

Showcase Viols

Friedemann & Barbara Hellwig, *Joachim Tielke Kunstvolle Musikinstrumente des Barock*¹ (Berlin/München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011), 456 pages.
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In 1980, after a lifetime's dedicated research alongside his 'day job' as a luthier, Günther Hellwig published a monograph on the life and work of the Hamburg instrument maker Joachim Tielke (1641-1719). The book was well received: not only did it sell out within a few years, but the interest it generated inevitably brought new information and a significant number of hitherto unknown instruments to light. Thus it was that when the present authors, son and daughter-in-law of Hellwig senior, undertook the task of preparing a second edition it rapidly became apparent that nothing short of a complete re-write was called for.

The project was to occupy the Hellwigs for seven years, during which time they travelled the world in order to personally document each surviving instrument or fragment. The resulting book is an impressive achievement, handsomely produced and lavishly illustrated in full colour. This may well conjure up the impression of a coffee-table book (which Tielke's highly ornamented instruments certainly invite), but there is nothing superficial about the scholarship here and the presentation is straightforward and informative. The format has been nicely judged too, the paper size a little under A4, the cover a little over—big enough to adequately accommodate the illustrations, but handy enough to sit comfortably in the lap. That it weighs in at just over 2kg is the price to be paid for the quality paper necessary to do justice to the fine photography. And all this for an extremely reasonable price!²

The authors had themselves contributed to the 1980 monograph, and were its dedicatees: my initial qualms that this might lead to scholarly integrity taking second place to filial reverence proved to be completely unfounded—Hellwig senior's work is thoroughly and rigorously overhauled, his attributions, assessments and conclusions are further developed, rejected or confirmed in a refreshingly objective manner. Equally refreshing is the objectivity with which the achievement of Joachim Tielke himself is approached: the Hellwigs' admiration for their subject shines out of every page, but never spills over into hagiography.

The greater part of the book consists of an inventory of all the known surviving Tielke instruments, with separate chapters devoted to the lute family, guitars, 'Hamburg' citterns (*Hamburger Cithrinchen*), pochettes, the violin family, violas d'amore, the viols, and barytons. This is preceded by around 100 pages of biographical and other background material, and chapters highlighting

¹ 'Joachim Tielke Ornate Musical Instruments of the Baroque'

² At the time of writing (internet search 11th December 2012) the book was obtainable for less than £50.

specific aspects of Tielke's work. The book is rounded off by appendixes covering the work of related instrument makers, and a useful series of tables listing the instruments both in numerical order and (where relevant) according to the museum or collection which holds them. Additions and errata are, or will be dealt with on the authors' website.³

As a coda, tucked away just inside the back cover, a useful two-page summary in English of the text sections of the book is provided—each chapter neatly condensed into a very readable paragraph.⁴

The first chapters chart Tielke's domestic and working life and set him in context in late seventeenth-century Hamburg. The securely documented facts of his life are quickly told; this skeleton is usefully fleshed out by general descriptions of the guild system and the administrative and trading conditions within which he must have operated. A remarkably lively picture emerges of a man who was capable of sitting at the workbench, but probably spent most of his time as the businessman, liaising with suppliers and customers, and supervising skilled specialist craftsmen in the enormously successful workshop operation he had built up. The best documented event turns out to be the golden wedding of Tielke and his wife Catherina, celebrated in 1717 by a series of gushing tributes, some in verse, from family and friends, a selection of which were published. These have furnished useful biographical information.

A subsequent chapter deals with pupils, imitators and successors: this is another poorly documented area where many conclusions must remain speculative.

To close this section of the book the Hellwigs had the happy idea of printing, without comment, a varied assortment of quotations drawn from encyclopaedias, diaries, newspapers and other sources. These provide a potted history of the reception of Tielke's work—both positive and negative—over the centuries since his death. Arthur Hill, of W. E. Hill & Sons, wrote in his diary on January 2nd 1915:

'The German family of Tielke made some of the most wonderful string instruments ... yet I have never heard of any German taking the trouble to tell us anything about these craftsmen.'

