

A violoncello from Joseph Haydn's Esterházy-Hofkapelle

Much of Haydn's music, as well as documents and objects directly or indirectly related to him, has survived through the centuries, but nearly all the stringed instruments from 'his' orchestra, the Esterházy Kapelle, have disappeared.

The purchase, upkeep and repair of instruments were his responsibilities both as vice-Kapellmeister (1761–5) and as Kapellmeister (from 1766 on). But of the roughly 20 violins and violas acquired during those years, only a few individual parts remain. However, a cello from the Esterházy Kapelle has survived in nearly its original state – albeit damaged by woodworm and storage – and this instrument, made by **Antony Posch** in Vienna around 1720, came to my studio in 2008 for restoration.



Description

The cello is a very large, well-balanced model (its body is 785mm long) with extremely round upper and lower bouts. It is quite straight at the C-bouts and has rather short, almost turned-in upper corners, as is typical of Posch instruments. The arching of the belly and back is swollen and full, forming an elegant curve that extends all the way to the edges and is clearly more pronounced at the C-bouts.

The narrow edgework is precise and elegant. The purfling consists of two outer stripes of hardwood – stained black – and an inner stripe of maple. In the corners, the tips of the purfling join in the middle. The two-piece spruce belly has striking medium-to-wide annual rings. The precisely carved f-holes are cut vertically into the arching and set far apart. The f-hole wings are not fluted. The belly and back were attached to the blocks along the centre joint using two locating pins of 5mm diameter. There was an undamaged softwood pin in the belly, suggesting that the instrument had never been opened.

The two-piece back is made of moderately flamed maple on the treble side cut on the half slab. The ribs are made of a similar wood, and the lower rib consists of one continuous piece. All blocks are made of spruce with visible tool marks; clearly the narrow

maple bout linings were only coarsely shaped using a curved gouge. Back and belly joints as well as f-holes are reinforced by parchment strips, and the ribs are strengthened in several places using linen strips.

The original bass-bar made of wide-ringed spruce is 10mm in width along its entire length. It is positioned parallel to the belly joint and is reinforced at the ends with parchment strips.



The head and original neck are made of unflamed maple, and long curving pegbox and the distinctive scroll are offset by ornamentation. As is typical for Posch, the volute is broader between the first and second turns, with the latter being rather flat, giving it a somewhat compact impression. The sunken spine, which stretches along the scroll and the back of the pegbox, is a feature usually found in Posch's double basses and his few surviving oversize cellos, and not in his later cellos, which are generally of a standard size. The peg holes are not bushed, something rarely observed in such old instruments.

The rich original varnish is a light golden brown in colour, somewhat brittle, and thinly applied. Examination under a UV lamp suggests the use of an oil varnish. The fittings all date back to the 18th century and have been retained during restoration (the bridge and soundpost were missing). The pegs reveal different workmanship,

but all are made of stained hardwood. The rather flat fingerboard is made of a hardwood core with an ebony veneer. The tailpiece is made of pine with an ebony veneer and is fitted with a copper tailpiece adjuster. The beech endpin is almost certainly original.

An examination of the neck foot and top block sheds light on the few neck modification repairs carried out on the instrument during the 18th century. Originally the neck foot was mounted on the ribs (at an angle of about 5 degrees), and held in place from within by a nail – one can still see the slot into which the belly fits. This (not very stable) joint must have been replaced in the second half of the 18th century, perhaps along with a new fingerboard. In the process, the neck was anchored in place from the outside using a wooden pin that pierces the neck foot and top block at an angle. This wooden pin has been retained in the top block. The violin maker Johann Joseph Stadlmann (1720–81), who maintained and repaired the instruments of the Esterházy Kapelle from around 1765, describes a similar repair in an invoice dated 1769: 'Made a new neck for a cello, trimmed the fingerboard, new nut, new strings'. The neck was reset again, no later than 1800, using a rather shallow dovetail joint. This procedure elongated the neck slightly by adding a shoe to the neck foot and giving it a steeper angle overall. In terms of playing technique, these were also modernising modifications. To date, no other repairs have been carried out on the body of the instrument.

Origin and playing history

Although a number of bass instruments by Antony Posch have survived, this oversize cello is one of very few existing instruments of its kind from Vienna from around 1720. There are a few facts that point to the time of purchase. In 1714 the Esterházy Kapellmeister Wenzel Zivlhofer was sent to Vienna to buy a 'tanz-basset' (a cello for dance music). We cannot be certain that the instrument he returned with was actually obtained from Posch, but a receipt dated November 1728 and hand-

written by Posch confirms payment of 26 guildens for a 'passetl' (cello) sold to the Esterházy court. No further cellos were acquired until 1783.

One interesting question is how a cellist was able to play this enormous instrument without a spike. Traces of heavy wear on the bottom of the original endpin suggest that while being played, the instrument rested directly on the floor (or on a low platform). Moreover, a square hole about 6mm in diameter was punched into the lower ribs near the endpin. Someone apparently hammered a piece of steel into the bottom of the instrument as a kind of short, makeshift spike.

As for the cello's playing history, we can sketch a rough picture based on several known details about the Esterházy Kapelle. Prior to 1761, the Esterházy court only maintained one ensemble, which was responsible for playing both church as well as chamber music, and for this, one cellist more than sufficed. But with Haydn's appointment that same year also came the express intention of creating a separate chamber music ensemble. From 1761 until 1790 there were two parallel ensembles, each fulfilling distinct functions: one in Eisenstadt, which was responsible for church music, and the other responsible for chamber music and based mainly at the family palace of Eszterháza (from 1768 onwards). It is unlikely that the cellists in Haydn's orchestra were willing to play operas on such a large instrument, so therefore it was probably used for church music instead. The ensemble of the Eisenstadt palace chapel, for example, had its own cello, which was repaired several times around 1800. The chamber music ensemble was disbanded in 1790 but was reinstated in 1794 by Prince Nikolaus II. By 1808 it had grown to include 96 members but it was disbanded again in 1813 in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars and national bankruptcy.

Though never more than two cellists were employed by the orchestra at any one time, additional musicians were occasionally needed. On a concert trip to Vienna, for example, the orchestra spontaneously recruited the chief accountant Adam Liszt (father of Franz Liszt) as a third cellist.

This is the kind of occasion for which this cello might have been played. After the orchestra was disbanded a few members did remain to perform church music in Eisenstadt. In an inventory from 1842 this cello is listed as an instrument no longer in use. In 1866 the Esterházy Kapelle, by then consisting of only a handful of musicians, was disbanded once and for all. After that, some of the stringed instruments were stored in Eszterháza, the rest in Eisenstadt, but all of them disappeared in the chaos following World War II. Now, after such a long time, at least one of these instruments has been restored to playing condition.

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