

All About the Violin

Gluck 2016

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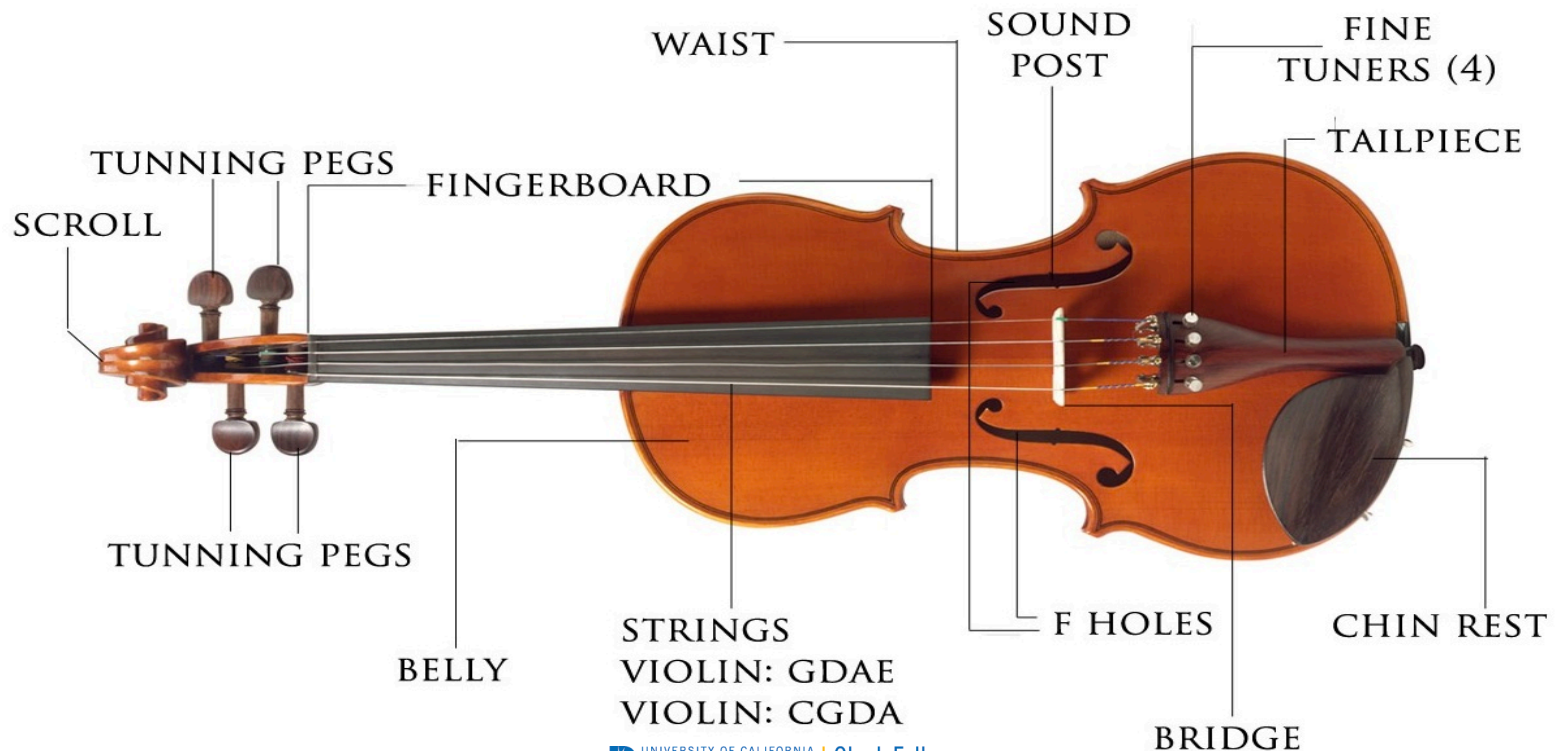
The String Instrument Family

- The violin is part of a family of instruments, including the violin, the viola, the cello, and the double bass.

