

# Cello Reference Guide

*Names, events, and facts every cellist should know*

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## Where the Name Comes From

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*The whole violin family is named off one root word, viola, with everything else built from it by making the word bigger or smaller. Violino is the little viola; violone is the big one. Violoncello is violone plus the diminutive -cello: the small big viola. Cello is just the tail end of that word, a nickname that stuck so hard it replaced the original.*

*The violin family did not replace the viol family so much as grow up next to it. Both took shape in 16th-century Italy from different roots: viols have frets, six strings tuned in fourths, sloped shoulders, and are all held on or between the legs; violins have four unfretted strings tuned in fifths and a louder, more projecting sound. Viols were the courtly amateur instrument, violins the professional dance-and-outdoor one, and the two families shared ensembles for two centuries before the fight turned decisive. The treble viol died off quickly, but the bass viol outlived the rest of its family by a hundred years — which means the cello, alone in the violin family, had to displace a rival that was still at the height of its powers.*

## 16th Century — Origins of the Bass Violin

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*The ancestor of the cello, the bass violin, begins life as a working instrument: doubling and holding down the bass line in church, in dance bands, and as the accompanying partner to the violin in folk music. Its rival, the viola da gamba, holds the refined, courtly end of the same job.*

- **Andrea Amati** — The Cremonese maker of the earliest surviving instruments of the violin family, including the bass violins built for the French court. Among them is the “King,” the oldest cello still in existence. Everything that follows is built on the shape he settled.
- **Gasparo da Salò** — The leading Brescian maker of the period, building gambas and bass violins side by side, back when it was still an open question which one would win. His instruments are bigger and rougher than the Cremonese ones, made for volume and outdoor playing rather than the salon.

## 17th Century — The Bass Violin Gets a Voice of Its Own

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- **Claudio Monteverdi** — Called for bassi da braccio in the score of Orfeo (1607), one of the first times the bass violin was written into a work rather than left to improvise the bass line. It marks the instrument moving from anonymous support to something a composer specifies by name.
- **Nicolò Amati** — Andrea’s grandson, who refined the family proportions and trained the next generation of makers, including Stradivari and Guarneri. Without his workshop there is no Cremonese golden age.
- **Marin Marais** — Brought the viola da gamba to its absolute peak with roughly 600 solo pieces across five published books, at the exact moment the cello was arriving in France. He is the reason the fight there lasted another full century: no cellist could argue the new instrument

was needed when the old one was producing music at this level. France became the gamba's last stronghold largely because of him.

- **Giovanni Battista Degli Antonii** — Published *Ricercate sopra il violoncello o clavicembalo* (1687), the earliest printed music for unaccompanied cello. The pieces are short and plain, but they are the first time the instrument is asked to carry a line by itself.
- **Domenico Gabrielli** — The Bolognese cellist who wrote the first *Ricercari* for solo cello and the first cello sonatas (1689). Nicknamed “Menghino dal violoncello,” he is the moment the instrument stops accompanying and starts playing solo. Everything in the Bach suites has a distant ancestor here.
- **Giuseppe Jacchini** — Gabrielli's Bolognese successor, and the first to publish sonatas with genuine obbligato solo cello parts. He took the idea out of San Petronio's church loft and into print, where other players could find it.

## 18th Century — The Cello Wins

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- **Antonio Stradivari** — Settled the cello's dimensions around 1707 with the smaller “forma B” pattern, the body size still copied today. Earlier bass violins were oversized and awkward; his proportions made virtuoso playing physically possible. The “Davydov” is a forma B instrument.
- **Domenico Montagnana** — The great Venetian rival to Cremona, nicknamed “the Mighty Venetian” for cellos with an unusually wide lower body and a huge, dark, throaty sound. Where a Strad is silvery and focused, a Montagnana is warm and enormous. Yo-Yo Ma's “Petunia” and Lynn Harrell's 1720 instrument are both Montagnanas.
- **Antonio Vivaldi** — Wrote roughly 25 cello concertos, the first large body of concerto repertoire for the instrument. He is the one who established that a cello could carry a full three-movement concerto against an orchestra, decades before anyone else took the idea seriously.
- **Francesco Alborea “Franceschello”** — The first international cello virtuoso, admired by Handel and Geminiani and credited with converting skeptics single-handedly. His playing is what convinced audiences the cello could be a solo instrument at all.
- **Johann Sebastian Bach** — Wrote the Six Suites for unaccompanied cello (c. 1720), the repertoire that still defines the instrument. They spend most of their existence treated as exercises before Casals rescues them.
- **Salvatore Lanzetti** — Carried the solo cello north of the Alps with his sonatas and one of the first cello methods. He was among the earliest to use thumb position systematically, which opened the instrument's upper register.
- **Martin Berteau** — Founded the French cello school and pushed France, the gamba's last stronghold, to switch to the cello. His students, including the Duport brothers, carried the method into the next century.
- **Hubert Le Blanc** — Published a pamphlet in 1740 with the fighting title *Défense de la basse de viole contre les entreprises du violon et les prétentions du violoncelle*. It attacks the cello directly as a loud, crude usurper with pretensions above its station. It is the losing side's manifesto and the single clearest piece of evidence for how personal the cello-versus-gamba fight got.

