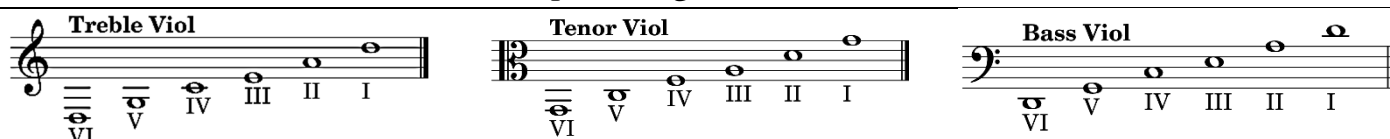


Viola da Gamba Society of America
Composing for the Viola da Gamba

Introduction: The Viola da Gamba, or simply “Viol” or “Gamba” is a family of bowed and fretted stringed instruments popular from the Renaissance to the Baroque periods. During the Renaissance, the “viol consort” was a favored ensemble. By the Baroque period, especially in France, the viol became a significant solo instrument.

Objective: The purpose of this short help-sheet is to aid composers interested in composing consort music for the viol and for the Traynor Composition Contest. It is hoped that this will add much-needed contemporary music to the repertoire of consort music accessible to amateur viol players.

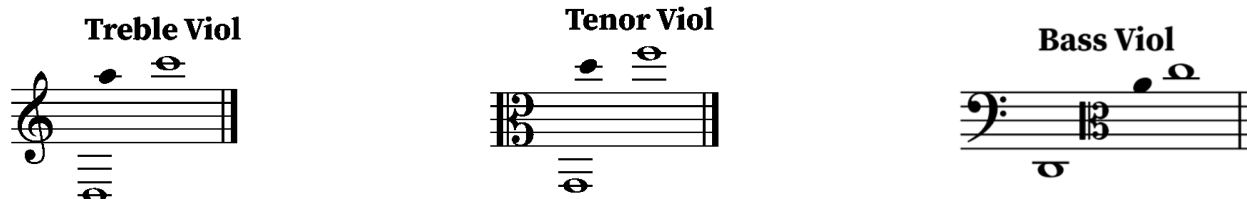
Open Strings on the Viols



Clefs:

- The *Bass Viol* usually uses the bass clef. The alto clef is sometimes used for passages in the high register.
- The *Tenor Viol* usually uses the alto clef. One may be asked to play using the octave treble clef, like guitarists. Treble clef at pitch may also occur in higher parts.
- The *Treble Viol* always uses the treble clef.

Ranges of the Viols*



**small black notes indicate suggested upper range. Treble, tenor, and bass viols are non-transposing.*

Frets: The neck of the viol has seven tied-on frets. These serve to simulate an open string-like quality. The player places the finger just behind the fret. The highest fret yields a note a perfect fifth higher than the open string. The range within the frets is the most characteristic, and the easiest to play for amateur players.

Strings: The viol uses plain gut strings on the upper three or four strings and metal-wound gut strings on the lower strings. Fully metal or synthetic strings, like those for orchestral string instruments, are not used on viols.

Pitch: Viol players generally tune their instruments to $A = 415$ Hz. It may be helpful to change the tuning in your score-writing software so you can hear the pitch correctly.

Texture of Consort Music

- In general, choral music is a good model for the texture and part distribution in viol consort music. It can be (and often is) contrapuntal, but with clear musical lines. Dance music can be another model for effective writing.
- Choral music is also a good model for the typical phrase of viol consort music. A sense of “breathing” with clear phrase endings makes the apprehension of new music easier for the amateur viol player.

Instrumentation: The three viols listed above (treble, tenor, bass), are the standard viols usually available to amateur players. To increase the size of the consort, score for multiples of these three instruments. Most combinations work! Other sizes of viol, such as violone and pardessus, are usually harder to obtain.

Composing for the Viola da Gamba

Tone: The tone of a viol is much less “direct” and powerful than that of the violin family. It has a “wider,” more resonant tone color. While the violin family projects well in many acoustical environments, the viol tends to “play the room.” Unlike the violin family instruments, viols tend to create a less focused “band” of sound. The room’s resonance is important to the effectiveness of viol music.

Tessitura: For the treble and tenor viols, the upper strings tend to sing out more, while some of the lower strings tend to sound somewhat “boxy” or dull in comparison. The bass viol, however, revels in its lower strings, and can sing beautifully in the upper register. Notes beyond the frets are often thin in tone, especially on the treble viol. These notes are also difficult for amateurs to play.

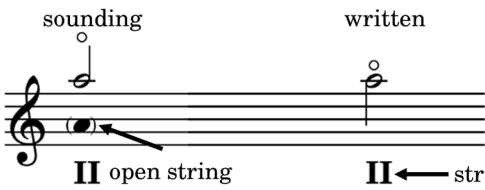
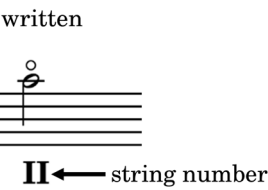
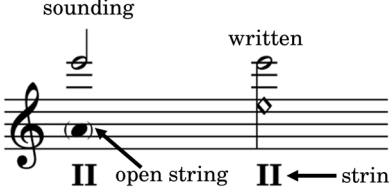
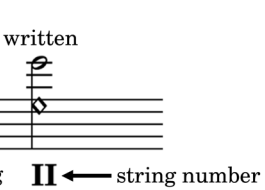
Bowing

- **Hand position:** Viol players hold the bow underhand. The directions for bowing are opposite that of the violin family. The “push” stroke is strong, the “pull” is weak. Although it is best to leave exact bowing to the player, the composer should think about how a passage is bowed to check that it is idiomatic.
- **Slurs:** Most viol bowing is not slurred, but slurring can be effective provided that only a few notes are placed under the slur.
- **Double stops:** These are usable and quite effective, but rare in consort playing.
- Viols are known for their lyrical, singing tone, but the bass viol can produce aggressive sounds in its low register.
- Most bowing techniques used for the violin family are also usable for the viols. The technical level for which one is writing must always be considered.

Preferred Keys: The viols tend to prefer flat keys on account of their tuning. This is unlike the violin family, which tends to prefer sharp keys. In general, it is best to avoid too many sharps or flats, as fingerings can be awkward, and the amateur may find even simple music in such keys too difficult to play.

Extended Techniques:

- **Pizzicato:** Effective on bass and tenor viols, but less so on treble.
- **Vibrato:** Viol players tend to play *non-vibrato*, but vibrato can be effective.
- **Glissando:** Less effective in the fretted area but can work above the frets. Many amateur players are uncomfortable playing above the frets.
- **Seven-String Bass:** Most amateur bass players will have access to an instrument with six strings, as above. It is best to avoid notes lower than D_2 for bass viol, as those notes are not playable without the seventh string.
- **Harmonics** are not too effective on the viol and can be difficult for less experienced players. Natural harmonics at the octave and twelfth may be usable, as below, given using the A string on the treble viol. Always give the Roman numeral of the string, and, in the case of the harmonic at the twelfth, the finger placement with a diamond-shaped notehead. **Artificial harmonics** are unsuitable for all but the most advanced players.

| Natural harmonic at the octave | | Natural harmonic at the twelfth | |
|---|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |  |

Music to Study: Composers such as Orlando Gibbons, William Byrd, Giovanni Coperario, John Dowland, Henry Purcell, William Lawes, John Jenkins, and Thomas Weelkes composed extensively for viol consort. Many other Renaissance composers composed fantasias and dances for viols.