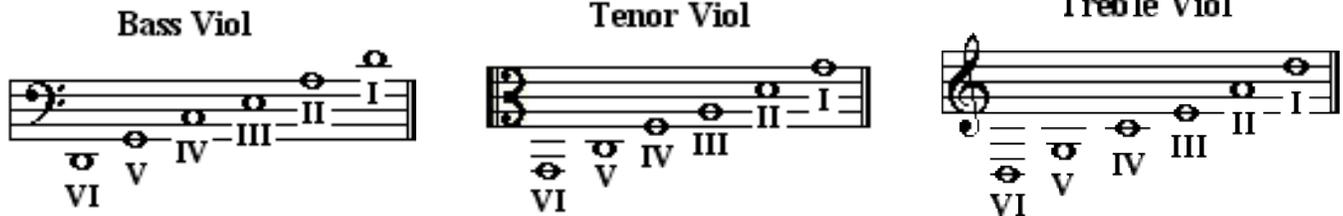


Composing for The Viola da Gamba

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. In so doing, it is hoped that this will add much needed contemporary music to the repertoire of consort music assessable to amateur viol players.

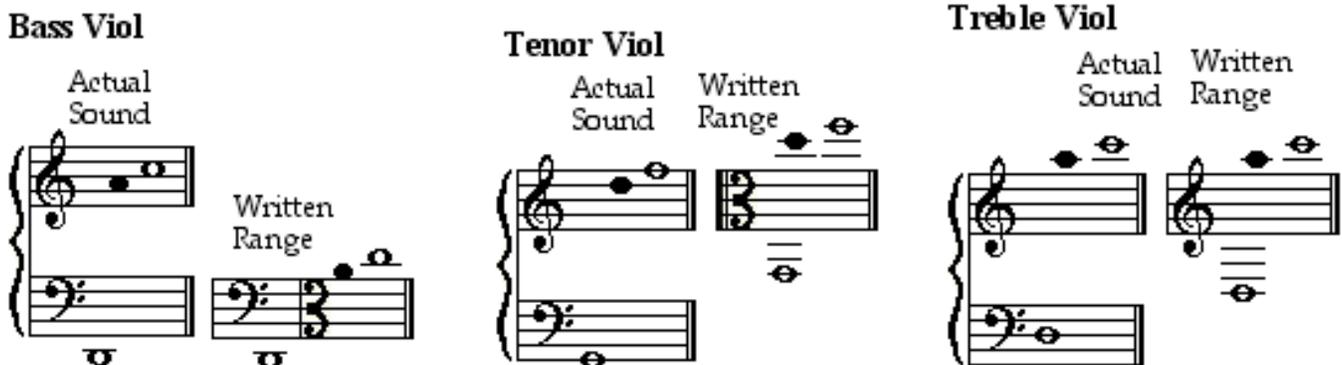
Open Strings:



Clefs:

- The **Bass Viol** normally uses the bass clef, although the alto clef is sometimes used for passages in the upper range of the instrument.
- The **Tenor Viol** usually uses the alto clef, but will often be asked to play G-clef sounding down an octave, as do guitar players.
- The **Treble Viol** always uses the treble clef.

Ranges:



* Small black notes indicate “suggested” upper range.

Frets: The neck of the viols has tied-on frets. These serve to simulate an open string quality. Unlike the guitar, the player must make finger placement at the fret point.

Strings: The viol uses plain gut strings on the upper strings and metal wound strings on the lower strings.

Pitch: Viols generally tune their instruments to “A” = 415hz.

Texture of consort music: In general, choral music is a good model for the texture and part distribution in viol consort music.

- 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, are the standard viols that are usually available for amateur viol players. In order to increase the size of the consort, it is common to double any of these three instruments. Almost any combination will work.

Tone: The tone of a viol is much less "direct" and powerful than the violin family. It has a "wider" less focused, but very resonant tone quality. While the violin family projects very well in a variety of acoustical environments, the viol tends to "play the room." That is, the resonance of the room is very important to the effectiveness of this instrument.

Tessitura: For the treble and the tenor viols, the upper strings tend to sing out more while some of the lower strings will tend to sound somewhat "boxy." The significant exception to this is the Bass viol, which revels in its lower strings, and yet can produce wonderfully lyric tones in the upper register. Outside of their obvious difficulty for amateur players, notes above the frets will often be somewhat "thin," especially on the treble viol.

Bowing:

- **Hand position:** Viol players hold the bow in under-hand fashion and so the directions for bowing are the reverse of the violin family.

- **Slurs:** Most viol bowing is one note per bow, but as long as there are not too many notes under one stroke, slurring can be very effective.

- **Double stops** are very usable, but are used less frequently in consort playing.

- While the viol is famous for its "lyrical" quality, the bass viol is equally famous for its aggressive mannerisms.

- In general, most bowing techniques used for the violin family are also usable for the viols, although some results are somewhat muted and less effective. Real consideration should be given to the technical level one is writing for.

Key Preferences:

- Unlike the violin family, the viol family tends to lean toward the "flat" side of the key spectrum. In general, composing in keys with an abundance of flats or sharps will not encourage the average amateur to take the plunge into contemporary music.

Extended Techniques:

- **Pizzicato:** This technique is especially effective on the lower viols, but becomes less effective on the Treble viol.

- **Vibrato:** Generally viol players will play "non-vibrato," but vibrato can be effective.

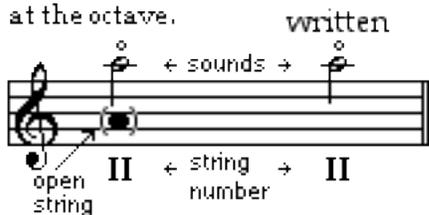
- **Glissandos** are less effective in the range of the frets, but are quite effective above the frets. It is well to note, however, that most amateur viol players do not feel comfortable negotiation passages above the frets.

- **Natural Harmonics:**

Harmonics are not always very effective on the viol and can be difficult for inexperienced players. Artificial harmonics are particularly ineffective and extremely unsuited for any but advanced players. Harmonics at the octave and the 12th might be usable. Examples are given below using the second string (A) on the treble viol. Always give the roman numeral of the string, and, in the case of the harmonic at the 12th, indicate the placement of the finger with the diamond shaped note-head.

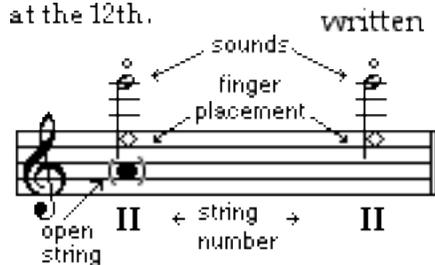
Treble Viol

Natural Harmonic
at the octave.



Treble Viol

Natural Harmonic
at the 12th.



Music to look at: Music by these composers tend to be particularly idiomatic for the viol:

Orlando Gibbons, William Byrd, Giovanni Coperario, John Dowland, William Lawes, John Jenkins and other well-known Renaissance composers who have written fantasias for the viol.