



**THE VIOLA D'AMORE**  
**ITS HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT**

Rachael Durkin



# The Viola d'Amore

This book provides the first scholarly history of the viola d'amore, a popular bowed string instrument of the Baroque era, with a unique tone produced by a set of metal sympathetic strings. Composers like Bach made use of the viola d'amore for its particular sound, but the instrument subsequently fell out of fashion amid orchestral standardisation, only to see a revival as interest in early music and historical performance grew.

Drawing on literary accounts, iconography, and surviving instruments, this study examines the origins and development of this eye-catching string instrument in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It explores the rich variation of designs displayed in extant viola d'amore specimens, both as originally constructed and as a result of conversion and repair. The viola d'amore is then set into the wider context of Elizabethan England's development of instruments with wire strings, and its legacy in the form of the baryton which emerged in the early seventeenth century, followed by a look at the viola d'amore's own nomenclatorial and organological influence. The book closes with a discussion of the viola d'amore's revival, and its use and manufacture today. Offering insights for organological research and historical performance practice, this study enhances our knowledge of both the viola d'amore and its wider family of instruments.

**Rachael Durkin** is a Senior Lecturer in Music at Northumbria University, specialising in the field of organology. She holds a doctorate from the University of Edinburgh (2015), and has previously worked at both the University of Edinburgh and Edinburgh Napier University. Her research has been published in journals such as *The Galpin Society Journal* and *Early Music*, and she was awarded the Terence Pamplin Award for Organology in 2013 for her research into the history and development of the baryton. Her research is primarily concerned with the sociocultural history of musical instruments, particularly peripheral instruments and inventions, and using them as a lens through which to view broader musical history. Her secondary interest lies in the relationship between music and literature, focussing on the inclusion of musical instruments in nineteenth-century fiction. For this work she was appointed as an Early Career Fellow by the Institute of Music Research (2017–18), and is lead editor of the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Music and Modern Literature*.



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## Its History and Development

**Rachael Durkin**

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**To my daughter, who arrived when this book was also in its infancy**



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# Notes to the reader

## Abbreviations of museums and collections

AFA	Academy of Fine Art, Vienna, Austria
AM	Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK
AUC	Adelphi University Collections, Garden City, USA
BC	Bate Collection of Musical Instruments, Oxford, UK
BM	British Museum, London, UK
BNM	Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Germany
DC	Dean Castle, Kilmarnock, UK
DM	Deutsches Museum, Munich, Germany
GMML	Grassi Museum für Musikinstrumente der Universität Leipzig, Germany
GNM	Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremburg, Germany
HML	Horniman Museum, London, UK
KM	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
MB	Museo internazionale e biblioteca della musica di Bologna, Italy
MdlM	Musée de la Musique, Paris, France
MDSM	Museo Degli Strumenti Musicali, Milan, Italy
MFA	Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA
MHG	Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte, Hamburg, Germany
MIM	Muziekinstrumentenmuseum, Brussels, Belgium
MIMEd	Musical Instrument Museum Edinburgh, UK
MKG	Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Germany
MKKH	Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der Hansestadt, Lübeck, Germany
ML	Musée du Louvre, Paris, France
MM	Musikinstrumenten-Museum, Markneukirchen, Germany
MMA	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
MPL	Musée de Palais Lascaris, Nice, France
NGA	National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C, USA
NMM	National Music Museum, Vermillion, South Dakota, USA
OL	Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum, Linz, Austria
RAM	Royal Academy of Music, London, UK

RCM	Royal College of Music, London, UK
RCT	Royal Collection Trust, London, UK
RM	Ringve Museum, Trondheim, Norway
RNL	Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
SAM	St. Annen Museum, Lübeck, Germany
SBM	Salzburger Museum, Salzburg, Austria
SIMPK	Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany
SKM	Scenkonstmuseet, Swedish Museum of Performing Arts, Stockholm, Sweden
SM	Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany
VA	Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

## Names

Where not presented as part of a quotation, instrument names are given as those most used in UK English at the time of writing; a table of common variations is below. Wood and metal types are also described using UK English terminology. Place names are as they were given at the point of documentation or production either in a source or on an instrument's label, but modern place names and countries are provided where necessary for clarification. Names of composers and instrument makers are given in the most common form unless as part of a quotation. Instrument maker names indicate the workshop rather than a specific person, given that many makers had employees and apprentices.

