Exploring the Evolution of Italian Violin Music in the Era of the Amati Family

Yifan Wu

Shaanxi Normal University, Xi’an, Shaanxi, China.

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*Corresponding author: Yifan Wu, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi’an, Shaanxi, China.

Abstract

Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the violin underwent a remarkable evolution, reaching its zenith of prosperity in the Baroque period. During this era, there were significant transformations in the appearance, structure, sound quality, and aesthetic appeal of the violin. These changes marked centuries of development that highlighted the instrument's unique artistic value and expanded its appeal among audiences. During the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a significant increase in interest and emphasis on the violin, closely linked to advancements in the craft of violin making. This industry not only responded to the evolving demands for artistic and cultural expression but also mirrored broader societal and civilizational advancements. Music played a crucial role in spurring ongoing innovation in violin design and construction. Despite extensive research, there has been a notable gap in empirical studies exploring the connection between these developments. Is the interrelationship between them merely speculative? This paper seeks to delve into the significant relationship between the violin-making industry and musical innovation during this time frame, with a special emphasis on the contributions of the Amati family in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Keywords

16th-17th Century Italy, Violin Music, Amati Family

Someone might wonder why the violin emerged around the 16th century. The perspectives of Rebecca Schaefer Cypess, a musicologist specializing in 17th-18th century European music, could enlighten us. She believes that the turn of the 16th century was amidst a wave of humanist thought, advocating for science, promoting freedom and equality, and opposing theocracy. Such ideas directly influenced the creation of musical works, with composers, noble enthusiasts, and the general public alike showing a fascination with instruments, the new phenomena of the time. During this period, instruments were understood as tools for discovery, imitating nature, and expressing, and stimulating human emotions. Many instrumental works adopted new genres, reflecting a consciousness of exploration of the instrument itself, as well as an attention to the physical structure of instruments and their sound capabilities. Such a social environment also directly facilitated the development of the violin craft.

Nobility across Italy and Europe also followed the “trend” of the era. They gathered in so-called chambers of art collections (Kunstkammern) or cabinets of curiosities (Wunderkammern), where collections might include paintings or sculptures, rare animal horns, shells turned into luxurious goblets through metal fusion, musical instruments, and countless other peculiar items, showcasing their interest and curiosity in art and science. “The father of modern science,” Galileo di Vincenzo Bonaulit de Galilei (1564-1642), was also born in this era. In 1600, when Galileo pointed his high-power telescope at the sky, he did so not knowing what he would see or discover, driven by a sense of curious exploration. Visual artists in Galileo’s circle began to incorporate his discoveries into their depictions of nature and the cosmos, thus interpreting Galileo’s observations and incorporating them into their own creative
processes. A similar type of open-ended exploration can be seen in the instrumental music of the 16th and 17th centuries (Barolsky, Daniel, & Louis Epstein, 2020).

Interestingly, the Amati family, including the Amati brothers (1537-1630) and Nicolo Amati (1596-1684), lived during the era of Galileo. It is widely acknowledged that in the mid-16th century, Italian violin craftsmanship began its quiet rise, with many artisans establishing their own workshops, among which the Amati family emerged. The Amati played an indispensable role in the development of the Italian violin, standing out from numerous small workshops and setting the benchmark for the industry. Subsequently, the now-famous violin-making families of Stradivari and Guarneri, whose renown is deeply linked to the Amati legacy, came into prominence. Thus, to study the evolution of Italian violin music or the lineage of Italian violin-making families, an exploration of the Amati family is essential.

In essence, the growth of both violin manufacturing and violin music was intimately connected to the social environment of the time. But how did violin music develop during this period? What exactly was the relationship between violin craftsmanship and the evolution of music? Did improvements in musical forms lead to changes in violin design? These are among the questions that need addressing. Therefore, this article will seek to trace the transitions in violin music from the 16th to the 17th century, starting from the era of the Amati family (the period of the Amati brothers and Nicolo). This piece aims to serve as a stimulative discussion for exploring violin music of the 16th and 17th centuries, offering no definitive answers but hoping to understand and investigate early music from diverse perspectives.

1. Development Overview of Violin Music Genres in the Amati Era

Before 1597, there were no dedicated instrumental scores for the violin; accompaniments were often created on the spot. However, as musical demands deepened, audiences began to expect performers to enhance the accompaniment or compensate for absent singers during polyphonic performances. This craving for polyphony led to the formation of ensembles comprised of similar-sounding instruments, with the violin swiftly rising in esteem. Studies have documented that the publication of violin music saw a remarkable surge at the start of the 17th century. Walter Kolneder, a German musicologist (1910-1994), has stated that the violin, due to its superior sound quality in terms of both volume and pitch, soon eclipsed other instruments to become the premiere choice in bel canto. Across Italy, numerous violinists found prestigious positions as Maestri di Capella in various church establishments, a testament to the enhancing stature of violinists during the 17th century and the incremental acknowledgment of the violin as an indispensable instrument for professional musical performances.

