

Authenticity problems in Herman Bönicke's Violoncell – Schule

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Abstract: *In 2010 - amongst other old scores - a cello tutorial entitled, Violoncell-Schule, signed by H. Bönicke, was discovered in the archive of the Black Church in Brasov by the actual cantor of this, Steffen Schlandt. While the document might have provided valuable evidence of musical pedagogy in nineteenth-century Transylvania, unfortunately the work is not an original, but a copy after The Violoncello Method by Friedrich Dotzauer, a great cellist and pedagogue, founder of the Dresden Cello School. However, its discovery proves that Transylvanian cellists of this era were well informed of Western cello technique.*

Key words: *cello method, Hermann Bönicke, Transylvanian music history*

1. Introduction

In 2010, Steffen Schlandt - cantor of the Black Church of Brasov, Romania - discovered an interesting manuscript entitled, *Violoncell-Schule*, signed by H. Bönicke. Amongst other scores discovered here, this one stood out; Hermann Bönicke was a well-known organist/cantor for the evangelical church in Sibiu. Although regarded as a musical polyhistor - and theoretically capable of creating a cello method - specific aspects of the work could only have been written by an accomplished cellist.

2. Hermann Bönicke and Transylvanian Musical Life

Hermann Bönicke (or “Armin Boenicke”) was born in Endorf, Saxonia (Meyers 1885-1892) (or by some accounts, Quedlinburg) on November 26th, 1821, and died on December 12th, 1879 in Hermannstadt, Transylvania, Hungary - now Sibiu, Romania. Not much is known about his life prior to 1861 beyond that he was an organist and music teacher, first in Qedlinburg then in Aschersleben; his students include the composer and organist Julius Reubke and Albert Erst Anton Becker. At

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Franz Liszt's recommendation he arrived in Hermanstadt in 1861 - and one year later, became cantor of the evangelical church, music director for the *Hermanstadter Musicverein* the music society of Sibiu, and leader of the local men's choir. As a pedagogue, he taught piano, and high school and Seminar music. (Riemann 1909) (Macgregor 2007-2017)

It seems unusual that such a closed society as the Transylvanian saxons would so willingly elevate an outsider, but Bönicke was preceded by several such exceptions in music. Amongst them were Philipp Caudella (1771 – 1826) of Vienna, Johann Leopold Bella (1843 – 1936) of Slovakia, Anton Brandner (1840 – 1900) of Bohemia (Philippi 2006), and Rutziska György (1786 – 1869) of Vienna - all of whom played important role in the cultural development of Transylvania, especially as pedagogues.

Because of the establishment of musical societies and conservatories, teaching materials at the time were already prevalent. Such sources of pedagogical treatises began with the Paris Conservatoire National de Musique et d'art Dramatique in 1795, followed by Prague in 1808, and eventually Transylvania in 1819 (Cluj) and 1839 (Sibiu). Smaller institutions, too, played a contributing role, largely through editing existing material. Such treatises include the ode collection of Johannes Honterus from Brasov: *Odae cum harmoniisa* (1548 - vastly predating Bönicke), Martin Schneider's *Grundlage zur Praktische Tonkunst für jeden Liebhaber, insonderlich für den angehenden Violinspieler, Singer, Klavierspieler und Orgelspieler, der zugleich die Musikalische Composition lernen will* (1803), Philipp Caudella's Piano Method (1822), and Ruzitska György's Singing school (1843). (Emese 2017) Following this tradition, Bönicke published similar works: an improvisation study book, *Die Kunst des freien Orgelspiels: Practische Anleitung zur Erfindung und Fortführung eigener musikalischer Ideen* (1861), a singing book *Chorgesangschule* (1859-1860) and a Piano Method for the Beginner (Personendossier Bönicke, Hermann n.d.). A cello method is nowhere to be found in this lineup of publications. Naturally, its discovery leads to many questions regarding its authenticity.