## Name used Other names and spelling variations

Bandora	bandoer, bandonet, bandore, bandur, bandurion, pandora, pandore
Baryton	bariton, barretone, barydon, barytone, paradon, paridon, pariton, viol de pardon, viola di bardone, viola di bordone
Cittern	cetara, cetera, cetra, cistre, citara, cithara, cither, citola, cythar, cythara, cythren, sithernezister, zitter
englische violet	angelic viola, English viola, englisch violet, englisch violett
hardanger fiddle	hardingfela, hardingfele
orpharion	alpharion, orpharyon, orpheoreon, orphtrye
poliphant	poliphon, polyphant, polyphon, polyphone
stump	stumpe

trumpet marine	marien trompet, nonnengeige, tromba marina, trompetengeige, trompette marine, trumscheit
viol	altus, bass viol, bassus, dessus, die gambe, gambe, viol da gambe, viola da gamba, viola, viole, violles
viola d'amore	doppelgeige, liebesgeige, viol damore, viola d'amour, viole d'amour, violetta d'amore

## **Measurements**

All measurements are given in millimetres unless otherwise stated or presented unaltered within a quotation.

## **Notation**

The Helmholtz system for musical pitch designation in text is used in this book, where  $c^1$  is middle c, and the octave change occurs at b/c. The standard tuning of the viola d'amore in D major is thus A–d–a–d<sup>1</sup>–f<sup>#1</sup>–a<sup>1</sup>–d<sup>2</sup>.

# 1 An obsolete instrument of the viol tribe

## The viola d'amore

Tucked in an old wooden display case at the back of the Reid Concert Hall Museum of Instruments, item 333 was ambiguously labelled 'viola d'amore or treble viol'.<sup>1</sup> Presenting many of the decorative characteristics of a viola d'amore, but strung with just a set of bowed strings like a viol, its dimensions would make it a rather cumbersome treble viol, and its longer vibrating string length would render it to be tuned too low for either instrument's repertoire. What number 333 turned out to be was an example of the rare larger-sized wire-strung viola d'amore hailing from northern Germany. It is one of a variety of different forms of the viola d'amore, ranging from a small viol with five wire strings to the *englische viole* with 21 strings or more, a diversity which is little acknowledged today.

This book is the first scholarly study of the viola d'amore's history and development, and the first English book concerning the instrument in over 40 years. With an initial 150-year phase of development and use, the viola d'amore began in the mid-seventeenth century as a treble viol-sized instrument strung with wire instead of gut, eventually evolving into an instrument with seven bowed gut strings, and seven sympathetic wire strings which ran untouched by the bow below the fingerboard. Many of the leading composers of the eighteenth century, such as Vivaldi, J. S. Bach, and Telemann, composed for the viola d'amore, but despite this, it has been largely excluded from Baroque music history and consequently its music has not been included in the Baroque music canon. Instruments from the eighteenth century survive in healthy numbers, evidence of the viola d'amore's popularity; they exhibit the variation that evidently existed in construction and stringing. It is this variation which has caused so much confusion to surround the viola d'amore's origins, development, use and identity, hindering attempts to repair or replicate historical instruments, and impeding well-informed historical performance. With a resurgence in interest triggered by the waves of early music revival, the viola d'amore is once again being employed by composers of contemporary music keen to explore its unique timbral capabilities, and by early music performers looking to reproduce musical performances as faithfully as possible.

### **What is a viola d'amore?**

The viola d'amore is a small bowed instrument that achieved popularity in Europe from *c.* 1649 until the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The instrument began life essentially as a treble viol strung with wire, but by the turn of the eighteenth century it had been influenced by the Alpine fashion for sympathetic resonance and bowed gut strings as found on the baryton, and adapted into an instrument with two sets of strings: a set of bowed gut strings, and a set of sympathetic strings made of wire that run under the fingerboard and through a cavity in the neck. The viola d'amore appears to have existed in large numbers, initially in Germany and Austria, and latterly across Europe. The viola d'amore was used as both a solo instrument and as part of a consort, but it is rarely called for in larger-scaled works before the nineteenth century. The instrument's history, therefore, lies with the viol family more so than with the violin. The viola d'amore flourished during the eighteenth century only to meet its demise in the face of the classical era, being regarded by Robert Chambers as 'an obsolete instrument of the viol tribe' by 1869 although 'revived with some success' in the hands of Chrétien Urhan in Paris.<sup>3</sup> Further progress had been made to revive the instrument, with Hector Berlioz including a detailed description of the instrument in his 1844 treatise,<sup>4</sup> and Johann (Jan) Král's *Anleitung zum Spiele der Virole d'amour* being published in 1870.<sup>5</sup> The work of the early music revival generated renewed interest in the viola d'amore as both an instrument for historical and contemporary performance, an interest which has continued to present day.