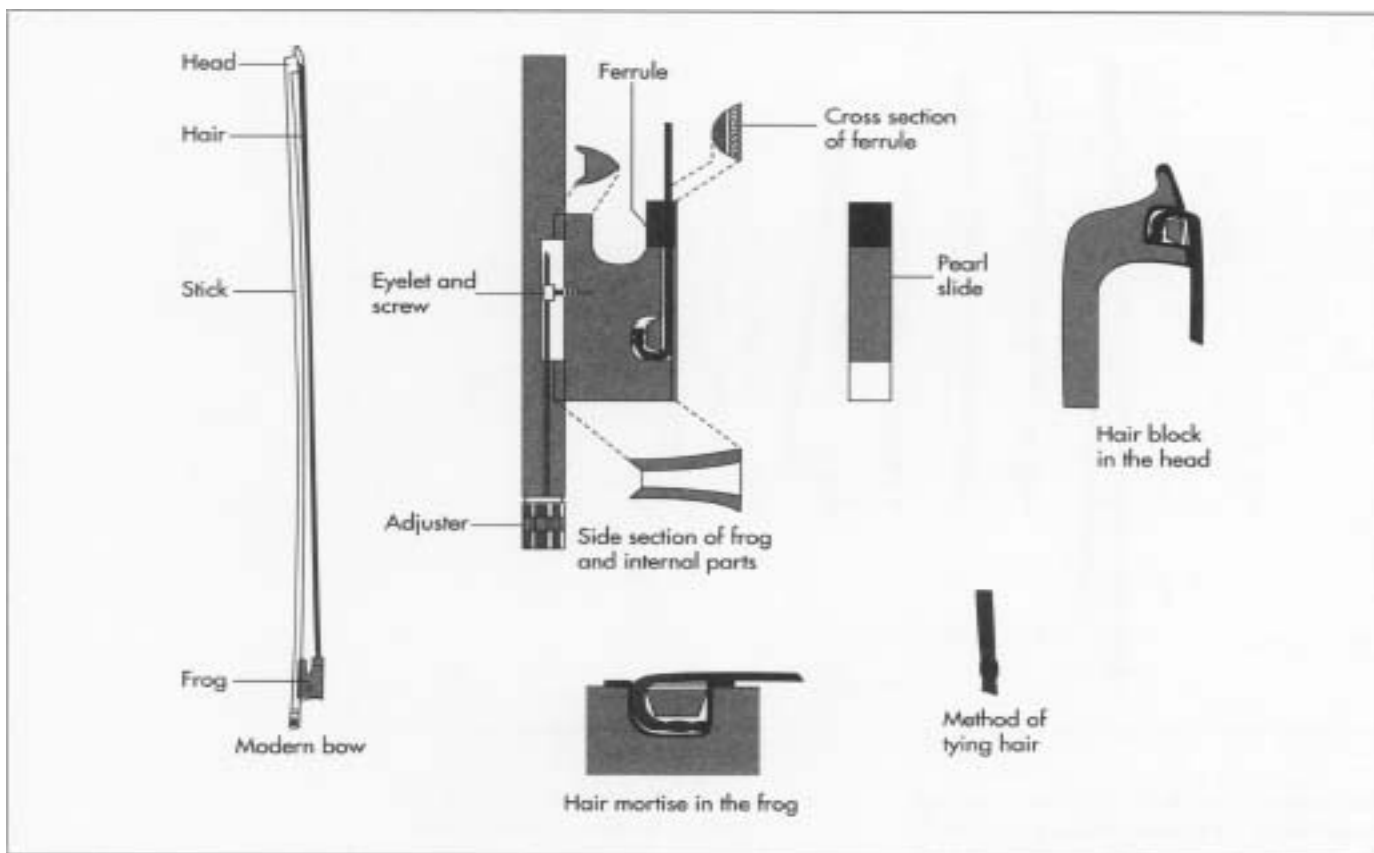


- Other string instruments include the guitar, banjo, harp, mandolin, bass guitar etc.
- There are a number of features that make the violin (as well as viola, cello and double bass) unique from these other instruments
- They have a fretless fingerboard
- They are played with a bow
- Today we will focus on the violin, so lets take a closer look

- Lets take a closer look at the violin and learn about its features:
- The sound post is hidden inside the violin somewhere between the f hole and the bridge. it is a tiny wooden rod that is wedged between the top and bottom of the violin. Moving the sound post even slightly changes the entire sound of the instrument. Without it the violin will not ring out. The violin can even collapse and become damaged without it.