From 1600 to 1670, a vast majority of published instrumental works were specifically intended for the violin. This period highlighted the violin's unprecedented evolution, establishing it as the preferred instrument among early 17th-century composers, with its prominence only continuing to rise. The development within instrumental genres further validates this observation (Cypess RS, 2008).

1.1 The Brothers Amati—Canzona

In the 16th century, the majority of instrumental ensemble compositions were referred to as "Canzona," a genre originally inspired by the Franco-Flemish chansons, which are vocal in nature.

Stephen Bonta, a scholar specializing in 17th-century Italian instrumental music, posited that the composers of the first published instrumental canzonas should be linked with the rise of luthiers in certain cities, as many composers hailed from Cremona or its surrounding areas. For instance, Giovanni Gabrieli (1554-1612) from Venice, whose collection of canzonas, "Sacrae Symphoniae", published in 1597, stands as one of the earliest to specify violin performance. Like the vast majority of 16th-century music, Gabrieli’s work likely perceived the purpose of instrumental performance as imitating the human voice. Each instrumentalist was expected to master the art of emulation using their instrument, a notion corroborated by Professor Simon McVeigh of Goldsmiths, University of London, in his research. He suggests that the primary aim for most instrumental composers during the 16th and 17th centuries was to mimic the human voice, elaborating that “[e]arly-seventeenth-century Italy was a hotbed of experiment, culminating in the operatic masterpieces of Monteverdi. The violin was the only instrument fully able to match the voice in the new aesthetic...” (Cypess RS, 2008). This statement not only highlights the violin’s timbre as being particularly resonant with contemporary audiences but also implies that the craftsmanship of the violin had reached a level of maturity enabling it to produce “beautiful” sounds congruent with the human voice.
1.2 Nicolo Amati—Sonata

As the 17th century drew to a close, the Canzona gave way to the Sonata (Sonare), a term that highlighted the sound produced by instruments and gradually began to denote works featuring multiple parts for instrumental ensembles. This shift marked a growing fascination with the instruments themselves. Rather than composing for a flexible ensemble of interchangeable instruments, composers started to tailor their works for specific instruments. Biagio Marini played a pivotal role in advancing the violin within the realm of sonatas, reaching unparalleled heights. An initial examination of compositions from 1600-1670 within Italy, specifically composed for the violin (referenced in Table 1), shows Marini’s contributions notably twice, each in the form of a sonata. As a virtuoso violinist, he wove his considerable expertise into his music. While he drew upon Gabrieli’s musical dialect, his melodies were not crafted for singability or grounded in vocal music; instead, they delved into the violin’s potential. Marini’s compositions were rich in unique violin techniques, such as open strings and double stops, leveraging his virtuosity to spark awe and curiosity about the instrument in his audience. The high technical requirements of his music inferred that the violin had to be capable of fulfilling these complex demands, indicating that the instrument was already well-equipped to handle technically challenging pieces before these works were composed.

Table 1. The collection of works designated exclusively for the violin in the Italian region from 1600 to 1670 (Selfridge-Field, E, 1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Place of work</th>
<th>Publication date</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Marcantonio Negri, (?-1624)</td>
<td>Venice</td>
<td>1611</td>
<td>Singer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Giovanni Gabrieli, 1554?-1612</td>
<td>Venice</td>
<td>1615</td>
<td>Organist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Biagio Marini, 1594-1663</td>
<td>Brescia</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>Violinist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Innocentio Vivarino, c.1575-1626</td>
<td>Adria</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>Organist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Francesco Turini,1589-1656</td>
<td>Brescia</td>
<td>1621</td>
<td>Organist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Carlo Farina,c.1600 –1639</td>
<td>Dresden</td>
<td>1627</td>
<td>Violinist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Alessandro Grandi,1590 –1630</td>
<td>Reggio</td>
<td>1628</td>
<td>Organist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tarquinio Merula,1595–1665</td>
<td>Bergamo</td>
<td>1639</td>
<td>Maestro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Biagio Marini,1594-1663</td>
<td>Bavaria</td>
<td>1644</td>
<td>Violinist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Marco Uccellini,1603-1680</td>
<td>Modena</td>
<td>1645</td>
<td>Ensemble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Tarquinio Merula, 1595 –1665</td>
<td>Bergamo</td>
<td>1651</td>
<td>Cavaliere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Giovanni Antonio Leoni, c.1600–1652</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>1652</td>
<td>Violinist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Maurizio Cazzati,1616–1678</td>
<td>Bergamo</td>
<td>1654</td>
<td>Maestro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Giovanni Antonio Pandolfi [Mealli], 1624 – c. 1687</td>
<td>Innsbruck</td>
<td>1660</td>
<td>Musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Marco Uccellini,1603-1680</td>
<td>Modena</td>
<td>1663</td>
<td>Ensemble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Giovanni Maria Bononcini, 1642-1678</td>
<td>Modena</td>
<td>1666</td>
<td>Bass-Player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Giovanni Battista Vitali, 1663-1692</td>
<td>Bologna</td>
<td>1667</td>
<td>Violinist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Giuseppe Allevi, 1603-1670</td>
<td>Piacenza</td>
<td>1668</td>
<td>Maestro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Angelo Berardi, 1636-1694</td>
<td>Viterbo</td>
<td>1670</td>
<td>Maestro</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preceding analysis predominantly addresses indirect or conjectural elements. But could there be a more direct relationship that can be demonstrated? Subsequent discussion will aim to clarify the direct connections and mutual influences between these developments.