While the bodies of most violas d'amore pertain to the outline and construction of a small viol, some later models are constructed like a violin, and thus dimensions vary somewhat, particularly in length and rib depth. Despite the variances in construction, the instruments tend to conform to the outline of a treble viol rather than the shape of the violin family, having sloping shoulders and no elongated corners. The front plates are made from two quarter-sawn wedges of wood, typically spruce, carved and scraped into the arch. For those instruments constructed like a viol, the flat backs are canted at the top in nearly all cases, and a small number of instruments also have a lower bout cant, although some of these are later alterations to reduce the rib depth to allow playing the instrument gripped under the chin rather than resting on the chest. The backs are typically made of maple, but other more decorative woods are sometimes found, such as walnut and plum, and a few instruments are constructed with staved backs. Many violas d'amore have a rosette on the front plate, situated between a moveable bridge and the end of the fingerboard (where the fingerboard is of the original, shorter length), with the rosettes typically carved from wood rather than parchment. The necks on violas d'amore are largely set at a Baroque angle (the neck approximately running perpendicular to the ribs), with older instruments having a wider neck than newer instruments, the latter indicative of the violin family's influence. Instruments with sympathetic strings have a channel cut into the neck to

carry the wire strings hidden below the fingerboard, and the sympathetic strings are generally tuned by wooden pegs in the pegbox and tethered to pins in the lower rib. The fingerboards are not bound or inlaid with frets, although an early iconographical source depicts one old wire-strung instrument inset with metal frets. The pegboxes vary depending on the stringing, and on any alterations which may have taken place to modernise the instrument. Other than being larger, the closely related *englische viole* primarily differs in its body shape and construction, often being festooned rather than of traditional viol-shape, and with overhanging rather than flush front and back plates. The *englische viole* shares the rest of its traits with the sympathetically-strung *viola d'amore*.

Initially, the *viola d'amore* was most certainly an instrument for the upper class, later becoming associated with the aspiring middle class. As such, the extra-decorative materials used on these earlier instruments tend to be of an expensive nature. Materials such as tortoiseshell, ivory and mother of pearl were used, with some instruments featuring gilded finials, as well as veneers of various woods and use of decorative mastic. As with the viol family, fingerboards and tailpieces provided opportunities for decoration, with those high-quality instruments that survive with their original fittings often displaying intricate designs. Inlaid backs, although rare, appear to be reserved for the most expensive instruments. However, even instruments without such extravagant decoration were still made visually appealing through the carving of the pegbox, in particular the carving of the blindfolded Cupid finial that has become symbolic of the instrument.

The stringing of extant *violas d'amore* varies, ranging from six single wire strings on the early *viola d'amore*, to later instruments with bowed gut strings and a large number of sympathetic strings. The typical arrangement for this later *viola d'amore* is seven bowed and seven sympathetic strings, with early instruments of this design having six bowed and six sympathetic. The vibrating string length varies from instrument to instrument, and moveable bridges can skew accurate measurements, but typically the string length is *c.*360mm. The *viola d'amore* was an instrument originally intended for scordatura tuning, but later adopted a standardised D major tuning (A–d–a–d<sup>1</sup>–f<sup>♯1</sup>–a<sup>1</sup>–d<sup>2</sup>). The tuning of the sympathetic strings has been a matter of debate, with some believing the strings should mirror those of the bowed manual, and others suggesting a scalic scheme in the same key as the bowed; this is complicated further by the variation in the number of strings on old instruments. It is still an issue very much debated by players today.

## Previous research

Brief histories of the *viola d'amore* may be found in the various dictionaries of music. George Grove, in his *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1900), dedicated a few column inches to the instrument, describing its physical features and tuning, but made no attempt to identify its history.<sup>6</sup> A brief summary in George W. Andrews's *Musical Instruments* (1910), did little to advance Grove's entry

and, apparently confused by Grove's discussion of sympathetic strings, stated that the instrument's invention dated from the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In the 1911 publication *Old English Instruments of Music*, Francis W. Galpin provided a short summary of the viola d'amore, citing John Evelyn's famed acquaintance with the old wire-strung instrument in 1679, linking the use of sympathetic strings to the baryton and England, and providing a passing mention of the englische viole, the sibling of the viola d'amore with a larger number of sympathetic strings and longer vibrating string length.<sup>8</sup> Curt Sachs's *Real-Lexikon der Musikinstrumente* of 1913 similarly provides a very brief description of the instrument, again linking it to Evelyn's account.<sup>9</sup> The space available in Sachs's book for each entry did not allow the inclusion of great detail, although was rectified in his much later publication, *The History of Musical Instruments* (1940).<sup>10</sup> One source acknowledged by Sachs in 1913 was Eugène de Bricqueville's *La Viole d'Amour* of 1908,<sup>11</sup> and it was Bricqueville's work that held the answers that these early musicologists sought.

Bricqueville's short book was the first modern study devoted solely to the viola d'amore. It pulled together the original accounts known to him, and drew conclusions about the viola d'amore's form and origins. It is through Bricqueville's writing that the seed was planted that the viola d'amore hailed from non-Western musical culture. Bricqueville's work was, at the time of publication, the most comprehensive appraisal of the viola d'amore's past.