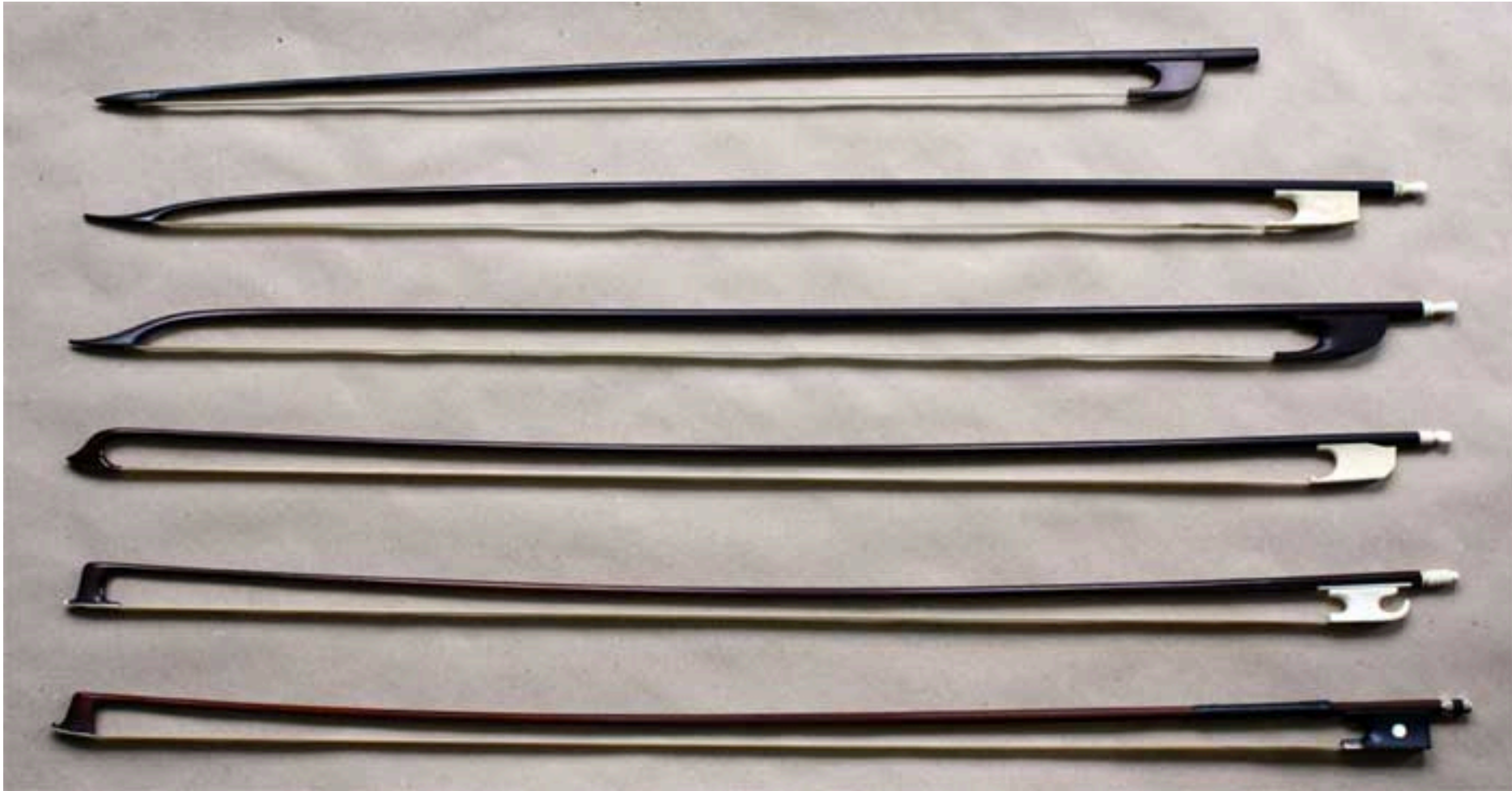


- Now lets look at the bow:



Violin bows are usually made of rosewood and ebony, while the violin itself is usually a combination of maple and spruce.

- The shape of the bow has changed through the ages. Older “baroque” bows like the one at the top were designed for a light sound, and were often played closer to the tip. Modern bows like the two at the bottom are designed for a more projected and powerful sound.



When was the violin invented?

The earliest reference to a bowed instrument comes from the writings of the Persian geographer Ibn Khurradadhbih (900-1000 A.D.)

Over the centuries that followed, the instrument migrated to Europe, and slowly changed into the Lira da Braccio, held over the arm (this example is from 16th century Venice)



...And the Viol da Gamba, which is held between the legs, and comes in all shapes and sizes. The viol da Gamba has little bands around the fingerboard that serve as frets (like a guitar has)

