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# The Three Parents of the Violin

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The Three Parents of the Violin

Hanna Bahorik

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The violin: an instrument acclaimed all over the world for its ability to soothe the soul, dazzle an audience with brilliant technical prowess, and rival the human voice in its expressive singing quality. But have you ever wondered *how* the violin arrived at its present state of perfect form and beautiful tone quality, or what characteristics of its precursors contributed to completion and perfection of the violin? Though many clearly see the influence of the modern violin, much confusion reigns concerning the ancestry of the instrument itself. Some contend that the violin should be traced back to the lyre through the evolution of the sound chest, while others support the opinion that the violin's history is really that of the bow, and should be traced back to the ravanastron.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to taking the approach of attempting to trace one distinct line back to an ancient instrument, it will be posited that the more appropriate approach would be to view the violin as a result of many instruments, each contributing elements that can be seen in the violin. Furthermore, not only is the violin a result of many contributing instruments, it is more specifically the combination of three distinct instruments directly preceding it. Rather than trying to trace the violin back to a single instrument, the purpose of this paper is to view the ancestry of the violin as taking elements from multiple instruments, culminating in a combination of the three immediate precursors, or parents, known as the rebec, lira da braccio, and viola da braccio.

Before talking about these three parents however, it is necessary to first mention two prevailing theories that have been discussed by multiple scholars. In reference to the two lines of ancestry touched on above, Kathleen Schlesinger in her book entitled *Precursors of the Violin Family* presented two contrasting genealogical tables.<sup>2</sup> These two theories of the violin's family

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Schlesinger, *The Precursors of the Violin Family Records, Researches, & Studies* (London: William Reeves, 1914), 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

tree demonstrate a more generational view of the violin's history. Both theories attempt to trace the violin back through multiple instruments down through the centuries. The first presents the violin's chief defining characteristic as being the sound chest, while the second theory holds that the violin's history lies in that of the bow. One of the first instruments in the sound-chest line is the ancient Greek kithara, which demonstrated important characteristics which can be seen in the violin: a bridge, sound holes, tail-piece, pegs, or purflings (narrow, decorative edges inlaid into the top and back plates), and a fingerboard.<sup>3</sup> However, the kithara was a very early ancestor and did not directly precede the violin. The sound chest line continues with the ancient lyre, the crwth, rebec, troubadour fiddle, and viol, all of which share important structural characteristics of the violin such as "the shallow sound chest, with ribs," but most are not considered as directly preceding the violin.<sup>4</sup> The second shows the line beginning with the ravanstron, and continuing on with the rebab, rebec, guitar fiddle, and viol, each of which used the bow. Though the ravanastron had strings and was played by drawing a bow underneath the strings, it was also a very ancient instrument, long fallen out of use by the time of the violin and therefore cannot be considered an immediate parent.<sup>5</sup>

The existence of these two schools of thought alone suggests that the violin was indeed the result of many instruments contributing to its development, and questions the idea that a clear line can be traced from the violin back to one single instrument. In contrast to this, instruments in both ancestral lines, those characterized by a sound chest and those characterized by their use of the bow, exhibited characteristics that led to the development of the modern violin. However,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>5</sup> Willey Francis Gates, *Pipe and Strings, Three Historic and Descriptive Sketches: The Origin and Development of the Organ, the Evolution of the Pianoforte, the Violin and its Ancestry* (New York: The J. Church Co., 1895), 10.

the instruments discussed in these two contrasting, generational family trees were for the most part out of use around the time of the violin, many of which very ancient instruments that had to be traced down and connected through many different instruments. Neither of the two theories make clear which instruments are the violin's immediate precursors, and neither discuss in detail any instruments that can be seen as the immediate parents of the violin.