There follow three chapters which give an overview of selected aspects of the instruments which came out of Tielke's workshop—the labels and signatures, the decoration, and the varnish. Inevitably the decoration claims the most attention: the carved heads and pegboxes, the purfling, the roses and soundholes, the appliqué fretwork, and the feature which we most associate with Tielke, the extraordinary inlays and marquetry. These last are put into context both in terms of technique and subject matter. Hellwig explains the method of lightly gluing several layers of dark and light material together with a template before cutting them all in one operation, which means that each pattern is produced at least twice, with dark and light areas reversed. A

³ <www.tielke-hamburg.de> (parallel pages in German and English)

⁴ With so many unidiomatic do-it-yourself translations around these days it is a pleasure to report that the authors took the trouble to engage Colin Tilney for the task.

remarkable number of these complementary pairs of instruments have survived, and are reunited, at least photographically, in these pages. Research has also revealed the source of many of the emblematic panels with which the most lavishly decorated instruments are adorned: 21 engravings from Otto van Heen's *'Amorum Emblemata'*, published in Antwerp in 1608, are reproduced here, for comparison with the inlaid panels which Tielke's craftsmen derived from them. Others are shown to be based on illustrations from Daniel Heinsius' *'Nederduytsche Poemata'* (Amsterdam, 1616), and Henri van Offelen's *'Devises et Emblemes Anciennes et Modernes'* (Augsburg 1695).

Also illustrated is a series of twelve untitled engravings of classical deities by Cornelis Danckerts published in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, which were repeatedly reproduced on Tielke instruments: the one evidently depicting Diana was used particularly frequently in association with the emblems of profane love. Hellwig argues here that Tielke, ignoring the clues offered by a bow-toting goddess sporting a half-moon diadem reclining in a chariot pulled by two stags, mistakenly took it to represent Venus, and the accompanying cherub—who has no bow—to be Cupid.

This bringing together of all Tielke's instruments between two covers also provides a fascinating picture of the widely varying quantity of decoration which was applied: the violins and some of the viols are very plain, with at most a carved head and pegbox—some even have inked-on 'purfling'—whereas others seem to be more decoration than instrument. Indeed, this proves to be no exaggeration, as it seems that some of the most elaborately inlaid examples genuinely are unplayable and meant only for the showcase, either because the mosaic body construction would not stand the full string tension, or because inlaid semi-precious stones stand proud of the fingerboard. On the other hand, the plain instruments allow us to form a clearer impression of the basic body outlines, which show that the aesthetics of simple shape and proportion was perhaps not the strongest suit of the Tielke workshops. This is seen most clearly with the violins, where the corners are little more than a small interruption in a 'guitar' outline; here is neither the restrained elegance of the Cremonese or Stainer instruments made on moulds, nor the strongly modelled individuality of a William Baker or the Alemannic school of South Germany and Switzerland. The one surviving cello is, optically at least, a particular disappointment, the outline and proportions gauche, almost home-made.⁵ It seems, however, that the cello sounds well, and the authors are able to produce plenty of evidence that Tielke instruments were prized for their sound: he obviously had the ability to choose good tone wood, and the plate thickening was well judged.

The brief chapter discussing varnish contains what was for me, at least, the biggest surprise of all, that on the evidence of those instruments which have not been re-varnished in the course of restoration or repair, the varnish used by the Tielke workshop was disastrously ill-chosen and has not stood the test of time at all well.

⁵ Recently discovered photographs of two further cellos are posted on the authors' website, these show much more assured and elegant proportions and outline.

The chapters containing the descriptions of the individual instruments are preceded by an explanation of abbreviations and the method of presentation of measurements etc. This includes diagrams of a lute, a viol and a guitar with the component parts labelled in German, and a helpful glossary giving English and French equivalents. This, in combination with the text summary already mentioned, makes the book far more accessible to non-speakers of German than it might at first sight appear.⁶ However, the lists are not complete in every language; there are four question marks in the English and one in the French. For completeness: *Kappe* (on the lute) is the ‘capping strip’ or ‘endclasp’; *Span* (in the context of the purfling) is ‘veneer’; *Teil* (component part of a three- or five-piece front) is ‘stave’. I too am stumped for a concise English term for the opposite end of the fingerboard to the nut. The French for ‘centre bout’ is missing, although this seems to be an oversight, as ‘bout’ has already been given as *écranchure*.

