

Viola Pomposa

(*pomposa* = grandiose, pompous)

Viola pomposa is a bowed stringed instrument belonging to the violin family. It has 5 strings tuned in fifths: *C - G - d - a - e1*. Shortly to say, it is a little violoncello held under the chin (see pictures). It was J.S.Bach who initiated its construction. The original instrument, built in 1724 was 75cm long and its corp's length was 45 cm¹. One cannot find however the term "viola pomposa" in Bach's manuscripts; the instrument may be hidden under the name "violoncello piccolo". The name *viola pomposa* is sometimes also used for an instrument which is tuned one octave higher (i.e. *c-g-d1-a1-e2*); this kind of instrument is also called *quinton*.

The size of the viola pomposa corresponds to that of a 1/8 cello. It cannot thus compete with the violoncello in tone volume at the deepest strings. Its merits are versatility and the possibility of using violin fingerings. One can thus play violin compositions from violin scores while the sound is one octave lower. Owing to instrument's corp size one can however use I - V. positions only.

The viola pomposa was only used for a limited period of time and there is only one original composition for this instrument: Sonata by *Christian Giuseppe Linarti* for v.p. and basso continuo. In addition, however the Suite Nr.6 for cello is composed for a 5-string instrument and was possibly also meant for viola pomposa².

I first saw the viola pomposa at the International Congress of the Viola d'amore at Ochsenhausen (Germany) in 2008, where it was demonstrated by Wolfgang Anton. I found that it perfectly fitted to my hands (I am 193 cm tall) and I later decided to get it. Mr. Anton's viola had an untypical layout of the belly: both the bridge and the soundholes were shifted in the direction to the end pin. Such an arrangement (Bohemian model) allows to keep the instrument comfortable for playing while the swinging length is long enough (43-44 cm) for string's resounding at low frequencies down to 70 Hz.

In agreement with the luthier, Mr.Václav Svoboda, I decided for the standard belly layout which promised a better sound. My instrument is 78 cm long with corp length 46 cm and swinging length of 43 cm. On base of practical tests we fixed the rib height at 7 cm and the neck width at the nut 32 mm. I was my penfriend Dr.John E. Gault who helped me to overcome other two technical problems: he sent me a stripe of kangaroo leather as a chin-rest and recommended me a German firm producing gut strings for nonstandard instruments. Gut strings produce a more delicate tone and are easier to play.

I am using a standard viola bow, but the way of touching the string must be different. The deep pomposa strings have greater inertia and they slowly start to resound. The right hand must be kept in a higher position because the bridge is relatively high. I started practicing elementary finger exercises and they were cello Suites by J.S.Bach which became my "daily bread"; I used to play them on the normal viola. Viola pomposa is most eligible for slow, chordal compositions - while playing the chords one can find enough space for fingers on its large fingerboard. This makes some solo-sonatas more playable on the viola pomposa than on the violin.

There are few people who play viola pomposa today; however as population gets taller, it may find new fans.

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Jan Matys

¹ In: Antonín Modr, *Hudební nástroje* (Musical Instruments), Editio Supraphon, Praha 1977

² See Preface in the AER Edition of the Suites, Jerusalem

Viola pomposa built by Václav Svoboda, Prague

Tuning: C – G – d – a – e1, swinging length: 43 cm, height of ribs: 6 cm, Kuerschner strings

