



BAROQUE PRACTICE

Introducing the Viola da Gamba

by Mary Sorlie

As string players, we are very familiar with the modern string family of instruments—violin, viola, cello and bass. The 20th century experienced a resurgence in the study and performance of Renaissance and Baroque instruments, including the family of viola da gamba, which is a cousin of the violin family. The most common sizes of viol are treble, tenor and bass and mirror the ranges of voices in a choir. During the Baroque period the “Great Double Bass” was added to this family to give support to larger ensembles and was often called a violone. This larger viol is an 8-foot version of the modern string bass, which is a direct descendant of the viol family. (Did you ever wonder why the string bass was tuned differently to the rest of the violin family?) Most viols have six strings and are tuned in intervals of a 4th with a 3rd in the middle, just like the lute and Baroque guitar.

The viola da gamba (literally “viol of the leg”)—or viol family of instruments came into being in the early 16th century, around the same time as the viola da braccio (literally “viol of the arm”), that is, the violin family. As time went on, the violin family took precedence in large ensembles, though the viol family has “survived” as the double bass of the modern orchestra.

Like the viola da braccio family, violas da gamba come in many sizes, from very small to very large. A typical viol ensemble consists of two to six players, each with a part that is equally interesting musically—much of this repertoire is also very technically accessible, and doesn’t require virtuosic skills for a satisfying experience. *La Mantovana*, arranged here for string quartet and young players, is similar to the viol consort version with just a few changes to accommodate the viol tuning. A viol consort would use 2 treble viols, 1 tenor and 1 bass viol. The lowest line is easier on the cello than bass viol due to the string crossings for octaves.

Julie Elhard and Josh Schwalbach, two of my colleagues in Lyra Baroque Orchestra gave me some insights into the bass viol. Julie Elhard grew up in the Twin Cities

playing cello and she experienced ensembles such as *Concentus Musicus* where her aunt, Nancy Froseth, played numerous string and wind instruments. During college she bought a bass viol and taught herself to play, eventually performing with local ensembles in the Twin Cities. In 1987 Julie was accepted at The Royal Conservatory of

Music in The Hague, Netherlands, where she studied with teachers such as Anneke Pols and Wieland Kuijken. This training was a rich source of early music performance practice and techniques specific to the viol.

For Julie, the resonance, timbre and repertoire of the viol is what she loves

La Mantovana
Gaspara Zanetti, 17c. Italy
arr. Julie Elhard

about the instrument. Not only is there an astounding amount of consort music for several viols to play together, but the solo repertoire for the bass viol is immense. In the viol family, the bass viol is the “solo” instrument, whereas the violin had been the primary solo melodic instrument of that family. J.S. Bach wrote three obligato sonatas for bass viol and harpsichord and Bob Jamieson, former principal cellist with the Minnesota Orchestra and also a viol player, once remarked that the repertoire for two bass viols exceeded cello duets in number and pleasure! The viola da gamba and its literature has been an instrument for aristocrats, wealthy people and professionals. It was their evening entertainment and, as a result, much of the consort music was less virtuosic and more accessible to amateurs, as it is even today.

Josh Schwalbach was studying bass at Stony Brook University when he was first introduced to the bass viol. He got hooked when he had opportunities to play in the Baroque ensemble. “It’s an excellent secondary instrument for anyone who already has string playing experience. Many things about the instrument—the frets, the low tension, the lack of shifting and slurring in ensemble parts, and the plethora of small ensemble music available—make it a wonderful instrument to pick up and learn in an amateur setting, even later in life.”

There are similarities to the bass and

bass viol, in the general layout of the fingerboard. The A and G strings are identical to the cello, and the left hand frames are basically the same. Josh says that, “Having some previous experience bowing a string and coordinating the hands saves a lot of time for someone just starting out on the viol.” Josh continues, “I would say the two most difficult things, even for the experienced string player, are learning to balance the instrument and managing the bow with all of those strings. Because there is no endpin, the instrument must be supported by the legs. Some viols are more top-heavy than a cello due to the larger neck and lighter construction of the body. The upper bouts are generally held further away from the torso than some cellists might be used to. Whether you’re playing a viol with six or seven strings, just staying on one string at a time and managing all of those string crossings can be a challenge for any beginner.”

Originally, viol consort music, or music for the same family of instruments, was designed for church musicians and wealthy amateurs for their evening entertainment (“amateur” meaning only those who cannot be paid for their services, like highly accomplished aristocrats. Working for a living was considered vulgar and disreputable.) This translates into repertoire that is often more accessible to players of all ages and levels.

Julie Elhard encourages anyone who is interested in learning the viola da gamba to find an instrument and start exploring. The Viola da Gamba Society of America (vdgsa.org) is a great place to get started with music, rental instruments and other resources relating to the viola da gamba. In addition to the vdgsa.org website, there are several places in the Twin Cities to help on the viol journey! The Saint Paul Conservatory of Music also has instruments for rent to students of the school and has programs for youth and adults to play the viol. The College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University, St. Olaf College and Macalester College all have viola da gamba consorts. The Baroque Room (thebaroqueroom.com) and St. Paul Conservatory of Music (thespcm.org) host many concerts that include viols. Teachers of the viola da gamba in the Twin Cities include Julie Elhard, Josh Schwalbach, Mark Kausch and Maryne Mossey.

If you have any questions regarding the viola da gamba, Julie Elhard would love to hear from you. You can contact her at julieelhard.com. Play on!

Mary Sorlie currently conducts the GTCYS Philharmonia East and West Orchestras, as well as teaches at the Harmony Program at Riverview Elementary. She maintains a violin and viola studio in her home. She loves teaching, playing, running and chocolate. †