered to clients who often lived a long distance from where the instrument was made and such a journey was inevitably bumpy and perilous, and so the case transporting it took on the character of a trunk charged with the protection of its valuable contents. As such, and in spite of it having an appearance befitting its illustrious owner, it never received the reverence of the violin, and when ravaged by damp and worm in the discharge of its protective duties, it was summarily replaced.

In the absence of reliable data, this author estimates European case production from 1600 to 1750 as follows. Italy, France, Germany, and England accounted for most of the violin production during that period. Assuming that 100 luthiers were active at any given time during those years with an average output of 100 violins a year, then 1,500,000 would have been made. If we estimate that only 10% have survived, that implies 150,000 violins. A number of these would have been pairs requiring just one double case, so let us assume that 100,000 cases of varying qualities would have been required to accommodate all these violins. After more than a decade of intense interest and research in this field, only a mere 40+ cases have been identified by us from this period. Undoubtedly there are more, but we can only discuss what we know and remain hopeful that more survivors will emerge from the shadows over the coming years.

It is only when we see enough of these items can we begin to understand them. Unfortunately, there was never a tradition of labeling them so their origins remain speculative. That said, there are a few “anchor cases” whose provenance can be asserted with some confidence, and when we compare others with them, some patterns begin to emerge.

We will begin this brief dissertation by stating five generalities which unify and divide the cases of this period.

1. The method of construction involves the formation of a wooden carcass into a kind

- of box which is generally protected on the outside with leather and on the inside with less durable linings such as paper, cloth, and suede.
2. Relatively local materials were used in the construction of cases. Wood was always available and deciduous hardwoods such as walnut and oak were preferred. These were the woods most commonly used for furniture in the 17th century as mahogany, a fine grained and nicely figured wood, did not become readily available until it was imported from Cuba, Santo Domingo, and further afield in the 18th century.
 3. The most distinctive outer feature is the attachment of the leather to the wooden base using metal studs with a domed surface. In contrast to a regular nail, the dome served to maximize the area of contact with the leather. Each one was handmade and represented an investment in time and materials.
 4. The clever preparation and use of leather has a very long history, but it seems to have been the book binders who most influenced the way it was used on cases. One often observes crosshatching which tended to disguise imperfections in the leather. Tooling, especially with gilding, was a form of decoration which afforded a sense of importance to books and cases alike. We believe that the leather of the best baroque cases presented a luxurious appearance to the cases being brightly colored with golden accents so that the brown we see today is a pale shadow of the former splendor.
 5. The cases are always fitted with a metal lock and stout, metal hinges.
 6. The cases fall into two, broad types. The first is the so-called "holster" case which is opened at one end and the violin slid, scroll first, before the end is closed and secured. This type of case is much rarer than the chest type and probably its forerunner. It only ever accommodated a single instrument. The second in the form of a flat chest with hinged lid that is lifted to reveal the violin (or violins) lying horizontally in the space below. The chest type was more suitable for housing a pair of instruments.
 7. The chest type invariably has a metal handle centrally located on the lid. The holster type typically has no handle but is often fitted with one or two metal rings to which a carrying chord could be attached.

Before describing each of the cases in detail, two more generalities can be mentioned. Chest cases to holster cases occur in the ratio of 2:1. This ratio has remained constant over the years of our record keeping. Our sample is probably too small to make this ratio statistically significant, but in our experience, surviving examples of holster cases are rare and the reasons for this would be speculation. But if we are permitted to speculate, there could be two possibilities. The first is that fewer were ever made and the second is that fewer have survived. There is little doubt that the holster is less practical than the chest from the point of view that it is less convenient to stow and withdraw the bow and violin and frequently causes wear and tear to the varnish as can be seen from flattening of the back of the scroll caused by sliding it in and out.

It may be that early violin owner/players were forced into choosing between the convenience of portability (the holster was lighter and easier to handle) and the greater security of the chest case which was heavy and clumsy in comparison.