- **Carl Friedrich Abel** — The last great viola da gamba virtuoso, and J.C. Bach's partner in the Bach-Abel concert series in London. By his lifetime he was already an anomaly, playing an instrument audiences considered old-fashioned while cellists took the same repertoire. When he died in 1787 the gamba went with him — the cello had won outright, and the instrument did not return until the 20th-century early-music revival.
- **Luigi Boccherini** — One of the first professional full-time cellists, as opposed to violin players who occasionally played a bass-like violin. He wrote a huge body of work featuring the cello, including twelve concertos and hundreds of chamber works with prominent cello parts. His writing sits high on the instrument and assumes a soloist's technique throughout.
- **Anton Kraft** — The Esterházy principal cellist for whom Haydn wrote the D major concerto, a piece so idiomatic that Kraft was long believed to have written it himself. He also premiered Beethoven's Triple Concerto, whose cello part is by far the hardest of the three. He was among the first cellists whose playing directly shaped how major composers wrote for the instrument.
- **Jean-Pierre Duport** — The Berlin cellist for whom Beethoven wrote the Op. 5 sonatas in 1796, the first sonatas to treat cello and piano as equals rather than making the cello the bass line. Mozart's D major variations K. 573 came out of the same visit.

## 19th Century

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- **Jean-Louis Duport** — Jean-Pierre's younger brother, and author of the *Essai sur le doigté du violoncelle* (1806), which fixed the fingering system every cellist still uses. Before him, fingering was improvised player by player. He also left 21 études that remain standard study material.
- **Bernhard Romberg** — Introduced the scooped fingerboard that keeps the C string from buzzing, still standard on every cello built today. He also wrote a widely used method and popularized the thumb position and the endpin-free playing posture of his era. Beethoven offered him a sonata and he turned it down.
- **Friedrich Dotzauer** — The founder of the German cello school, whose 113 Studies remain the backbone of technical training. His *Violoncell-Schule* systematized cello teaching for the first time. He also published the first printed edition of the Bach cello suites in 1826, when almost nobody was playing them.
- **Sebastian Lee** — A Dotzauer-lineage German cellist best known for the 40 Melodic and Progressive Etudes, Op. 31, the studies most students meet before Popper. His Method, Op. 30, was one of the most widely used teaching books of the century.
- **Carlo Alfredo Piatti** — The leading cellist in London for decades and the anchor of the Popular Concerts chamber series. His 12 Caprices, Op. 25, are the cello's answer to the violin caprice tradition and still function as the standard virtuoso studies. He also rescued Boccherini and other Italian Baroque cello music from obscurity by editing and performing it.
- **Karl Davydov** — Called "the czar of cellists" by Tchaikovsky, he directed the St. Petersburg Conservatory and founded the Russian cello school. His School of Cello Playing set the technical standard for generations of Russian players. The Stradivarius he owned still carries his name and later passed to du Pré and Yo-Yo Ma. As a composer he left four cello concertos and the salon pieces cellists still use as encores, above all *At the Fountain*, Op. 20 No. 2, and the *Ballade*, Op. 25.

