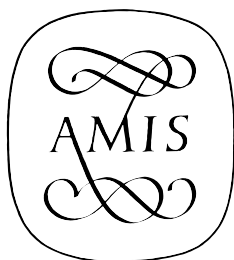


*Journal of the
American Musical
Instrument Society*

VOLUME XLVI • 2020



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Bettina Hoffmann. *The Viola da Gamba*. Translated by Paul Ferguson. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. xiv + 391 pp.: 107 illustrations, 18 musical examples. ISBN 978-1-138-24023-0 (hard-bound), \$155.00; 978-0-367-443757 (paperbound), \$47.95; 978-1-315-28425 (e-book), \$47.95.

Although widely played throughout Europe from about 1500 to 1750, the viol—like the recorder, lute, and harpsichord—fell into disuse during the nineteenth century, before experiencing a revival of interest and popularity that began some 125 years ago and continues ever more strongly today. During the latter period, in addition to numerous article-length publications, there have been only a few books devoted to the instrument, either in whole or in part. A list of these ought to begin by acknowledging the pioneering contributions found in the opening chapters of Edmund van der Straeten's *History of the Violoncello, the Viol da Gamba, their Precursors and Collateral Instruments* (London: William Reeves, 1914) and the greater part of Gerald Hayes's *The Viols and Other Bowed Instruments* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930). Important publications from the second half of the twentieth century include *The Viola da Gamba: Its Origin and History, its Technique and Musical Resources* (New York, London, and Frankfurt: Hinrichsen Edition, 1962), a slender volume of eighty-seven pages by Nathalie Dolmetsch, whose father Arnold had done so much, as both a performer and a maker, to spark the instrument's rebirth; Ian Woodfield's much longer but more narrowly focused *The Early History of the Viol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and Adolf Heinrich König's extensively illustrated *Die Viola da Gamba* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Erwin Bochinsky, 1985). The first full-length monograph offering comprehensive coverage was Annette Otterstedt's *Die Gambe: Kulturgeschichte und praktischer Ratgeber* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1994), of which a revised English translation entitled *The Viol: History of an Instrument* appeared in 2002 from the same publisher.

Bettina Hoffmann, like several of her predecessors just mentioned, is an active professional gambist as well as an author. (Woodfield is a viol-playing musicologist with wide-ranging research interests; König was a luthier, and Hayes a civil servant and dedicated amateur musician.) A German who has lived for many years in Italy, she chose to publish her book first in Italian (*La Viola da Gamba*; Palermo: L'Epos, 2010) and then in German (*Die Viola da Gamba*; Beeskow: Ortus Musikverlag, 2014) before arranging

for a professional translator to produce the present English edition. On the back cover it is described as “an introduction to the instrument—its construction, technique and history—for the non-specialist,” whose primary focus is “a historical and geographical survey of the instrument from its origins into the classical period.”

The book is divided into six chapters, of which the central two, respectively devoted to the “Renaissance” and “Baroque and Classical” eras, comprise approximately two-thirds of its length. Like the others, they are helpfully divided into numbered subsections, which for the Renaissance cover topics including the instrument’s origins, repertoire, tunings, and appearance; in contrast, the latter chapter is organized geographically, dealing in turn with the various and varying situations in Italy, England, France, and finally the German-speaking areas of Europe and the Netherlands. The opening three chapters provide an introductory basis for these detailed discussions, with the first being devoted to “Getting Acquainted” (nomenclature, sizes, and sound quality), the second to “Anatomy of a Viol,” and the third to “Antecedents.” Throughout, Hoffmann delves deeply into the primary sources that tell us how the viol was made and played during the centuries of its original flourishing, meticulously citing both these and modern publications in a total of more than 1,000 endnotes, in which she also provides original-language texts for numerous quotations from those sources. The volume concludes with a brief (twenty-page) consideration of “The Revival,” followed by a glossary of technical terms, an extensive bibliography, and an index of personal names.

Acknowledging that the viol went through “an amazing richness of stylistic development and experimentation” (p. 1) before arriving at a more-or-less standardized design, Hoffmann concludes that “only two characteristics are common to all viols of all periods: the playing position and the [presence of] frets” (p. 3). In her initial description of the “Anatomy of a Viol” in chapter 2, she writes that “Our reference-model will therefore be the 17th century English viol, . . . which . . . was admired and imitated throughout Europe” (p. 25). Subsequently, at the end of chapter 4 she discusses how sixteenth-century Italian viols differ from this type, and each of the nationally-focused sections of chapter 5 contains one or two brief sub-sections describing the distinctive characteristics exhibited by viols of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in those countries. For the most part these presentations are clear and accurate, though here and there one encounters a questionable or misleading statement. For example, in

showing alternative tunings for the different sizes of viols Hoffmann appears to conflate those for great bass or violone (in GG) and contrabass (in DD), while for the two kinds of *pardessus de viole* (respectively with five or six strings) she places the more commonly-used tunings second (pp. 13 and 15); her list of Italian viol makers from the baroque period singles out Pietro Zenatto as “the most heavily represented Italian maker of viols” (p. 190), even though dendrochronological testing has shown that the two dozen instruments in the Brussels Musical Instruments Museum and elsewhere that bear this name (mostly with dates of 1683 or 1684) or have been attributed to him were made no earlier than 1875; and she claims that the measurements in James Talbot’s manuscript notes on musical instruments dating from the early 1690s (Oxford, Christ Church, Music MS 1187) were “rounded off to the nearest whole-number in inches,” (p. 207), whereas in fact they are given to the eighth of an inch, which he refers to as a *ligne*. Other comparatively minor points involving maker biographies are that the Henry Jay who made pochettes in the mid-eighteenth century is not the same person as the Henry Jaye who made viols between 1610 and 1632 (p. 25); Richard Meares Sr. did not remain active until 1722, but had probably died or at least retired by about 1700, and his namesake son did make viols as well as violins (p. 228); and while Michel Collichon may well have been working as early as 1666 (when he would have been twenty-five years old), none of his surviving viols is dated before 1683 (p. 260).