The same portability and convenience of the holster may have inflicted greater wear and tear on the case itself leading to its deterioration and ultimate replacement in later centuries.

We should mention in passing that the brass studwork falls basically into two classes. Either the studs were applied touching each other to give a continuous line of domed heads or they were placed alternately with a gap of approximately 2 cm between adjacent heads. Given that each stud had to be handmade with the shaft being soldered to the domed head, the spaced placing meant a saving of 50% of the studs allowing the case to be finished more quickly and at reduced cost. Generally, the holster cases are nailed in this way implying that they were a cheaper item than the chest but this is a rule with frequent exceptions.

Our Registry of baroque violin cases consists of three sections: holster cases (H), chest type single cases (S), and chest type double cases (D). Each case is uniquely identified according to its classification and position within that classification. Each is followed by a brief description which acts as an aide-mémoire for the author and the italicized entry in parenthesis indicates who took the photo and when).

SECTION 1—HOLSTERS



1H1—Italy? 2009.



1H6 Stradivario case, Chi mei Museum Taiwan (Author 2016).



1H2 Strad violin label (C. Beare 2007).



1H7 ex Paganini (R. Scrollavezza 2009).



1H3 Decorated Holster (C. Beare 2005).



1H8 Tartini case, Castello Sforzesco Milan, (D. Musafia 2016).



1H4 NMM Vermillion, USA (Author 2007).



1H9 Sotheby's (Author 2001).



1H5. Milan holster, Italy (D. Musafia 2016).



1H10 Yale University, USA (A. Dipper 2016).

SECTION 2—SINGLES



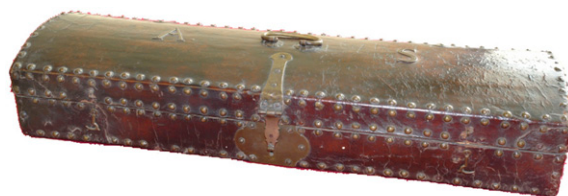
1H11 Yale University, USA (A. Dipper 2016).



2S1 CF Single (C. Beare 2004).



1H12 NMM Vermillion A. Maggini Cremona (Author 2007).



2S2 Sforzesco collection. Milan, Italy (D. Musafia).



1H13 Castello Sforzesco. Milan, Italy (D. Musafia 2017).



2S3 NMM Vermillion, USA (Author 2007).

SECTION 3—DOUBLES



2S4 NMM USA, Padua lute case 17thC (Author 2007).



2S5 Amati ex Una Elliott (Author 2016).



3D1 Decorated double (C. Beare 2004).



3D2 NMM Vermillion, USA (Author 2007).



3D3 Crevelli Case London, UK (Author 2011).



3D4 ex Una Elliott (Author 2016).



3D5 Gasparo case (Lyon & Healy catalog).



3D9 Strapped case (R. Scrollavezza 2009).



3D6 Decorated case #1 (Author 2002).



3D10 BE Case (R. Scrollavezza 2009).



3D11 Washington, DC ex W.E. Hill (Author 2014).



3D7 Decorated case #2 (Author 2002).



3D12 Lindholm case, Stockholm, Sweden (S. Lindholm 2013).



3D8 MV case (R. Scrollavezza 2009).



3D13 Natta family case, Chi Mei Museum, Taiwan (Author 2016).



3D14 'Landolfi' case ex Bisiach (L. Negri 2007).



3D19 Princess Lilian, Belgium (T. de Launoit).



3D15 L Spohr case (T. O'Donnell 2016).



3D20 Decorated double with tray (Author 2016).



3D16 Sforzesco collection, Milan, Italy (D. Musafia 2016).



3D17 Castello Sforzesco, Milan, Italy (D. Musafia).



3D21 Pierre Franck. Paris, France (P. Franck 2017).



3D18 Castello Sforzesco, Milan, Italy (D. Musafia).