

Historical development of the violin family

The violin family emerged in Italy in the mid 16th century. Its chief predecessors were:

- the *rebec* (a bowed instrument, usually with three strings tuned in 5ths, that could be played on the lap or on the shoulder),
- the *lira da braccio* (shaped like a violin, and played under the chin, but having five strings plus two additional drone strings),
- the Renaissance *fiddle* (with five strings, one of which may be a drone).

The violin family developed independently of the *viol* family (which flourished in the 15th to 17th centuries, until it became eclipsed by the popularity of the violin). A consort of viols would consist of treble, tenor and bass (the latter also known as *viola da gamba*), although other sizes did exist (such as the contrabass, or *violone*). Viols are fretted, and held on or between the knees when played. They typically have six strings, with a flatter bridge than the violin's, making chord playing easier. Other differences, when compared with the violin family, include a flatter back, sloping shoulders, and thinner wood and strings. The bow used for the viol is slightly convex, unlike the concave bow now used by violinists.

Early violin makers, mostly based in northern Italy, included Giovan Giacomo Dalla Corna, Zanetto de Michelis da Montechiaro, Gasparo da Salò, Giovanni Paolo Maggini, and, most notably, Andrea Amati (c.1505-c.1576; there are surviving Amati instruments dating from 1564). The tradition was continued by Andrea's sons Antonio and Girolamo, Girolamo's son Nicolo (1596-1684), and Nicolo's students Andrea Guarneri and Antonio Stradivari.

The violins of Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) set the standard for all future instruments. Their dimensions were slightly larger than earlier instruments, and were less deeply arched in the belly, with wider purfling and bolder soundholes, producing a stronger tone.

During the 19th century, with the rise of the public concert and the virtuoso performer, further small modifications were introduced to the violin to increase its power: the bridge was heightened and its curvature increased, the sound post was thickened and the neck angled back. These, combined with the slight raising of pitch (to A440) since Baroque times, put increased pressure on the bridge, requiring the bass bar (supporting the bridge) to be strengthened. The fingerboard also became longer, to facilitate playing very high pitches.

Gut strings were used on the earlier instruments, which produced a warm, mellow tone. These began to be replaced in the 19th Century by more resilient metal strings, which are thinner and tauter, and produce a brighter tone. In the 20th Century, synthetic strings also began to be used.

The chin rest is thought to have been added by Louis Spohr around 1820.

Early violin bows were convex in shape, like those of the viol. The modern bow was developed in Paris in the late 18th century by François Tourte (1747-1835); it was longer and heavier than earlier bows, and convex.