3. The Book

The manuscript was likely brought the Black Church from Sibiu by Franz Xaver Dressler (1898 – 1981), who transported many musical documents to the church - although it currently resides at its probably point of origin, the Evangelical Church in Sibiu. It is written in an old German script, called *Kurrent* or "*German cursive*". The work consists of two parts: the technical method, and practical teaching material.

The method begins with an introduction establishing its intention, the “desire to expose the basis of violoncello playing as simple, clear and convincing is the goal: to be the most useful, in general.”

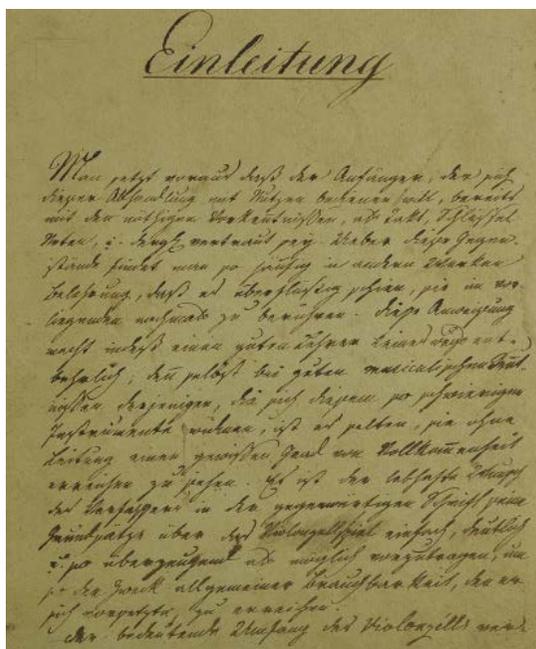


Fig. 3. The introduction of the manuscript

Though Bönicke states a necessary prerequisite knowledge of basic musical notion and considers “their repeat useless,” the first chapter is dedicated to the “use of clefs,” describing the three clefs of cello notation; the second chapter, “the tuning of the violoncello;” the third, “holding the cello and left hand” properly; and the fourth, the bow hold and bow control. As the endpin had yet to be invented, the author suggests that the cello should be held by the calves - but not too low - and the player’s stature should be relaxed. Surprisingly, he advocates for a bow hold as close to the frog as possible. Where bowing itself is concerned, he often quotes Duport’s *Essay on the fingering of the violoncello and on conduct of the bow*, and describes three primary manners of bowing: a long stroke with crescendo and decrescendo, a “wavelike” stroke, and finally, a short, accented stroke.

Fingering is discussed in the fifth chapter, and bowing - demonstrated through eighty-one graphic, musical examples - is the subject of the sixth, emphasizing arpeggiation and staccato playing. Further examples adorn the seventh chapter, “of the diatonic and chromatic scales and the use of the thumb,” scales with multiple fingerings - with or without the thumb - to five sharps and five flats, and specific

explanations regarding the use of the thumb. Chapter eight discusses double stops, including thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, sevenths and octaves. Ornamentation is the subject of the ninth chapter - specifically, contemporary embellishments: appoggiatura, acciacatura, trills, glissando (“sliding from a note to another one”), and finally, vibrato – referenced as “tremolo.”

In chapters ten and eleven, harmonics and pizzicato are explained, respectively. Interestingly, the whole of chapter twelve elaborates on the “resonance of the notes.” Bönicke notes that playing certain pitches - often, open strings - improves the resonant quality of others, played simultaneously; and overtones can be perceived both audibly and visually. Chapter thirteen is comprised of a pragmatic (and period-relevant) discussion on how to accompany recitatives. The author argues on behalf of simplicity: the cellist should be discerning about when to ornament, and perceptive of potentially unwanted harmonic implications. Principally, the cellist should be well versed in harmony and the realization of figured bass. Thus, this chapter reinforces Bönicke’s assertion, found in the introduction, that “...it is good if the cello player himself is a composer, or at least understands the rules of the harmony.” The final chapter, fittingly, regards performance practice. Quoting Rousseau, the author again emphasizes tasteful simplicity. Concluding the first part of the *Violoncell-Schule*, an appendix identifies specific, quality instruments and their luthiers.