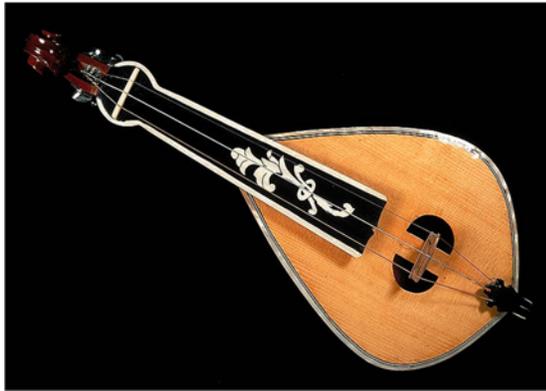
If instruments in both of the ancestral lines put forth by Schlesinger contributed in some way, shape, or form to the violin, which of those instruments can be said to have been the most influential directly prior to the violin's completion and perfection? Or more specifically, which instruments directly preceded the violin? Though traces of the violin can be seen in many instruments, and one can attempt to trace the violin through either the sound-chest or the bow, a third theory presented by Jo Ann Hoffman in her thesis entitled *The Structural Evolution of the Violin*, suggests that the violin's direct ancestry can be narrowed down to three main instruments through which the development of the violin can be illustrated.<sup>6</sup> Hoffman stated that, "the violin was not a descendant of a single instrument, but evolved from the rebec, the lira da braccio, and the viola da braccia."<sup>7</sup> Research shows that the violin can be directly traced back to these three immediate precursors while other instruments, such as the Greek kithara, the lyre, and the ravanstron, are far more ancient, do not directly precede the violin, and do not exhibit nearly the amount of contributing factors as will be shown in the violin's three parents. The rebec, lira (or *lyra*) da braccio, and viola da braccio have been proven to be incredible important in the violin's history, and research shows that the violin can be thought of as immediate offspring of these three instruments.

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<sup>6</sup> Jo Ann Hoffman, *The Structural Evolution of the Violin to 1550 A.D.* (Dayton, Ohio: W.S.U. Printing Service, 1986), 18.

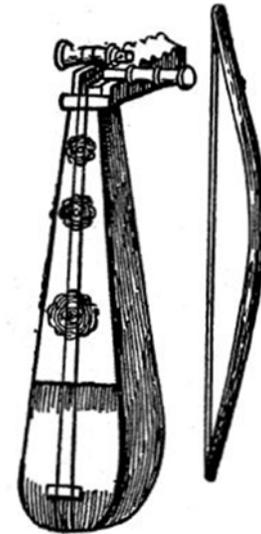
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

In order to demonstrate the importance of these three precursors and how they influenced the violin, research shows that the first of these instruments, the rebec, had many important structural characteristics that led to the design of the early violin. The rebec itself was derived from two different instruments, the lira and the rebab.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1 (left, above):** pear-shaped lira with fingerboard, bridge, two semi-circle sound holes, and tailpiece.

<http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/arts/opus/opus542e.shtml>



**Figure 2 (right, above):** Bowed-rebab with slender design, arched bow, and peg box with lateral pegs.

[https://aerbook.com/maker/books/8412/assets/reflow\\_sample/OEBPS/html/images/f048-1.jpg](https://aerbook.com/maker/books/8412/assets/reflow_sample/OEBPS/html/images/f048-1.jpg)

The lira (Fig. 1), according to Straeten, belonged to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was played with a bow, and was a “pear-shaped instrument” with “a bridge, two semicircular sound holes by the side of the feet of [the bridge], a tailpiece, and apparently also a fingerboard which ran on into the head.”<sup>9</sup> The rebab (Fig. 2) was a short-necked, pear-shaped lute.<sup>10</sup>

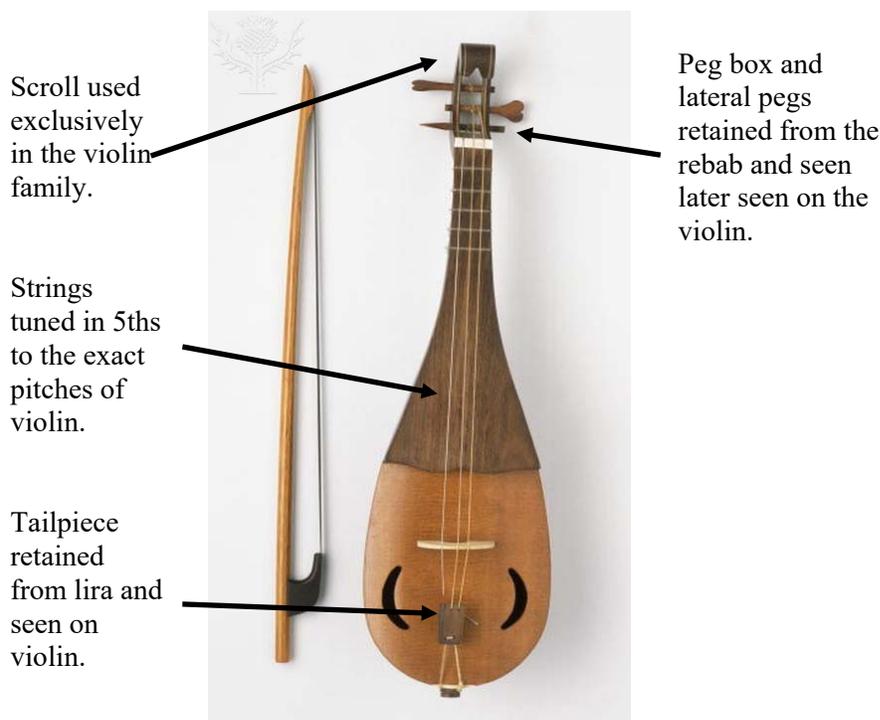
According to Hoffman, the bow grew in popularity in Europe and “neither [the rebab] nor the