2. Interplay Between the Amati Family's Violin Craftsmanship and Musical Developments in the 16th and 17th Centuries

Scholars Stephen Bonta (1927-2017) and Philip J. Kass posit that during the zenith of the Amati family’s influence in the 17th century, there inevitably existed pivotal links between the violin craftsmen and the musicians of the era. They advance a hypothesis suggesting that the craftsmanship of violins served as a muse for composers, inspiring the creation of violin-centric compositions, and in turn, the evolution of violin-making spurred on advancements in

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musical form. While this proposition holds value, it somewhat narrowly frames the intricate relationship between the innovation in music and the craft of violin making. Hence, the evolution of instrumental music, as well as that of violin craftsmanship, should not be perceived as abrupt or isolated phenomena. A comprehensive analysis, considering a multitude of factors inherent to the historical context, is imperative. The progression of musical instruments represents not merely an objective choice of history but also embodies a subjective manifestation of the cultural ethos. Patrons of elevated social standing, serving as the custodians of musical taste, wielded considerable influence over the aesthetic preferences of the nobility beneath them, the burgeoning merchant class, and other societal segments aspiring for higher social status. This multifaceted dynamic warrants thorough contemplation and analysis within our scholarly discourse.

2.1 Musical Requirements Drive Innovations in Violin Making Crafting Violins for Particular Occasions

2.1.1 Crafting Violins for Particular Occasions
During the era when the Amati family thrived, a period characterized by the ascendency of the middle class and propelled by the French Revolution, there was an unprecedented surge in musical activities, particularly within the realm of domestic music. This trend was mirrored in the founding of numerous conservatories and music groups. These entities drew a wide array of music aficionados, leading to performances and celebrations within both amateur and professional ensembles. As these ensembles expanded, there emerged a need for string instruments capable of delivering greater volume and maintaining a harmonious tone quality, which in turn stimulated the evolution of violin craftsmanship. In Nicolo Amati’s time, his work was intricately linked with musical developments. The era saw the rise of a unique Baroque style, best exemplified by the Salzburg Festival Mass, which demanded string instruments produce a volume loud enough to permeate the vast expanse of cathedrals, necessitating the creation of the “Grand Amati” model around 1640. This model was not only noted for its enhanced volume but also its enlarged size and width, marking a distinct presence in the violin landscape of its time. While some argue that the “Grand Amati” was less an innovation than a refinement incorporating features from earlier family designs, its impact on subsequent violin development is undeniable, laying the groundwork for Stradivari’s later adaptations of wider and longer violins. Investigations revealed that Nicolo had crafted similar violins earlier, but it wasn’t until around 1650 that societal demand led to their widespread recognition and production. This suggests that the violin makers’ designs were not the sole determinants of musical direction. Nonetheless, the advancements in violin-making techniques were crucial for reproducing the desired acoustic effects, significantly influencing the stylistic evolution of music during that period.

2.1.2 Engineering Violins for Virtuosity
The influence of violin craftsmanship on composers’ creative processes is unmistakable, offering substantial support for musical composition. Biagio Marini’s seminal work, “Affetti Musicali” (1617), exemplifies this by providing detailed guidance for performers on emotional expression and technique on the violin. This includes instructions for employing scordatura (alternative tuning), triple stops, and tremolo con l’arco (bow tremolo)—with Marini being credited as the first to introduce the term "tremolo con l’arco" for string instruments. The publication year of 1617 marks the apex of the Amati legacy during Nicolo’s tenure, a convergence that aligns with Stephen Bonta’s findings. The progress in violin making during this era not only coincided with but arguably facilitated a richer exploration of violin techniques by composers, broadening the horizons for virtuosic expression within the repertoire.