- **Wilhelm Fitzenhagen** — The German cellist in Moscow for whom Tchaikovsky wrote the Rococo Variations, and who gave the premiere in 1877. He then rewrote the solo part, reordered the variations, and cut one entirely — and that altered version, not Tchaikovsky's original, is what almost everyone still plays. It is the clearest case of a cellist permanently reshaping a canonical work.
- **David Popper** — The technical endpoint of the century, whose High School of Cello Playing, Op. 73, is the hardest and most universal set of cello studies ever written. Every conservatory audition still runs through it. As a composer he also produced the showpieces cellists use as encores, including the Hungarian Rhapsody and Elfentanz.
- **New York Philharmonic** — Founded in 1842, the oldest orchestra in the United States. Mahler and Toscanini both led it, and Leonard Bernstein turned it into a national institution through the televised Young People's Concerts. Dvořák's New World Symphony was premiered by it.
- **Vienna Philharmonic** — Founded in 1842 and self-governing from the start, with members drawn from the Vienna State Opera orchestra. It premiered Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler under the composers themselves, and its New Year's Concert is the single most-watched classical broadcast in the world. Its string sound is the reference point for the Austro-German tradition.
- **Metropolitan Opera Orchestra** — Founded in 1883 as the pit orchestra of the Met. Its Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts, running continuously since 1931, made opera a mass-audience art form in America. James Levine's four decades turned it into an ensemble that also concertizes on its own.
- **Boston Symphony Orchestra** — Founded in 1881 by Henry Lee Higginson and one of the Big Five, with a French-influenced sound cultivated over Koussevitzky's twenty-five years. Koussevitzky commissioned Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra and Copland's Third Symphony, among many others, making the orchestra a patron rather than just a performer. Tanglewood, its summer home and school, has trained American musicians since 1940.
- **Boston Pops** — Founded in 1885 also by Henry Lee Higginson as a lighter-repertoire offshoot of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and not a separate organization: the Pops is the Boston Symphony minus roughly eleven principals, run by the same management, playing in the same hall. Arthur Fiedler ran it for fifty years and John Williams followed him from 1980 to 1993, which is why the film repertoire lives there. Its season is also what let the BSO become one of the first American orchestras to offer year-round employment.
- **Berlin Philharmonic** — Founded in 1882 and shaped by Nikisch, Furtwängler, and then Karajan, whose recording contracts made it the most documented orchestra on earth. Its Deutsche Grammophon catalog under Karajan defined how the standard repertoire sounded to a generation. Its Digital Concert Hall did the same thing again for streaming.

## Early 20th Century

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- **The Philadelphia Orchestra** — Founded in 1900 and made famous by Stokowski and then Ormandy, who cultivated the lush "Philadelphia Sound" built on its strings. It was the first orchestra to make electrical recordings and to appear in a feature film, Disney's Fantasia. Yannick Nézet-Séguin leads it today.

- **London Symphony Orchestra** — Founded in 1904 by players who walked out of Henry Wood's orchestra to run their own, and self-governing ever since. It is the most recorded orchestra in the world, including the Star Wars scores and much of the film canon.
- **The Cleveland Orchestra** — Founded in 1918 and rebuilt by George Szell into the most precise ensemble in America, with a chamber-music transparency no other orchestra of its size had. Szell auditioned and replaced most of the roster to get it. Lynn Harrell was its principal cellist at twenty.
- **Hollywood Studio Orchestras (MGM, Warner, Fox, etc.)** — Between the arrival of sound and the collapse of the studio system, each major studio kept a full salaried orchestra on staff, recording essentially every film score made in America. Those contracts made studio players among the best-compensated orchestral musicians in the country at a time when concert orchestras offered no year-round work, and drew top-tier talent west — the Hollywood String Quartet was formed entirely out of studio players, with Warner Bros. principal cellist Eleanor Aller at its center. The work later moved to London for Star Wars in 1977 and then to Prague, Bratislava, and Budapest as budgets tightened.
- **Pablo Casals** — Famous for popularizing the cello as a soloist's instrument, above all by performing the Bach suites complete and treating them as concert works rather than etudes. He found the suites as a boy in a Barcelona shop and studied them for twelve years before playing them in public. He also made "Song of the Birds," a Catalan Christmas song, a symbol of peace and exile.
- **Emanuel Feuermann** — Possessed the cleanest technique of anyone in the century's first half, playing at a speed and accuracy that still sounds implausible on record. He recorded the Dvořák concerto and the trio repertoire with Heifetz and Rubinstein in the group billed as the Million Dollar Trio. He died in 1942 at thirty-nine, from complications of routine surgery.
- **Gregor Piatigorsky** — Became principal cellist of the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler at twenty-one before leaving for a solo career. He premiered the Walton concerto and works by Hindemith and Castelnuovo-Tedesco, expanding the modern repertoire. He also partnered Heifetz and Rubinstein, and taught a generation of American cellists at USC.
- **Pierre Fournier** — A giant of the French cello tradition, nicknamed the aristocrat of cellists for the elegance of his playing. His Bach suites and Dvořák concerto with Szell are benchmark recordings. Poulenc, Martinů, and Roussel all wrote for him.
- **Paul Tortelier** — The other giant of the French school, best known for his Don Quixote, which he recorded with Beecham and performed under Strauss himself. He designed the bent endpin that angles the cello for a more open string crossing. His BBC masterclass series made him one of the first cello teachers with a mass audience.
- **Maurice Gendron** — The third of the great French cellists of the era, and the one who gave the Western premiere of Prokofiev's Cello Concerto No. 1, in London in 1945. He was largely self-taught at the top level and built a major recording career on Philips, including a complete Bach suites cycle and a well-known performing edition of them. He later taught at the Paris Conservatoire and in Saarbrücken.
- **Enrico Mainardi** — An Italian cellist, composer, and conductor whose real legacy is teaching — his Salzburg Mozarteum and Santa Cecilia classes trained much of the postwar European generation, including Miklós Perényi and Siegfried Palm. His duo with pianist Edwin Fischer set the standard for the sonata repertoire in its day. He also wrote concertos and solo works for