Part two is comprised of sixty-three studies in almost all major and minor keys (to the sixth sharp and the fifth flat), written with an accompanimental second cello part. Following are eight, short musical pieces, and lastly, some exercises in thumb position.

4. Authenticity

In assessing the authenticity of the manuscript, I compared the handwriting of the *Violoncell-Schule* to that of Bönicke’s other manuscripts. Thanks to Mr. Jürg Leutert, manager of the Archive of the Evangelical Church in Sibiu, who provided these documents for my analysis. Upon perusal of Bönicke’s work, evidently, there are two different types of handwriting, often within the same manuscript. For example, the front cover of the *Violoncell-Schule* contains distinct penmanship in each the title and signature, respectively.

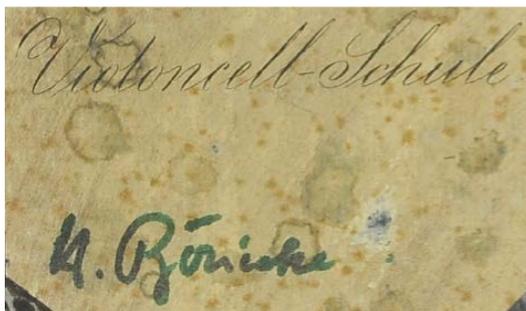


Fig. 1 The title and the signature on the front cover of the manuscript

Evident in Figure 1, both the handwriting and ink are different. Compared to Bönicke's signature on another of his works, the signature of the *Violoncell-Schule* is clearly the consistent writing style.

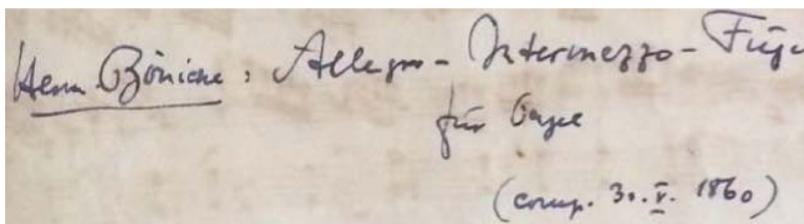


Fig. 2. Bönicke's signature from an alternate source

Next, I compared the structure and content of the *Violoncell-Schule* to that of other, prominent cello methods of the time. Eventually, I came across the Op. 165 cello method of Justus Johann Friedrich Dotzauer, published in 1832. Dotzauer was a great cellist, founder of the Dresden Cello School, and publisher of numerous pedagogical works (Ginsburg 1983) (Venturini 2009). Of my findings, Dotzauer's Op. 165 was strikingly similar to Bönicke's method. Shortly, it became apparent that the *Violoncell-Schule* is essentially a duplicate of Dotzauer's method.

Thorough analysis yielded only a few figures and small musical examples that had been changed - specifically: Figs. 1, 2, and 3 at the very beginning, musical examples of the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters, and the appendix. All other content is exactly duplicated.

The question remained: how did Dotzauer's Op. 165 find its way to Bönicke? Likely, as the distinct handwriting styles would suggest, he was not the copyist. A middle man may have delivered the score to Bönicke - perhaps his son-in-law Peter Hermann, who was an exceptional cellist (Hermania 1939) and also whom later he gave the leading ship of the music society. The inquisitive musicologist may yet find out.

Of course, confirmed authenticity of the *Violoncell-Schule* would have been a great asset to Transylvanian culture. At least, based on the content of the work, it is evident that Transylvanian cellists of Bönicke's time were privy to the nuances of progressive, pedagogical development for the instrument.

5. Acknowledgements

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