In 1980 Günther Hellwig numbered the 139 surviving Tielke ‘works’ then known in a single, chronological sequence. The present authors now exclude four of these as inauthentic, but are able to add 34 which were previously unknown. They have chosen to renumber this new total of 169, again in a single chronological sequence, this time using TieWV numbers, mirroring the modern cataloguing of the compositions of Bach, Buxtehude, Schütz, Handel and Telemann: the old numbers are cross-referenced, so 135 ‘works’ have two numbers, any future new finds will be incorporated by means of a letter suffix, TieWV 153a, for example. I wish I were as convinced of the wisdom of this as the Hellwigs are. One obvious criticism is that although many instruments have securely authenticated labels, others can only be approximately dated by informed guesswork, whose status may change in the future, but which has been given a stamp of authority by the TieWV number—usually allocated according to the earliest possible dating. But more problematic, I think, is that this single sequence has to do for such a variety of artefacts: not only are there eight different instrument types represented (not including possible subdivisions of the lute and violin families), there are also fragments (a neck, or a pegbox), a number of instruments which were documented earlier in the twentieth century but which have since disappeared, and finally, instruments made by others but labelled and sold by Tielke. To be fair, uncertainties of dating or attribution, and the possibility of further new discoveries (there are already three⁷) mean that a fully consistent and logical cataloguing will never be possible; some sort of simple sequential numbering is probably the best compromise, and serves well enough for purposes of identification—provided that the next revision does not re-number once again! Nevertheless, I think there was a case to be made for separate sequences for each category of instrument.

And so to the chapters containing the detailed inventory: each begins with a few pages of introductory material and goes on to describe the instruments in chronological order. There is a lot of information here, and whereas the shorter chapters, such as those on the violin family or the barytons, can be

⁶ Reading between the lines, especially on the authors’ website, a full English translation does not seem to be planned, which is a great pity, as I am sure it would be welcomed.

⁷ <www.tielke-hamburg.de> accessed 31 December 2012.

absorbed in one sitting, that concerning the viols is better suited for dipping into, as the sheer quantity of instruments soon defeats the concentration! A good place to begin, along with the photographs, is the descriptive paragraph which ends each entry: these vary in length from one sentence to half a column or more, depending on the importance of the instrument. Preceding this, some or all of the following information is provided: present owner; label and/or signature (including any repair labels); a listing and description of original parts, including construction details if known (presence of linings or corner blocks, method of attaching the neck); dimensions; any known previous owners; any published literature (sale catalogues, restoration reports etc.); technical drawings, if any; CD or other recordings featuring the instrument; page or illustration numbers if the instrument is additionally discussed elsewhere in the book.

The entries vary in length from less than a quarter of a column and one photograph, e.g. for TieWV 22, a viol of which only part of the body is original, to seven pages and thirteen illustrations for TieWV 64, one of the most ornately inlaid (but unplayable) viols. Commendable care has been taken with the photographs to show only what is original: if the neck and pegbox are modern, we see only the body; if the pegbox has been grafted onto a new neck, the body and pegbox are shown separately; if the front has been replaced, only the back and ribs are illustrated. This means that, with a few exceptions, the overall visual impression is restricted to the genuine Tielke workshop product; cumulatively, the effect of this is significant—the exceptions are mainly those instruments which have disappeared after being documented in black and white photographs from the early twentieth century, and one or instances where a neck has been made narrower and fitted with a long ebony fingerboard for use as a cello, but is otherwise unaltered. Sadly nothing can be done to improve the appearance of the often hideous replacement pegs which spoil the look of too many of the instruments.

Care has also been taken with the layout, which is varied flexibly to suit the different photograph formats. In most cases the photographs and descriptions are on the same opening, avoiding the otherwise irritating need to turn to and fro. The price paid for this is endnotes—at the end of each chapter—rather than the more convenient footnotes: I had at first been prepared to note this as a fault, but after realising what damage footnotes would have inflicted on the layout I happily withdraw the criticism! In any case, the book is kitted out with a ribbon bookmark which may be pressed into service to locate the endnotes when necessary.

Dimensions are also restricted to original parts; in particular the sounding string length is only given precisely if it is considered reliably authentic. In one or two cases where the neck angle has been altered but not the length, an approximate original SSL is estimated. The dimensions given are not intended to be sufficient for a copy to be made, but are for comparison. It seems no two Tielke viols are the same dimensions, the workshop did not use moulds, so in a sense, aiming to make an accurate copy is missing the point! Nevertheless, it is a shame to have no information at all about plate thicknesses, or to know whether they are remarkable in any way.

The Tielke viols emerge from all this as a fascinating mix of sometimes perverse and paradoxical construction features. Earlier examples typically have a three-piece front, the centre stave 6-7cm wide, and perhaps bent, and the pegs mounted 'mirror-imaged', that is, the peg nearest the nut on the treble side; later the workshop went over to 'conventional' two-piece carved fronts and the pegs in the usual arrangement. Notable also are the arched backs, which began to appear from 1683, the early ones three-piece, like the fronts. Many also show a hybrid form, the upper part bent longitudinally over ribs pre-cut either to a gentle curve, or with a sharp fold. Some of these have suffered quite spectacular deformation with the stress of the years.