his own instrument.

- **Orlando Cole and the Curtis String Quartet** — Entered the first class of the Curtis Institute in 1924 as a student of Felix Salmond, joined its faculty in 1938, and taught there until 2005, training generations of American cellists including Lynn Harrell. A classmate and close friend of Samuel Barber, he read the Cello Sonata a page at a time as Barber wrote it and premiered it with the composer at the piano. In 1927 he co-founded the quartet that became the Curtis String Quartet, the first touring quartet trained entirely in the United States and the first American quartet to tour Europe; Barber wrote his Op. 11 quartet, the source of the Adagio for Strings, for the group, and Cole held the cello chair for over fifty years. He died in 2010 at 101. (He is in my direct cello lineage — my teacher's teacher — and I performed for him in two masterclasses.)
- **Queen Elisabeth Competition, Brussels, Belgium** — One of the competitions that can make a career overnight, founded in 1937 and famous for sequestering finalists in a chapel for a week with a newly commissioned concerto. Cello was the last discipline added, in 2017, after eighty years of violin, piano, and voice — a late but immediate arrival, since the inaugural winner Victor Julien-Laferrière went straight to a major career. It now runs on a rotating cycle alongside the other disciplines.

## Mid 20th Century

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- **Leonard Rose** — One of the two most important American cellists of the mid-century, making a name for American playing in general and rivaling European performers for the first time in history. He was principal cellist of the New York Philharmonic before going solo, and his Juilliard studio produced Yo-Yo Ma and Lynn Harrell. His trio with Stern and Istomin set the American standard for the repertoire.
- **Janos Starker** — The other half of that generation, with a famously exact, unsentimental technique and a fifty-year teaching career at Indiana. He is particularly famous for popularizing the Kodály Solo Sonata, which he recorded first in 1948 and effectively rescued from neglect. He made over 160 recordings.
- **Mstislav Rostropovich** — One of the most important cellists of the mid to late 20th century. A vast majority of the pieces written for cello by major composers of the era were dedicated to him and intended for him, including works by Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Britten, which incredibly expanded the repertoire and the instrument's standing worldwide. He was exiled from the Soviet Union for sheltering Solzhenitsyn and stripped of citizenship, and later played at the Berlin Wall as it fell.
- **Borodin String Quartet** — Giants of Soviet-era chamber music, founded in 1945. They recorded the Shostakovich quartets having worked through the Shostakovich quartets them with the composer in the room, which makes those recordings a primary source rather than an interpretation. Cellist Valentin Berlinsky held the chair for 62 years. (Berlinsky is the other half of my cello lineage — he was one of the main teachers of my first cello teacher, my father.)
- **Amadeus String Quartet** — Played with the same four musicians from 1947 until 1987, an unbroken forty-year run that ended only when violist Peter Schidlöf died. Their Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert recordings for Deutsche Grammophon were the standard reference sets for decades. Britten wrote his Third Quartet for them.