2.2 Violin Craftsmanship in Harmony with the “Sound” of the Era
Research into the acoustical characteristics of violins crafted by the Amati family reveals a creative intent that mirrors that of contemporary composers — the emulation of the human voice. Baroque violinist Francesco Geminiani (1687-1762) opined that the ideal tone of a violin should “rival the most perfect human voice.” Utilizing voice analysis technology, scholars have discovered that early Italian violins, especially those by Andrea Amati and the Brescian founder of violin making, Gasparo da Salo (1540-1609), could mimic the resonant vocal tract of male singers, matching the timbre of a male alto (Figure 1). This suggests that imbuing violins with vocal-like qualities may have been among the acoustical design objectives of Amati and da Salo. The emergence of this phenomenon was profoundly influenced by the musical environment of the time. When Andrea pioneered the modern violin, most public performances featured male singers, with female vocalists beginning to take the stage only in the early 17th century. Subsequent research into the acoustical evolution of violins post-Andrea has gradually revealed sound effects reminiscent
of female voices, aligning with the increasing popularity of professional female singers. The exploration of the acoustical properties of violins from the Amati family underscores how violin development was responsive to the musical trends of the 16th and 17th centuries, illustrating a nuanced interplay between craftsmanship and the prevailing soundscapes of the era.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 1. Comparison of Andrea's Works and Male Alto Resonance Peak Characteristics (Tai, H. C. & Shen, Y. P. & Lin, J. H. & Chung, D. T., 2018).**

Furthermore, "violin acoustics" research aids in the more precise replication of string music from the 16th and 17th centuries. The underlying principles of violin sound production are complex and enigmatic, harboring numerous scientific quandaries that have yet to be fully resolved. Harvard University's Professor Carleen Maley Hutchins (1911-2009), an expert in violin acoustics, highlighted the presence of wolf tones in violins, a phenomenon extensively explored by researchers. Professor Joseph Nagyvary (1934-present) from the University of Texas, both a physicist and a specialist in violin acoustics, has characterized the violin as an immense maze of art and science. In a similar vein, Dr. John Meyer, a physicist and violinologist at the West German Institute of Physics and Engineering, has remarked that the investigation into the tonal qualities of violins represents one of acoustics' most intricate challenges. Throughout centuries, craftsmen, physicists, and acoustical instrument analysts from various nations have endeavored to decipher the acoustic "mysteries" inherent to violin families. Scientists have been engaged in identifying the principles behind crafting superior violins through diverse scientific methodologies and experiments for hundreds of years, amidst continuously escalating standards of violin craftsmanship. Modern violins, which encompass a wide spectrum of diversity, elude straightforward classification. The emulation of human vocal qualities, especially those of female voices, emerges as a novel concept in the acoustic fine-tuning of contemporary violin craftsmanship. Pushing the resonance peaks of violins further, aiming to mimic the nuanced tones of female mezzo-sopranos or sopranos, may present a novel challenge for violin makers in the 21st century.

3. Conclusions and Suggestions

To sum up, the debate over the interconnection between violin music evolution and the manufacturing sector remains open-ended, yet it is feasible to uncover diverse insights from a breadth of perspectives. It is clear, however, that violin crafting and musical evolution are interdependent, fostering a deeply integrated and crucially important relationship marked by synergistic growth. As such, considerations of the Amati family's impact on violin music should invariably accompany future research into the violin music of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The Amati family propelled the advancement of string music in the 16th and 17th centuries. As music became more widespread, there was an increased pursuit for superior sound quality, setting new standards for musical instruments and accelerating the transformation of violins. Furthermore, advancements in violin craftsmanship enhanced
the expressiveness and dynamism of music, facilitating its dissemination. Therefore, improvements in violins are closely linked with socio-cultural and musical artistic development, warranting significant attention and research within the violin-making industry. Additionally, the study of violin component manufacturing techniques is somewhat niche within domestic musicology. Through the viewpoints argued in this paper (that the development of violin making and violin music are complementary), it is reasonable to extrapolate to another theoretical dimension—that research into the construction of various violin parts could unearth deeper insights into the nuances of violin music performance or other related factors at the time. The author believes these aspects are worthy of study and can provide profound explanations for understanding the evolution of violin music.

References