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>9</sup> Straeten, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman, 97.

lira, could meet the tonal expectations of Europe as bowed instruments, and were, therefore, generally plucked by Europeans,” the bow’s popularity bringing about the desire to experiment and resulting in the new and tonally-improved instrument known as the rebec.



**Figure 3:** Immediate parent #1 – the rebec (combination of lira and rebab)  
<http://awesomemiddleageshastings.weebly.com/medieval-music---mustapha-b.html>

Edmund Sebastian Joseph van der Straeten in his book entitled, *The History of the Violin: Its Ancestors and Collateral Instruments from Earliest Times to the Present Day*, agreed on the importance of the rebec, stating that “the rebec already exhibited several features which were afterwards adapted to the violin,” such as a primitive scroll and sound holes.<sup>11</sup> According to William Sandys and Simon Andrew Forster, the rebec (Fig. 3) “seems originally to have been of

<sup>11</sup> Straeten, Edmund Sebastian Joseph van der. *The History of the Violin: Its Ancestors and Collateral Instruments from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: Cassell and Company, (1933), 8.

a trapezoid form, and afterwards oblong, with the angle cut, and two or three strings.”<sup>12</sup> Straeten described the rebec as a “pear-shaped instrument with a fingerboard widening out into the shape of the table, which was raised sufficiently to allow the bow to touch each of the three strings separately.”<sup>13</sup> Though the rebec’s tone quality left something to be desired, it was a favorite among the lower class and was used in village dances and different outdoor events.<sup>14</sup> Though the rebec fell out of popularity as the early violin took precedence, many important elements of violin can be seen in the older rebec. For example, the rebec was played with a bow and had many important structural characteristic instruments that resembled the modern violin, including a connected sound-chest and neck, four strings, a tailpiece, and two small, round sound-holes.<sup>15</sup> Structural features of the rebec included a slenderer design like that of the rebab, with thinner wood after the manner of the lira as well as a thin wooden soundboard and raised neck.<sup>16</sup> From the rebab it retained an arched bow as well as a peg box and lateral pegs. Though there were many different methods of the attaching the strings of the rebec, eventually a tailpiece similar to that of the violin became standard, and the scroll of the rebec was also used exclusively in the violin family.<sup>17</sup> Another characteristic of the rebec that is seen in the modern violin is that of its tuning. The strings of the rebec usually duplicated the female voice with c’ and g’ strings, leading to the range of the violin also corresponding with the female voice.<sup>18</sup> When a third string was added by 1532, all sizes of the rebec had their strings tuned in fifths, with the discant rebec’s

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<sup>12</sup> William Sandys and Simon Andrew Forster, *History of the Violin* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2006), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Straeten, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman, 203.

<sup>15</sup> Schlesinger, 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 205, 224.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

strings tuned g, d', a' just as the pitches of the violin's first three strings were later tuned.<sup>19</sup> Hoffman further insisted that, "none of the fiddle (or, "viol") tunings were the basis for that of the violins; the string pitches of the violin were derived from those of the rebecs."<sup>20</sup> The rebec was abandoned because certain aspects of its structure contributed to a shrill sound and poor tone. These reasons explain why the violin would have gained in popularity, with its sweet and singing tone. However, the rebec made many important contributions to the form of the violin. Hoffman lists the rebec's contributing features as a sickle-shaped peg box, the lack of frets, the overhand bow hold, and the fact that all of its three strings were tuned to the exact pitches of the violin, showing several ways in which the rebec contributed to the modern violin.<sup>21</sup>