- **Bernard Greenhouse** — One of the last direct Casals students, having worked with him in Prades for two years, and the founding cellist of the Beaux Arts Trio, where he stayed 32 years. He is the main conduit through which the Casals approach reached American teaching, via Juilliard, Manhattan, Stony Brook, and Rutgers. He played the 1707 “Paganini” Stradivari for most of his career.
- **Beaux Arts Piano Trio** — Founded in 1955 and, for 53 years, built around pianist Menahem Pressler, who never left. They recorded the complete Beethoven, Schubert, Haydn, and Dvořák trios for Philips and essentially defined the modern piano trio as a full-time profession rather than a side project.
- **Tchaikovsky Competition, Moscow, Russia** — Founded in 1958 and the most politically loaded competition of the Cold War, since Soviet victories were treated as state achievements. Cello was added in 1962, with Natalia Gutman and Karine Georgian among the early laureates. American Nathaniel Rosen’s 1978 cello win was a genuine geopolitical event, the cello equivalent of Van Cliburn’s piano victory in 1958.
- **Guarneri Quartet** — Played for 45 years from 1964 with almost no personnel change, the American answer to the European quartet dynasties. Their recordings with Arthur Rubinstein are the classic accounts of the piano quintet repertoire. They were also the first quartet to be widely studied as teachers, through residencies and a well-known book on how a quartet actually functions.
- **Jacqueline du Pré** — One of the most famous British cellists, above all for her Elgar concerto, which remains the recording the piece is measured against. She also recorded the Beethoven and Brahms sonatas with her then-husband Daniel Barenboim. Multiple sclerosis ended her playing career at 28 and her life at 42, and a drama film was later made about her.

## Late 20th Century

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- **Tokyo String Quartet** — Founded in 1969 by Japanese musicians who met at Juilliard, and for years the only major quartet performing on a matched set of four Stradivari instruments. Their Beethoven and Bartók cycles are among the most recorded of the era.
- **Alban Berg String Quartet** — Founded in Vienna in 1970 and the giants of the European tradition, combining Viennese warmth with a modern precision no earlier Austrian group had. Their live Beethoven cycle is the reference recording for many listeners. They also championed the Second Viennese School their name comes from.
- **12 Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic** — Formed in 1972, the first ensemble of its kind to last, performing works written especially for them. Their repertoire runs from commissioned classical pieces to tango, jazz, and film music, which proved a cello-only group could hold a full concert program. (Their recordings were one of my biggest inspirations as an arranger.)
- **Kronos String Quartet** — Founded in 1973 and responsible for over 1,000 commissioned works, more new repertoire than any quartet in history. They are popular for recording and popularizing modern classical music, including Reich’s *Different Trains* and Riley’s cycles. Their Hendrix and world-music arrangements pulled a rock audience into the quartet hall.
- **Takács String Quartet** — Founded in Budapest in 1975 and now resident in Colorado, blending Hungarian phrasing with an Anglo-American clarity. Their Beethoven cycle for Decca swept the major awards and is widely treated as the modern benchmark. Their Bartók is

equally definitive.