Sachs's later work of 1940 owes much to Bricqueville, and presents the first short but detailed attempt in English at a history of the viola d'amore. Sachs questioned the form of the instrument, noting the absence of sympathetic strings from the earliest accounts, but otherwise rewords much of Bricqueville's work. Sachs concluded that the significance of the viola d'amore was small, that its tone was metallic rather than lovely, and that the blindfolded head was not explicitly representative of the viola d'amore and therefore could not be indicative of its tone. Sachs was evidently less enamoured of the instrument than Bricqueville.

The main twentieth-century study of the viola d'amore is the work of Harry Danks and his 1976 publication *The Viola d'Amore*.<sup>12</sup> As the first book-length study of the instrument, the book brought together all the known evidence at the time, largely informed by the work of Grove, Galpin and Sachs, and attempted to draw conclusions about the origins of the instrument. Of note, Danks located and translated the sources cited by previous writers, providing a central source of these otherwise hard-to-find sources in a time long before the internet. This book is not a scholarly account by modern standards, relying on the observations and comments of earlier writers to explain the viola d'amore's sympathetic strings and 'flaming sword' soundholes, accepting uncritically the long-held belief that the instrument was of Moorish origins. The temptation to look to more exotic cultures in twentieth century musicology was largely a legacy of the Victorian fascination with non-Western cultures and the newly discovered worlds of music and instruments, and was still the case when Danks published his study. Only 1,000 copies of Danks's book were printed (500 in

each print run of 1976 and 1979), making the information now relatively inaccessible. This lack of availability of the book by Danks may have inspired Heinz Berck to self-publish his own *Die Viola d'Amore* in 2008.<sup>13</sup> Very similar to the work of Danks but expanded to include more recent discoveries, and written in German, the book serves as a refreshed repository of sources.

Finally, the work of the members of the International Viola d'Amore Society should be acknowledged, and their vast array of discoveries about the instrument's history, use and music. The Society newsletters contain a treasure trove of information and insight from players, as well as semi-scholarly and enthusiast research.<sup>14</sup> This work has undoubtedly contributed to the viola d'amore's current popularity and increased accessibility as an instrument for historical and contemporary performance.

### A note on sources

This book calls upon a wide range of sources to piece together the history and development of the viola d'amore; a history which, at times, is non-linear, or simultaneously evolving in different regions. Extant instruments from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are central to this study, informing our understanding of design and construction, and evidencing alterations to reflect changing tastes and needs; a selection of brief instrument examinations with commentary are presented in the appendix. It is therefore the physical instrument rather than the music which is the key focus of this book, although as the two mediums are not entirely separable the music is considered at the necessary junctures. A small number of iconographical sources survive depicting the viola d'amore, and when compared with extant instruments much can be gleaned about both the playing position and design of the instrument at a set point in time, although with the movement of instruments across Europe, such imagery tells us less about geographical tastes than we would hope. Primary texts such as music treatise, correspondence, and diaries, and to a lesser extent fictional sources, provide a variety of observations and opinions. Information about playing style, instrument design, and tuning can all be found in such texts, and are often the only evidence of a particular practice.

### Notes

- 1 The Reid Concert Hall Museum of Instruments has now been amalgamated with the collection at St Cecilia's Hall in redeveloped premises. Item numbers across the two collections remain unaltered.
- 2 This start date is determined by the earliest dated reference to the viola d'amore by Johann Ritter in a letter dated 1649 from Hamburg. See p.8.
- 3 Robert Chambers, *Chambers's Encyclopaedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People* (Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1869), Vol. 9.
- 4 Hector Berlioz, *Grande Traité d'Instrumentation et d'Orchestration* (Paris: Schonenberger, 1844).

6 *The viola d'amore*

- 5 Johann Král, *Anleitung zum Spiele der Viole d'amour* (Brussels, London & Leipzig: Cranz, 1870).
- 6 George Grove, *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1900), Vol. 4.
- 7 George W. Andrews, *Musical Instruments* (New York: Irving Squire, 1910). This was part of the *Imperial History and Encyclopedia of Music* series edited by W. L. Hubbard.
- 8 Francis W. Galpin, *Old English Instruments of Music* (London: Methurn & Co Ltd, 1911).
- 9 Curt Sachs, *Real-Lexikon der Musikinstrumente* (Berlin: Julius Bard, 1913).
- 10 Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 1940).
- 11 Eugène de Bricqueville, *La Viole d'Amour* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1908).
- 12 Harry Danks, *The Viola d'Amore* (Halesowen: Bois de Boulogne, 1976).
- 13 Heinz Berck, *Die Viola d'Amore* (Selbstverlag, 2008).
- 14 Newsletters are accessible to members via the Society's website:  
[www.violadamoresociety.org](http://www.violadamoresociety.org).