The next instrument that segued into the making of the violin was the lira da braccio, or, "arm lira" (Fig. 5). The lira da braccio's predecessor were the oval fiddles (Fig. 4), also called vielles, which were characterized in Renaissance paintings by their two-footed bridge, violin-like tailpiece, fingerboard, distinctive C-shaped sound holes which face each other, four melody strings, and a single drone string.<sup>22</sup> These instruments were a favorite among minstrels.<sup>23</sup> The oval fiddle saw improvements in the fourteenth century, including a more elliptical body with a clearly defined neck, as well as a separate fingerboard to aid the plucking of the drone strings separately.<sup>24</sup> According to Hoffman, the oval fiddle was a favorite among Italian artists, and by 1500, the transition from the oval fiddle to the new and improved lira da braccio was complete.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>23</sup> Sandys and Forster, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Hoffman, 230.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 230.



**Figure 4:** Oval fiddle painted by Signorelli (predecessor of lira da braccio)  
 From: Jo Ann Hoffman. *The Structural Evolution of the Violin to 1550 A.D.* Dayton, Ohio: W.S.U. Printing Service, 1986. Plate 49.

Features of the lira da braccio seen in violin:

Short neck, separate raised fingerboard.

Strings tuned in 5ths.

C-holes later made into f-holes.

Bridge and tail piece.



Overall shape of violin-body with upper and lower bouts, with four corners.

**Figure 5:** Parent #2 – Lira da braccio (descended from the oval fiddle in Fig. 4).

<https://www.google.com/search?q=picture+of+lira+da+braccio>

The first edges of the lira da braccio were made by extending the front and back plates beyond the ribs and by dividing the body into two bouts (the top and bottom halves of the body) to improve tone, and the tuning of the fingered strings in fifths was also added, foreshadowing the violin's tuning.<sup>26</sup> Hoffman went on to explain the upper bouts had corners as well, and eventually “the C-shaped sound holes were repositioned back-to-back instead of face-to-face.”<sup>27</sup> Though the lira da braccio still had drone strings, they were tuned in octaves and only used occasionally to reinforce tonic.<sup>28</sup> The instrument was very popular, and experienced many advancements and improvements. It was in the lira da braccio that in 1550 the first f-holes appeared, a feature that became characteristic of the violin family.<sup>29</sup> In speaking of Ferrai's “La Modonna degli Arcani,” which according to Hoffman was at one point the oldest known illustration of the violin, stated that, “the very small three-stringed instrument, like more of Ferrai's violins, clearly showed the sickle-shaped peg box of the rebec and the body form of the lira da braccio”<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 6).

First f-holes



<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Hoffman, 242.

**Figure 6:** Early violin from Ferrari’s “la Madonna degli Aranci,” (1529) exhibiting body form of the lira da braccio and first f-holes.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/36/18/63/3618631db06856c1d7e7ae75707d7ba4.jpg>

The matter of the lira da braccio’s contributions to the modern violin is also discussed and supported by Straeten who called the lira da braccio a “direct parent of the violin” and said that it “led to the birth of the violin.”<sup>31</sup> He further described one lira, apart from a few discrepancies, as “almost the complete violin model.”<sup>32</sup> Straeten documented a particular lira da braccio made in 1540 as being extremely close to the violin in its dimensions; the length of the body was 38.7 cm. and width was 23.5 cm., in comparison to the dimensions of the modern violin, which are normally 36.4 and 21.2 cm.<sup>33</sup> As time went on, advances in the body and structure of the lira da braccio allowed it to almost reach the perfect form of the violin. Hoffman described an even later instrument made in 1580 as “approach[ing] the form of the violin with its flat ribs (not hollowed out as in previous liras) and its slightly arched plates. The f-holes are nearly exactly like those of the violin.”<sup>34</sup> Hoffman clearly stated the contributions the lira da braccio made to the violin when she stated, “both the violin and the lira had a sound post, shallow ribs, an arched back and belly, a similar body silhouette in the definition of three bouts with four corners, overlapping edges, purfling, a separate neck and finger board, f-holes, no frets, and a short neck.”<sup>35</sup> The lira da braccio made many contributions to the modern violin and also ushered in a third instrument: the viola da braccio.