- **Emerson String Quartet** — Founded in 1976 and the most prolific recording quartet ever, with nine Grammys and a vast Deutsche Grammophon catalog covering Beethoven, Bartók, Shostakovich, and Bach. They stood while playing, and their two violinists alternated the first chair. Their complete Shostakovich cycle is a landmark.
- **Turtle Island String Quartet** — Founded in 1985 and the group that made the string quartet a full-time jazz ensemble rather than a classical group playing arrangements. Everyone improvises, including the cellist, which required inventing a technique for it. They have two Grammys.
- **Anner Bylsma** — The Dutch cellist who brought the cello into the period-instrument movement, playing on gut strings without an endpin and with a Baroque bow. His two Bach suite recordings, the second on Servais's Stradivari, forced every modern player to justify choices they had never questioned — vibrato, tempo, phrasing, the weight of the bow. Almost nothing about how the suites are played today is untouched by him.
- **Miklós Perényi** — A Hungarian cellist whose first teacher was a Popper student, which puts him in a direct line back to the 19th-century school. He won a prize at the Casals Competition at fifteen and was invited to Casals's masterclasses in 1965 and 1966. Known for an unusually plain, unforced style, he is closely identified with Kodály and Bach, and with his long duo partnership with pianist András Schiff.
- **Heinrich Schiff** — An Austrian cellist and conductor with a large, intellectually rigorous discography, particularly his Shostakovich, Britten, and Haydn. Concertos were written for him by Friedrich Gulda and John Casken among others. His teaching produced Gustav Rivinius and Natalie Clein.
- **David Geringas** — A Rostropovich student who won the gold medal at the 1970 Tchaikovsky Competition, but whose real importance is as a teacher — his class is the single most productive cello studio of the last fifty years. Sol Gabetta, Johannes Moser, Maximilian Hornung, Jens Peter Maintz, Gustav Rivinius, and Tatjana Vassiljeva all came out of it. He also has close to 120 recordings and works as a conductor, and Gubaidulina, Vasks, and Tüür wrote concertos for him.
- **Antonio Meneses** — A Brazilian cellist who won the ARD competition in 1977 and the Tchaikovsky first prize in 1982, an unusual double. He spent a decade as the Beaux Arts Trio's final cellist, closing out that ensemble's history. His Villa-Lobos and Bach recordings are the reference accounts.
- **Natalia Gutman** — A Rostropovich student and one of the most important late-Soviet cellists, known for an unusually severe, inward playing style. Schnittke and Gubaidulina both wrote major works for her. Her partnership with violinist Oleg Kagan, her husband, produced much of the duo repertoire recording of that era.
- **Misha Maisky** — The only cellist to have studied with both Rostropovich and Piatigorsky. He was imprisoned in a Soviet labor camp before emigrating in 1972, and became an exclusive Deutsche Grammophon artist with a large and unusually romantic discography. He has recorded the Bach suites three separate times.
- **Lynn Harrell** — One of the two most important American cellists of the late 20th century, representing the Curtis and Juilliard lineage alongside Yo-Yo Ma. He was principal cellist of the

Cleveland Orchestra under Szell at twenty before going solo, and won the first Avery Fisher Prize in 1975. He played the 1673 “du Pré” Strad and a 1720 Montagnana, and taught at Juilliard, USC, and Rice.

- **Yo-Yo Ma** — The other half of that pair, and one of the first cellists to record essentially the entire standard repertoire, some of it several times over. He inherited the “Davydov” Stradivarius from Jacqueline du Pré’s estate and also plays a 1733 Montagnana. He pushed the cello out of classical music and into popular, jazz, and world music through the Silk Road Ensemble, his Piazzolla album, his work with Bobby McFerrin, and appearances everywhere from Sesame Street to presidential inaugurations.
- **Jian Wang** — Appeared as a boy in the 1979 documentary *From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China*, which was for many Western viewers the first sight of classical music surviving the Cultural Revolution. Stern’s advocacy brought him to Yale and then to a full international career on Deutsche Grammophon, including a widely admired Bach suites cycle. He is the bridge figure between Chinese and Western classical music, and the reason a generation of Chinese string players had a visible path.
- **Steven Isserlis** — A British cellist known for playing on gut strings, which gives him a lighter, more transparent sound than the modern norm. He is the leading advocate for Schumann’s cello music and premiered Tavener’s *The Protecting Veil*. He also writes children’s books about composers and directs the International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove.
- **Alexander Rudin** — One of the most important late-Soviet cellists still active, and unusual in being a conductor and scholar as much as a soloist. He directs the Moscow chamber orchestra *Musica Viva* and has built a career on reviving forgotten 18th- and 19th-century repertoire nobody else programs. (His reading of the Bach Chaconne is my favorite of any recording I have heard — not just among cellists, but including every violinist.)
- **Alexander Kniazev** — A late-Soviet cellist who is also a trained concert organist, performing full recitals on both instruments. He was a Tchaikovsky Competition laureate and is known for enormous, physically intense readings of the Russian repertoire and the Bach suites.
- **Apocalyptica** — Formed in 1993 by four Sibelius Academy students and the first cello ensemble to play exclusively hard rock. Their debut, *Plays Metallica by Four Cellos*, sold in the millions and proved the instrument could carry a metal record without a guitar. They later moved into original material with rock vocalists.
- **Sphinx Competition, Detroit** — Founded by Aaron Dworkin in 1996 for Black and Latino string players, with junior and senior divisions and cello as a full contender from the start. Laureates get solo dates with major American orchestras, touring slots with the Sphinx Virtuosi, and loans of major instruments, which addresses the access problem rather than just handing out a prize. It has become the most reliable launching pad for young American cellists — Sterling Elliott and Sonya Moomaw both came through it.
- **Quatuor Ébène** — Founded in 1999 and equally at home in the classical canon and in jazz and pop, which almost no major quartet had attempted before. Their Fauré and Debussy recordings won top awards, while their crossover album *Fiction* reached a completely different audience. They recorded the complete Beethoven cycle live on six continents.