Viols account for about half the surviving Tielke oeuvre; the other instrument types manufactured in his workshop are of course covered here in equal detail. It is especially fascinating for a non-specialist to be introduced to a number of plucked instruments which are less often encountered today. The little *Hamburger Cithrinchen*, a form of bell cittern, obviously enjoyed great local popularity; it featured an early form of vibrato bar, in which the strings of all but the lowest course are attached to a hinged tailpiece. The Tielke citterns, like many other wire-strung instruments which had fixed metal frets, show evidence of unequal fret spacings: Hellwig reports, however, that the placing of the frets is so inconsistent that it is not possible to deduce what temperament might have been aimed at. I must say I find the graphic presentation (page 202) of the average measured fret positions rather obscure.

Guitars were produced in three basic sizes, and as we see with other contemporary instrument makers, they carry the most lavish decoration. In addition to the 'normal' size with body length 42-45cm and sounding string length (SSL) 64-69cm already mentioned there are small ones, with a body only 25-30cm long and SSL around 45cm, and some veritable giants, the bodies 50-55cm long with SSL 75cm or more. Hellwig is content to describe the small instruments as 'Terz' guitars, but does point out that they are small enough to be tuned more than a third higher than normal; comparison with the string lengths in use today shows that they are even smaller than 'Quarte' guitars.⁸ Another quirky feature is evident here: although there are always ten pegs, enough original bridges survive to show that there were only ever nine strings, the first course being single-strung.

The workshop's range included 11-course lutes, mandoras and angéliques. This last was an instrument for amateurs, a hybrid between theorbo and harp with 16 single courses, the ten stopped courses also tuned diatonically. The best preserved example (TieWV 139) has both the saddle and table marked with numbering of the strings, and tablature letters on the bass edge of the fingerboard (up to 'k') alongside the frets. Few of the surviving lute family instruments are in their original state; in particular lutes have been converted to 'theorbos' by mounting an extended swan necked double pegbox, sometimes re-using decorative elements salvaged from the original pegbox, which then no longer quite fit. Strictly speaking these are in most instances 'theorboed lutes',

⁸ Sizes are quite variable, but string lengths are typically: standard guitar 64cm; 'Terz' guitar 55cm; 'Quarte' guitar 50cm; 'Quinte-basse' guitar 70cm.

as only one of them has stopped courses long enough to require a re-entrant tuning.⁹

One was converted to a 'Swedish theorbo': this rare variant enjoyed popularity in the early decades of the nineteenth century; not only is the neck drilled behind the first three frets for a normal capo to be fastened, there is also a further ingenious mechanism which allows the player to raise the diapasons by one semitone, this is operated by the left hand with a lever mounted behind the neck.

The violas d'amore represent another organological byway: these are all of the type with five wire playing strings and no additional sympathetic strings. Friedemann Hellwig writes that his father Günther accepted only with deep misgivings that these instruments were violas d'amore, belonging as he did to the generation which had grown up viewing them as a small viol played on the shoulder, and calling them a *Diskant Viola da braccio*. As a result of such misunderstandings many instruments of this type are in use today as shallow-ribbed treble viols, played 'da gamba', either with five strings, or with neck and pegbox rebuilt for six strings.

It is not possible to discuss the viols from the Tielke workshop without attempting an explanation of their remarkable variation in size: the body lengths measure between 71.5cm¹⁰ and 57.5cm, the sounding string lengths between 70.5cm and 57.5cm. Despite the similar overall range the correlation between body and string lengths is not particularly strong. Commentators generally assume that they are all bass viols, the top string nominally tuned to *d'*, although this is usually asserted (as here) without justification. Two explanations are offered for the range of sizes: the first, that two basic sizes of viol were played at *Cammerton* or *Chorton*, pitch levels which were either two or three semitones apart, according to different sources quoted; the second, that at least some of the viols were used for unaccompanied solo playing and could be dimensioned purely to suit the customer.

Prof. Hellwig mentions the second explanation, which has been promoted by Annette Otterstedt,¹¹ but favours the first—although he does concede that the smallest surviving viol could be a large tenor. Arguing primarily on the basis of body lengths he sees two groups: the majority are of normal size, for use at *Cammerton*, and a small number are of small size, for use at *Chorton*. I have made my own tables and graphs of body length and sounding string length—of the 73 viols whose bodies survive complete, 22 are listed as reliably retaining their original SSL. The body lengths of the majority (66 instruments) are distributed quite widely around a clear peak at 67cm—the range is 62-71.5cm; there are six small instruments measuring 57.5-59.5cm. Consideration of the string lengths shows that twenty instruments fall into a continuum between 64 and 70.5cm,

⁹ TieWV 154 now has stopped courses 83.8cm long. German speakers generally use the term *Theorbe* (without qualification) fairly loosely for any lute with two distinct pegboxes.

