



# VIOLA

## Leg Violas

by J. David Arnott

Having written for *String Notes* for more than a few years, I claim the option of swerving away from simply writing about the “viola” this issue, and wish to address our somewhat close relative, the viola da gamba. Yes, the cello column would be an appropriate place for this as well, but it is the “viola” da gamba, not the “cello” da gamba. If you wish to argue semantics, please move on to the eclectic column. At least violists and cellists may lay equal claim to the Bach *Gamba Sonatas* (unlike the *Cello Suites*—a claim on which violists have no leg to stand).

As a point of departure, the Wikipedia article on viola da gamba (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viol>) is informative, comprehensive, and makes definitions unnecessary here. There are pictures and even several recordings embedded in the article. Please look at it at your convenience. For the purposes of this article however, we will focus on our region as a hotbed of viola da gamba activity in terms of live professional performances, pedagogical opportunities, and community activity.

### Professional Opportunities

Though the recent Twin Cities Early Music Festival is what led me to write about this topic, what also inspired me was that Jordi Savall & Hespèrion XXI ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordi\\_Savall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordi_Savall)) and Phantasm (<http://www.phantasm.org.uk/>) both performed in Minnesota last season. These two world-class gamba consorts were here within days of each other, one in St. Paul, the other in St. Cloud. Both concerts were very well attended demonstrating the high level of interest in early music in our region. Jordi Savall is the rock star of the gamba world and his music may be heard on the soundtrack to the famous viola da gamba movie, *Tous les matins du monde*, about the eminent viola da gamba player and composer, Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe,

and his pupil, Marin Marais. It’s a beautiful movie with stunning music, and should serve as an example as to how to portray musicians as the focus of a movie. According to their website, our own SPCO principal bassist, Zac Cohen, studied gamba with Jordi Savall, and has performed on gamba locally as well.

The Twin Cities Early Music Festival offered several opportunities to hear gambas live in an intimate chamber setting, playing mostly music from the Renaissance. The opening concert featured faculty from the Baroque Instrumental Program, a 10-day program for advanced students to study with international artists, which runs concurrently with the Early Music Festival. Violist Jaap ter Linden played gamba on this first concert of the festival concert. Ensemble Sprezzatura, featuring Mary Burke on both tenor and bass gamba, was the final performance of this year’s festival in a program of music from the Renaissance.

The Rose Ensemble frequently features viola da gamba in their repertoire and will do so again this season with Josh Schwalbach on gamba.

### Pedagogical opportunities for all ages

As far as viola da gamba lessons, there are many opportunities to find teachers at least in the Twin Cities area. A quick search of the internet and the Musician’s Union book show the following list of gamba teachers: Julie Elhard, Josh Schwalbach, Mark Kausch, Mary Burke, Tulio Rondón and Veronica Hudacek. My apologies if this list is incomplete.

Several regional higher education institutions have viol consorts in their curriculum including St. Olaf, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University, and University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire (my apologies if I have missed anyone). The St. Paul Conservatory offers beginning gamba for those under 18 taught by Julie Elhard,

and an advanced gamba class taught by Josh Schwalbach with no age limit.

We also have a regional outlet for purchasing music for gamba. Honeysuckle Music in St. Paul (<http://www.honeysucklemusic.com/>) run by Jean Allison Olson is an excellent source for pedagogical studies for all size gambas.

### Community

The Viola da Gamba Society of America (<https://vdgsa.org/>), based in Minneapolis, is the national organization dedicated to everything relating to gambas. The local community of viol players chapter in the Twin Cities goes by the name North Star Viols. They are highly encouraging of new viol players and have been around for many years (though their web site is a bit out of date). Ann Barclay Rovner is the contact person and they sponsor 4 or 5 play-ins every year. Experience is not necessary to attend—and they always have an extra instrument or two on hand for those wishing to try it.

One additional interesting viola da gamba note—one of the only makers of gut strings in America resides in Duluth. Gamut Music and Dan Larson supply gambists all over the world interested in historical performance practice.

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