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A Cello by Antony Posch, Vienna ca. 1720, from Joseph Haydn's "Esterházy Kapelle"

Although much of Joseph Haydn's music as well as documents and objects directly or indirectly related to him have survived over the centuries, nearly all the string instruments from "his" orchestra, the Esterházy Kapelle, have disappeared. Out of the roughly twenty violins and violas acquired while Haydn served as Kapellmeister (tending to the purchase and repair of instruments was one of his duties from the beginning of his appointment until approximately 1799) only a few individual parts remain. However, a violoncello from the Esterházy Kapelle was also preserved in its nearly original state – albeit damaged by woodworm and storage – and this instrument made by Antony Posch in Vienna around 1720 was restored in my studio in 2008.

I.) Description

The very large, well-balanced model (body length: 78.5 cm) with extremely round upper and lower bouts is quite straight at the centre 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 centre bouts.

The narrow edgework is precise and elegant. The purfling consists of stained hardwood (black) and maple (centre). 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.

Belly and back were attached to the blocks along the centre joint using two locating pins (diameter: 5 mm). 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 with the lower rib consisting of one continuous piece.

All blocks are made of spruce with visible tool marks; it is clear to see that 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; the ribs are strengthened in several places using linen strips.

The original bassbar made of wide-ringed spruce is 10 mm along its entire length; it is positioned parallel to the belly joint and reinforced at the ends with parchment strips.

The head and original neck are made of unflamed maple; the 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 along the scroll and back of the pegbox is usually found in double basses and the few surviving oversize violoncelli by Antony Posch and not in his later violoncelli, which are generally standard in 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 (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 ebony veneer. The tailpiece is made of pine with ebony veneer and is fitted with a copper tailpiece adjuster. The beech endpin is almost certainly original (see below).

An examination of the neck foot and top block shed 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 approx. 5° angle), and held in place from within with 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 into 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 who maintained and repaired the instruments of the Esterházy Kapelle from around 1765 on describes a similar repair in an invoice dated 1769: “An ein Paßetl ein Neürn Hals gemacht, den Griff abgericht ein Griff bainl und Neur besait” (Made a new neck for a violoncello, trimmed the fingerboard, new nut, new strings). No later than 1800 the neck was reset again using a rather shallow dovetail joint, this time elongating the neck slightly by adding a shoe to the neck foot and giving it an overall steeper angle. In terms of playing technique, these were also modernizing modifications. To date, no other repairs have been made on the body of the instrument.

II.) Origin/History/Use

Although a number of bass instruments by Antony Posch have survived, this oversize violoncello is one of very few existing instruments of its kind from Vienna around 1720.

There are a few facts that point to the time of purchase. A few years earlier, in 1714, the Esterházy Kapellmeister Wenzel Zivillhofer was sent to Vienna to buy a “tanz-bassetl” (a cello for dance music). We cannot be certain that the instrument he came back with was actually obtained from Antony Posch, however, a receipt dated November 1728 and handwritten by Antony Posch confirms payment of 26 guldens for a “passetl” (violoncello) sold to the Esterházy court. No further violoncelli were acquired until 1783.

One interesting question that arises 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 measuring approximately 6 mm 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 far as its musical application is concerned, we can only guess at the history of its use. One can, at least, 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 palace Esterháza (from 1768 on). It is unlikely that the cellists in Haydn’s orchestra were willing to play operas on such a large instrument, therefore it was probably used for church music instead. The quire 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 Nicolaus II and had grown to include 96 members by 1808 before it was finally disbanded again in 1811 or 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 needed occasionally. On a “concert trip” to Vienna, for example, the orchestra spontaneously recruited the chief accountant Adam List Jr. (father of Franz Liszt) as a third cellist.

These are some occasions on which this cello might have been played. As mentioned, the orchestra was disbanded in 1813, though a few members remained 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 Esterhàzy Kapelle, by then consisting of only a handful of musicians, was disbanded once and for all. After that, some of the string instruments were stored in Esterhàza, the rest in Eisenstadt, but all of them disappeared in the chaos following WWII. Now, after such a long time, at least one of these instruments has been restored to playing condition.

Translation: Kimi Lum

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