¹⁰ Only one lies exceptionally outside this range: TieWV 84 has a festooned, baryton-like body which is 74cm long. I have disregarded it in the following discussion.

¹¹ See A. Otterstedt, 'Die Lyra Viol auf dem Continent und ihre Verwandten', in *Viola da gamba und Viola da braccio, Symposium im Rahmen der 27. Tage Alter Musik in Herne 2002*, ed. C. Ahrens & G. Klinke, pub. Stadt Herne (Musikverlag Katzbichler: Munich – Salzburg, 2006), 139-155.

the remaining two measure 61.5cm and 57.5cm. The small sample makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions: these figures represent a range of nearly four semitones,¹² but without the two clear peaks one could wish for to confirm the 'two pitch' hypothesis.

But is this the right way to look at it? Certainly seventeenth century England Playford recommended tuning the top string as high as it would go—so the playing pitch was determined by SSL¹³—and Thomas Mace insists on the strict proportions between consort instruments.¹⁴ But already in 1640 Mersenne had described violas of three sizes all tuned alike,¹⁵ and in 1687 Rousseau wrote that the English had begun to make their viols smaller before the French took up the idea, reflecting the impact of the newly introduced silver wound bass strings.¹⁶ On the other hand, at the end of the 1690s James Talbot still reported the old larger sizes of viol.¹⁷ In her book on the Alemannic school Olga Adelmann is content to describe the instruments which are built only one semitone longer than the violins as violas, the notion that they might be violins for lower pitch is not raised.¹⁸ This pot-pourri of contemporary ideas suggests that without further evidence it seems risky to try to relate SSL to absolute pitch levels at this period: even the largest Tielke viol, with an SSL of 70.5cm, could be tuned up to a *Chorton* of A+1 without the top string breaking. Since it was not strictly necessary to build smaller viols for high pitch it is necessary to look elsewhere for evidence that this might have been the practice.

In this context it is also interesting to turn to the chapters on other instrument types; what I find there serves to make the variability of the viols seem almost wilful. The lutes, guitars and citterns mostly have elaborately inlaid necks; this has not only ensured their preservation, it also makes it easy to see whether the length has been altered. Eight lutes deliver trustworthy original string lengths, which range from 70 to 74cm. Surprisingly long in comparison to the viols, if one assumes the standard baroque lute tuning from *f'*, and remarkably consistent, spanning less than a semitone.

I have mentioned the guitar SSLs already, the standard sized instruments' range of 64-69cm is also quite consistent, spanning just over a semitone. The *Hamburger Cithrinchen* show even greater uniformity, six have string lengths between 36.5 and 37.5cm, one early example has strings 34.5cm long.

If I have rather harped on this point, it is because I find it particularly fascinating. I do not want to give the impression that the fact that I query some of the authors' interpretations and conclusions detracts significantly from the value of the book. The authors invariably make a clear distinction between

¹² String lengths of, for example, 57, 60.5, 64, 68 and 72cm represent semitone steps.

¹³ See e.g. J. Playford, *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick* (London, 1655), 44

¹⁴ T. Mace, *Musick's Monument* (London, 1676), 246

¹⁵ M. Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle* (Paris 1640)

¹⁶ J. Rousseau, *Traité de la viole* (Paris, 1687), 22

¹⁷ J. Talbot, 'Collection for a Treatise upon Musick by Dean Aldrich', GB-Och Mus. MS 1187

¹⁸ O. Adelmann and A. Otterstedt, *Die Alemannische Schule, Geigenbau des 17. Jahrhunderts im südlichen Schwarzwald und in der Schweiz* (Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung, Preußischer Kulturbesitz : Berlin, 1997): the tenor violins with unaltered necks have SSLs 34-35cm, which is only one semitone longer than a violin at 32cm.

presentation of information and their interpretation of it, and readers are free to examine the facts and draw their own conclusions.

The style and appearance of Tielke instruments is not to everyone's taste, and some readers will no doubt agree with Gerald Hayes' pithy remark, cited on page 47:

The seventeenth-century firm of Tielke in Hamburg seems specially to have delighted in turning out the sort of instrument with which collectors love to fill their cabinets; and the musician is content to leave them with this choice.

Equally, there are plenty of Tielke aficionados today, as there were during and immediately after his lifetime. No serious student of the viol can afford to ignore him, and for anyone, enthusiast or detractor alike, seeking information on the man, his workshop and the instruments, this book is the place to start. Many more delights and surprises await the reader.