Overall, however, Hoffmann displays an impressively thorough knowledge of all things pertaining to the viol, including not only its physical characteristics but also the diverse kinds of music written for it and the social contexts in which it was played, as well as the way these differed from country to country and over a span of some three hundred years. As is entirely appropriate for such a wide-ranging survey, both organological information and playing technique play important but secondary roles in her presentation. The publisher’s description of the book as “an introduction . . . for the non-specialist” is, however, perhaps too modest a claim: this is much more than a once-over-lightly treatment, and the depth of detail the author presents could at times seem a bit daunting to a newcomer to the topic, even as it occasionally feels challengingly dense to an already well-oriented reader. As such, it is comparable to the volumes of the Yale Musical Instrument Series that have been appearing slowly over the past two decades, with seven titles in print and a further seven still described as forthcoming. Phrases from the dust-jacket blurbs of some of

them are equally applicable to this book, which likewise “examines the [instrument’s] full social, historical and cultural trajectory” and “provide[s] an up-to-date and lively portrait . . . in unprecedented detail.”

An even more relevant—indeed, an almost inevitable—point of comparison is Otterstedt’s *The Viol*, whose original edition and subsequent English translation were each published about a decade and a half before Hoffmann’s corresponding volumes. Though Otterstedt’s book has only three-quarters as many pages, her approach is similarly comprehensive and well-informed but is organized differently and has a somewhat different emphasis. In keeping with the subtitle of her German edition (omitted from the English version), her intention was to offer not only a cultural history of the viol but also a practical guide for modern-day players. This led her to include substantial sections devoted to playing technique and to the construction and fittings characteristic of a good instrument, topics which together comprise the final twenty percent of her main text but are covered either less fully or not at all by Hoffmann. Otterstedt’s writing style is also rather more personal and less academic, for example in characterizing the viol as a princess and in inserting into her main historical narrative biographical sketches of important figures in the instrument’s history under the rubric “Legends of the Saints.” She is also not reluctant to express her sometimes strong personal opinions on a range of issues, which has led some reviewers to call her writing polemical or even argumentative as well as informative and entertaining. In contrast, Hoffmann’s approach is more straightforwardly factual, though still clear, well-considered, and engaging. She also has twice as many illustrations as Otterstedt, though unfortunately many of them are less clearly reproduced (and sometimes inconveniently smaller) in the English edition than they were in its German or Italian predecessors.

Although both authors, to my personal knowledge, are fluent in English, each chose to collaborate with a professional translator in producing the English version of her book. For Otterstedt this was Hans Reiners, who is himself a gambist as well as a bow-maker, after earlier employment as a diplomatic interpreter. In Hoffmann’s case, however, while Paul Ferguson has had a long career as a commercial and technical freelance translator, and also describes himself as an amateur musician (<https://www.societyofauthors.org/translator-Profile?itemID=450>), unfortunately he is not completely familiar with the vocabulary of the viol. Scattered throughout the book are more than fifty mistranslations or misunderstandings, starting on

the very first page where we read that the viol has “less sharply tapering [*recte* pointed] middle bouts” than instruments of the violin family, together with “a flat back ending in a tilted peg-box” [*recte* a sloping section], and that its waist sometimes “can end in sharp edges” [*recte* pointed corners]. Most of these do not seriously interfere with comprehension but are jarring nevertheless, especially the repeated rendering of *Griffbrett* as “fretboard” (a term more appropriate for plucked-string instruments) rather than “fingerboard.” There are also a number of more general idiomatic infelicities, such as translating *Konferenzen* as “conferences” instead of “lectures,” or *Ergebnisse* as “Consequences” instead of “Results” as the title of the section summarizing a lengthy discussion of historically-documented viol tunings.

Some readers may be surprised that chapter 5 covers not only the baroque but also the classical period of music history. However, at least in some countries the viol continued to be played until nearly the end of the eighteenth century (both by virtuoso soloists on the bass such as Carl Friedrich Abel in England and Franz Xaver Hammer in Germany and by devotees of the fashionable *pardessus de viole* in pre-revolutionary France), so this twilight period certainly deserves to be included in a full-length study such as this one. Hoffmann’s coverage of the viol’s modern revival, though, is disappointingly short, and moreover somewhat unbalanced, with six pages on activity during the final decades of the nineteenth century and only six more for the whole of the twentieth century. A case could be made that the revival period merits a book of its own, but since by now it has lasted nearly half as long as the historical period of the viol’s use, a lengthier consideration of its more recent history would have been welcome here.

To sum up, this is not only the most recent and most substantial book devoted to the viol in modern times, it is also thoroughly recommendable for both the depth and breadth of its coverage of the instrument, its music, and its social context during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Minor problems of translation aside, we in the English-speaking world are fortunate that Hoffmann’s knowledge and insights about her chosen instrument are now available to us as well as to those who during the past decade have been able to access them in either Italian or German.

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