

Overview of Anonymous Viols with No Known or Suggested Place of Origin by Size and Current Location

The Database of Historical Viols contains records for 160 instruments (about 10% of the total) for which we lack not only the maker's name but also any suggestion of where the instrument was made. While future examination and research may eventually lead to at least a regional identification for some of these, at present there is not too much that can be said about them.

Slightly more than half of these viols are basses, as is true for the database as a whole. A further 20% are treble-size instruments, again in line with their representation in the full list, although some in this group have a question mark in their Size field to indicate that they may be disguised (or altered) violas d'amore rather than true treble viols. The remainder are divided among pardessus, quintons, tenors (some of which may also originally have been violas d'amore), and violones, with no more than ten instruments in any one size category except tenors.

The total number of 160 includes about three dozen viols whose current location is unknown. Some of these have been missing since World War II from the museums of Berlin and Leipzig and may no longer exist. Others were once owned by the 19th-century Belgian collector César Snoeck but have since disappeared from view, not having been included in the sale of either his first collection to the Berlin museum or his second collection to the Brussels museum. And another group of mystery viols have appeared in auction sales during the past several decades but the identity of their purchasers remains unknown, as is also the case for a few instruments seen on dealers' websites that have subsequently been sold.

Most of the rest are scattered across 15 European countries plus the British Isles and the United States. Approximately two thirds of these anonymous viols with known owners belong to museums, leaving the remaining third in the hands of private individuals, including both professional and amateur gambists.

—Thomas G. MacCracken
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