

Robert Duncan, ABERDEEN

VIOLIN 1758

The influential early Aberdeen maker Robert Duncan was active in that city during a period of intense musical activity. The Aberdeen Musical Society was formed in 1748 and soon built up a substantial membership. Among other things, the society brought new talent into the city and organized regular concerts, with an emphasis towards the music of Corelli. Given this and the heritage of traditional fiddle playing in the north-east, Duncan was well placed in his profession. As perhaps the earliest recorded violin maker of sophistication in Scotland, it seems probable that Duncan must have trained in some other part of Europe. Given Aberdeen's location and history as a maritime port it was not unusual for its inhabitants to travel widely.

Where Duncan learned his craft is not certain but his instruments do offer some pointers. On first inspection, this violin of 1758 it could be mistaken for an eighteenth-century London-made Stainer copy. The earliest English exponents of this style include John Johnson, David Furber and Henry Jay. However, in chronological and stylistic terms, Peter Walmsley, who worked on Piccadilly between 1720 and 1745, is a strong contender as Duncan's teacher. On the other hand, the fine reflective, gold-coloured varnish is not dissimilar to Florentine work by the likes of Gabrielli, whose the high-arched violins were contemporary. Perhaps because violin making in Scotland became established slightly later than in England, the fashionable bright-toned Stainer model did not gain the popularity it had in the south.

This well-preserved and highly finished Duncan violin has much in common with his cello of 1756, including the full and strong breast arching coupled with deep edge fluting. The long arch in both plates forms a continuous curve, the highest point being opposite the bridge area. The short, widely spaced sound-holes with parallel openings and elegant hooked wings are characteristics drawn from Stainer's work. On this example there is also a distinct asymmetry in their positioning. The scroll, with its extra half-turn over the eye, is finished with a narrow chamfer that contrasts with Duncan's characteristically wide quadrant on upper edge of the peg box, a detail particularly pronounced on his cello. In addition, the dished volutes and narrow, tapered peg box anticipates Ruddiman's style. The original neck remains intact, attached to the body by a single nail. The table edge is square on to the neck root, and the neck step measures 2.5 mm.

The hand written label reads 'Rob' Duncan maker Aberdeen 1758'.



PRINCIPAL DIMENSIONS (MM)

LENGTH OF BACK	354
UPPER BOUT WIDTH	165
MIDDLE BOUT WIDTH	109
LOWER BOUT WIDTH	204
STOP LENGTH	196

RIB HEIGHTS

AT NECK	32.2
AT ENDPIN	32.4

ARCHING HEIGHT

BACK	17.5
FRONT	17.5

EDGE THICKNESSES

MAXIMUM	3.2
MINIMUM	3.2

F-HOLES

OVERALL LENGTH	72
BETWEEN UPPER CIRCLES	4

SCROLL

OVERALL LENGTH	103.5
MAXIMUM WIDTH	36.5

PURFLING: *painted*

LININGS: *pine*

BLOCKS: *pine nail*