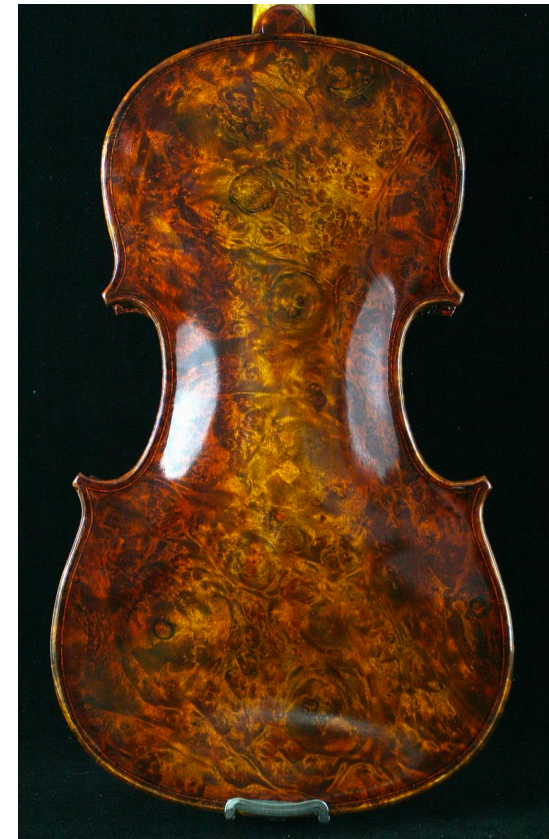


- The Importance of Italy: In the 15th-17th centuries, Italy was the epicenter of European music. All the great luthiers (instrument makers) lived and worked there. The earliest representation of a “modern violin” can be found in this old painting from 1530.



- The oldest surviving violin is the “Charles IX” made in Cremona Italy, 1564, by Andrea Amati (1505-1577). The violin is named for the French King who ordered 38 different instruments from Amati. Scholars believe that the true inventor of the modern violin is either Amati or another Italian gentleman, Gasparo da Salo. The Amati family made violins for generations, and violins by Nicola Amati (1596-1684) are considered the finest Amati violins.

Nicola Amati is the second most famous violin maker of all time, only surpassed by Antonio Stradivari. He lived from 1644-1737. Each Stradivarius violin has its own name, like “The Penny,” “The Ruby,” or “The Antonious.” This one, called “The Hammer” has an unusual birdseye maple back.





The Strad on the left was stolen from the Concert Master Milwaukee Symphony orchestra in 2014. The thieves hit him with a stun gun as he walked to his car. The violin was thankfully recovered.

The one on the right is owned by UCLA. It was found on the side of the freeway in Los Angeles 1967. The lady who found it secretly kept it until she died. It wasn't until the 1990s that the violin surfaced, and a legal battle for its ownership ensued.



People are always leaving their violins silly places, even if they are worth millions. A violinist in Germany recently left hers on the train! Lucky the train engineer found it for her just as the train was about to leave the station!



The most expensive violin in the world is no longer a Stradivarius – its this violin known as the Vieuxtemps Guarneri, made by Guarneri del Gesu (Sold for about 18 million dollars). Both Antonio Stradivarius and Guarneri’s father were apprentices of Antonio Amati (the possible inventor of the modern violin we learned about earlier). In other words, all the best violin makers were closely associated, and passed the knowledge of violin making to each other.

• Stradivarius vs. Guarneri

Stradivarius was a meticulous craftsman, and an excellent businessman. He made violins for over 70 years, living till he was 93.

On the other hand, Guarneri died in his 40's. His violin making career only spanned 24 years. He was so overshadowed by Stradivarius during his lifetime that in the end he had to work as an inkeeper, making violins only on the side. Unlike Stradivarius, his violin designs vary widely, and many of his violins bear evidence of hasty construction or even sloppy work. There is even evidence that many of his violins were actually made by his German wife, Caterina Roda.

violins.

One of the most famous violinists of all time, Jascha Heifetz, owned several Stradivarius violins, but he loved his Guarneri most of all. There are only about 200 Guarneri violins in the world, vs. about 512 Stradivarius



- Theories about why these old violins sound so good

Many people have tried to explain why the Stradivarius and Guarneri violin's sound so good. Some think it is because of "the little ice age" that happened during the 16th century. The unusually cold weather during this time meant that trees grew in such a way that their wood was very dense.

Another theory is that scientists have revealed that the wood of Stradivarius violin's was treated with a chemicals to prevent insect infestation. This treatment may have been done by Stradivarius's supplier, and therefore may not have been known even to Stradivarius himself. These chemicals weakened the wood and made it porous. In other words, the wood has tiny microscopic holes in it, and this somehow makes the instrument more resonant.

The good news is that you don't have to have 16 million dollars to have a nice violin. Modern technology is allowing today's violin makers to replicate these ancient violins in ways never before possible. Only time will tell though- Stradivarius and Guarneri violins were not truly appreciated until they were about 100 years old themselves!