## 2000s to Today

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- **Bond** — Formed in 2000 as a classical crossover quartet with an electric cello in the lineup, and became the best-selling string quartet in the world. They are the reason the electric cello reads as a pop-stage instrument rather than a novelty.
- **Tina Guo** — A Chinese-American cellist who built a career on the electric cello in film, television, and video game scores. She is Hans Zimmer's touring cellist and played the Wonder Woman theme, along with major work on the Diablo and Call of Duty franchises.
- **The Piano Guys** — A Utah group whose cellist Steven Sharp Nelson built a following through multitracked YouTube videos filmed in dramatic locations. They popularized the cello in non-classical settings for an audience that never buys concert tickets.
- **2Cellos** — Luka Šulić and Stjepan Hauser went viral in 2011 with a two-cello arrangement of Smooth Criminal and ended up touring with Elton John. Both are conservatory-trained: Hauser studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Ralph Kirshbaum and won a string of classical competitions before the duo existed. That classical grounding is why the arrangements hold up technically.
- **Giovanni Sollima** — An Italian cellist-composer famous for writing a large body of interesting works featuring the cello, including Violoncelles, Vibrez! for two cellos. He founded the 100 Cellos project, a mass improvising cello ensemble. His writing is minimalist and rock-inflected and gets programmed by classical players constantly.
- **Truls Mørk** — A Norwegian cellist known for an austere, intense sound and for championing Nordic repertoire alongside the standard concertos. His Shostakovich, Britten, and Elgar recordings are among the best of the last thirty years. He has premiered concertos by Rautavaara, Pintscher, and others.
- **Sol Gabetta** — An Argentine-French cellist with a large following in Europe, known for pairing standard concertos with contemporary and forgotten repertoire. She founded the Solsberg Festival in Switzerland. Pēteris Vasks and others have written concertos for her.
- **Gautier Capuçon** — A French cellist and one of the most visible classical musicians in France, largely through television and his Classe d'Excellence teaching program. He performs constantly with his violinist brother Renaud. His outreach work, including free open-air concerts across France, has done as much for his profile as his recordings.
- **Alisa Weilerstein** — An American cellist and MacArthur Fellow, known for her Elgar with Barenboim and for a strong commitment to new music. She has premiered concertos by Pascal Dusapin and others, and her Fragments project reframes the Bach suites as staged, immersive performances.
- **Sheku Kanneh-Mason** — Won the BBC Young Musician competition in 2016 and then played at the 2018 royal wedding, which made him instantly the most recognized young cellist in the world. His debut album topped the UK classical charts. He comes from a family of seven professional-track classical musicians.
- **Laufey** — An Icelandic singer, songwriter, and cellist born in 1999 who became famous in the early 2020s posting recordings of herself singing and accompanying herself on cello, in what she calls a mishmash of pop, jazz, classical, and bossa nova. She performed as cello soloist with the Iceland Symphony at fifteen, and later recorded a live album with them. She has won Grammy awards for Best Traditional Pop Vocal Album, and is explicit about using her audience as a gateway into classical music.

- **Mike Block** — An American cellist who invented the Block Strap, which anchors the instrument to the player's body and lets it be played standing up and moving freely. It brings the endpin argument full circle: early cellists gripped the instrument with their calves, then came custom stands and stools, then Servais popularized the endpin in the 1800s, then Tortelier bent it — and now the strap removes it again, for the opposite reason it was removed the first time. He is also a Silk Road Ensemble member who sings while playing.
- **Raphael Weinroth-Browne** — Has built an entire solo language out of alternate tunings, treating scordatura as the foundation of composition rather than an occasional effect the way the classical repertoire does. Retuning the open strings gives him chord voicings and intervallic combinations impossible in fifths, a lower usable range, sympathetic resonance from the drone strings, and whole new fields of natural harmonics — and he writes to those specific tunings, so the pieces cannot simply be transposed onto a standard cello.
- **Han-Na Chang** — Won the Rostropovich Competition at eleven, taking the grand prize as well, and became his protegee and the highest-profile child soloist the instrument has produced. She toured and recorded at the top level for roughly two decades, then stopped soloing entirely in her late twenties to conduct full-time, and now holds chief conductor posts in Europe.
- **Abel Selacoe** — A South African cellist who sings and plays at the same time, combining Xhosa vocal technique and African percussion traditions with Bach and the Baroque repertoire. Nothing else on the instrument sounds like it, and he does it without treating either tradition as decoration for the other.