At first, the name “viola da braccio” (Fig. 7) may seem too similar to the “lira da braccio,” so it is necessary to clarify the two and give some specifics as to their differences

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<sup>31</sup> Straeten, 29

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Hoffman, 234.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

before we can get into the history and contributions of the viola da braccio. There are several features of both instruments that distinguish one from the other. An indented curve at the end button, a heart-shaped peg disk, frontal pegs, and the Renaissance feature of six to seven strings are just a few of the features that set the lira da braccio apart from both the viola da braccio and the violin.<sup>36</sup> Hoffman explained why the lira was abandoned in favor of the viola da braccio when she stated, “[as] music began to shift more toward independence of the musical line and began to demand more virtuosic techniques, string players turned to the structure of the viola da braccio, which, with its arched bridge and lack of drones, was more conducive to such needs.”<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 7:** Comparison of viola da braccio (parent #3, left, ca. 1500) and early violin by Linarolo (right, 1581). Hoffman. Plate 53.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 238.

In order to further clarify the sometimes-confusing terminology, Hoffman stated that “the da braccio or ‘arm viola’ was always a member of the violin family” whereas “the viola da gamba or ‘leg viol’ was a member of the viol family,” the viol family being totally separate from the violin family.<sup>38</sup> Hoffman describes the viola da braccio as a combination of the rebec and early lira da braccio, appearing in the fifteenth century and as “the first member of the violin family.”<sup>39</sup> As for the history of the viola da braccio, many elements of the rebec and the lira da braccio are found. The influence from the rebec include “the sickle-shaped peg box topped with a scroll, lateral pegs, the arched bridge and lack of drone strings, the overhand bow hold,” and the viola da braccio’s three strings and tuning.<sup>40</sup> The viola da braccio’s waisted outline, overlapping edges, purfling, tripartite construction, separate neck and fingerboard, fiddle-like playing position, and lack of frets were all features carried over the lira da braccio and oval fiddle.<sup>41</sup> The purpose of the viola da braccio was different from the other instruments as well. Unlike the polyphonic chordal music played with the drones of the lira da braccio, the new up-and-coming style of tuneful melodies, singing tone, and virtuosic playing required a new instrument with an arched bridge and lack of drones. The viola da braccio was the closest any instrument had ever come to the perfect form of the violin, but however, there are a few differences. To begin with, the viola da braccio was quite a bit larger than the violin, and of an awkward size to be played in the usual position.<sup>42</sup> This constructional element explains why the instrument was abandoned for the smaller, more portable violin, which of course would have been easier to for both the bow hand and the right hand than the bulky viola da braccio.<sup>43</sup> A viola da

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Gates, 77.

<sup>43</sup> Hoffman, 239.

braccio made in 1500 exemplifies the few differences that distinguish it from the violin, as compared by Hoffman: smaller central bouts, as opposed to the wider central bouts of the violin, straight corners rather than the violin's more rounded shoulders, and concave ribs, reminiscent of the lira da braccio.<sup>44</sup> Back-to-back C holes, rather than the face-to-face f-holes of the violin, as well as the absence of bass bars or linings, were also a more primitive element displayed by the viola da braccio; the violin on the other hand presents f-holes complete with the middle nick along with bass bars and linings.<sup>45</sup> Other than these distinguishing features, the viola da braccio was very much like the early violin in its form and structure, with just a few more improvements to come before instrument-makers finally arrived at what we know today as the modern violin.

Now that each of these three, influential instruments have been brought forward and examined, it seems clear that without the rebec, lira da braccio, and viola da braccio, the beautiful instrument known as the violin might not have ever been brought into existence. In each of these forefathers, structural elements and characteristics that led to the violin can be clearly seen and observed. While several theories still exist, such as the bow and sound chest theories, the research done on the three instruments examined in this paper shows that a more narrowed approach could very well be the most accurate in attempting to trace the lineage of the violin. These three instruments clearly answer the question of *how* the violin arrived at its current form as well as *why* those three instruments needed to be improved and then abandoned as the best of each was melded together to form the perfect instrument. The rebec's poor tone quality, the lira da braccio's out-of-date polyphonic structure, and the viola da braccio's bulky, awkward size were all elements that prompted the experimentation and improvements that led to the form of the violin. Without both the advances and the setbacks of these three instruments,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

perfection would never have been achieved. As I researched this topic and learned of these three instruments, I developed a new and deeper sense of appreciation for an instrument that I hear every day, but still never ceases to move me. Knowing about the violin's three parents has allowed me to fully appreciate the ease of playing, the artistry, the amazing tone quality, and the moving, expressive singing sound of the violin.

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