## Names to Be on the Lookout for in the Future

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- **Sterling Elliott** — Won the senior division of the Sphinx Competition in 2019 and received an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2021. He has since appeared with the Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, and Los Angeles Philharmonic, and debuted at the BBC Proms. He plays a 1741 Gennaro Gagliano on loan through the Sphinx Organization.
- **Rafaele Andrade and the Knurl** — A Brazilian-Dutch cellist and instrument builder who created the Knurl: a 16-string, solar-powered, reprogrammable hybrid cello that can be recoded mid-performance. It is played with cello technique but is not a cello — closer to a new branch growing off the family tree than a modified version of the old instrument. If the violin family once split off from the viols, this is what that kind of split looks like happening now.
- **Sonya Moomaw** — A Cincinnati cellist who was a Sphinx Competition junior division laureate in three separate years and appeared on NPR's From the Top. She made her orchestral debut at eight and plays jazz and bluegrass alongside the classical repertoire. Nobody ever enforced a rule against non-classical playing, but the establishment treated it as unserious, and it was not something most musicians would admit to back in the day. That stigma is finally lifting, thanks to Yo-Yo Ma, Apocalyptica, and many others, and younger players now move between genres openly.

## Most Important Concertos

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- **Core repertoire** — Dvořák, Schumann, Elgar, Haydn (C and D major), Boccherini, Shostakovich (Nos. 1 and 2), Prokofiev Sinfonia Concertante, Britten Cello Symphony, and

Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations.

- **Also important** — Saint-Saëns No. 1, Lalo, Walton, Barber, Hindemith, C.P.E. Bach, Vivaldi, Bloch's Schelomo, Dutilleux's Tout un monde lointain, Ligeti, Lutosławski, Schnittke, and Penderecki.

## Most Important Sonatas

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- **Core repertoire** — Beethoven (five), Brahms (two), Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Barber, Mendelssohn, Rachmaninoff, Debussy, Franck (arranged from the violin sonata), Grieg, and Chopin.
- **Also important** — Poulenc, Britten, Kodály Op. 4, Martinů, Bridge, Strauss, Fauré, and Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata.

## Most Important Works for Solo Cello

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- **Core repertoire** — Bach's Six Suites, Kodály Sonata Op. 8, Britten's three Suites, Reger's three Suites, Cassadó's Suite, and Hindemith Op. 25 No. 3.
- **Also important** — Ligeti Sonata, Saygun's Partita Op. 31, Dutilleux's Trois Strophes sur le nom de Sacher, Crumb's Sonata, Penderecki's Capriccio per Siegfried Palm, Xenakis's Nomos Alpha, and Berio's Les Mots sont allés.

## Most Important Works with Piano (Non-Sonatas)

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- **Showpieces and encores** — Saint-Saëns's The Swan, Fauré's Élégie and Après un rêve, Bruch's Kol Nidrei, Tchaikovsky's Nocturne and Pezzo capriccioso, Popper's Hungarian Rhapsody and Elfentanz, Rachmaninoff's Vocalise, and Cassadó's Requeiebros.
- **Larger works** — Schumann's Fantasiestücke and Adagio and Allegro, Beethoven's three sets of variations, Chopin's Introduction and Polonaise brillante, Dvořák's Silent Woods and Rondo, Falla's Suite populaire espagnole, Mendelssohn's Variations concertantes, and Piazzolla's Le Grand Tango.

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## Why This List Exists

*I put this document together for my students and fellow cello enthusiasts — a quick tour of what someone should know about the cello and what the instrument can actually do. It is a document I created with the help of AI to factcheck me every step of the way, and it is a document I wish I had as a student. That is why the list is deliberately eclectic: the names and events here are chosen to show the cello, as I know it, in all of its multifaceted applications rather than only the classical ones.*