

Overview of Extant Italian Viols  
by Maker, Size, Date, Place Made, and Current Location

The Database of Historical Viols contains records for 150 instruments thought to have been made in Italy before approximately 1900. Forty-two viols are listed as anonymous, while the remainder are assigned to a maker of the 16th, 17th, 18th, or 19th century, based on present knowledge and in some cases with an added question mark to indicate doubt. Among the latter group, no fewer than 24 instruments either bear the name of, or have been attributed to, a certain Pietro Zenatto, who supposedly worked in Treviso in the 1680s. Although presented here under his name for convenient reference, these viols are nowadays generally considered to be the work of an unknown (but likely still Italian) maker of the late 19th-century, probably on commission for a collector or dealer. As such, they qualify for inclusion in a list of pre-20th-century viols, but they will be disregarded in the following discussion.

Leaving these aside, only 85 instruments have believable or proposed attributions, nearly half of them to a maker from one of five families active from the mid-16th to the early 17th century, namely Giovanni Paolo Maggini and four father-son pairs: Gasparo and Francesco Bertolotti (known as “da Salò”), Antonio and Giovanni Battista Ciciliano, Francesco and Ventura Linarol, and Zanetto and Pellegrino Micheli. After Maggini’s death in 1630/31 very few viols were made in Italy, the instrument having been supplanted in popularity by the violin family; most surviving later examples are either one-of-a-kind or else comprise groups of only two or three by their respective makers.

Fully two-thirds of the non-“Zenatto” viols of Italian origin are basses, though a few of these are now, and/or may originally have been, set up as lirones, or liras da gamba. Next most numerous are tenors (with body lengths generally between 45 and 60 cm), followed by violones (here defined as anything larger than 80 cm, and for the most part probably intended to be tuned in G or A rather than low D); together, these two size groups make up nearly another 30% of the total. Conspicuous by their extreme scarcity are instruments of the size we today would call a treble viol. The best-known and virtually only convincing example is one by the 16th-century maker Giovanni Maria of Brescia, echoed by two copies of it made by Leandro Bisiach just before and after 1900; apart from these, there are only three in the current list, each of which raises questions of one sort or another. (Several additional small viol-like instruments classified by their owners—usually museums—as Italian trebles have been excluded because they appear to have been originally constructed as violas d’amore.) This distribution gives support to the notion that in Italy, during the period when viols were played in consorts, the three sizes in common use were those we would now call tenors, basses, and (small) violones. However, the pitches to which they were tuned, while typically identified in written sources as d', g', and d' for the top strings, may have differed significantly from our modern-day expectations for those note names.

Largely because so many viols of identifiable origin date from the first century of the instrument’s existence, when northern Italy was a center of string instrument making for all of Europe, fully half of the 126 viols under consideration here were made either in Brescia (home to the Micheli and Bertolotti families as well as Maggini) or in Venice (where the Cicilianos and Linarols worked). A fifth are of unknown provenance, with the remainder coming from cities including Bologna, Cremona (yes, Stradivari made viols, and so did the Amati family), Milan, and Naples.

Surviving Italian viols exhibit a variety of body shapes, not too surprisingly since so many of them date from the early period when the instrument was still evolving, while later examples come from an environment almost totally dominated by the violin family. About a third have some version of what we today think of as the “classic” outline with sloping shoulders and unpointed body corners, while another third have no body corners at all (identified in the database as guitar-shaped, also sometimes called cornerless or figure-of-eight). In both of these groups, soundholes are more often shaped like the letter F than the letter C. The other main category, comprising a quarter of the total, is here called “cello-shaped,” a designation that usually implies at least pointed body corners and nearly always F-shaped soundholes, though other features can vary considerably.

Over the centuries these instruments have migrated widely. Only 20 of the 126 are still in Italy, with 27 in neighboring Austria, 10 in Belgium, 9 in England, and 8 in Germany. A further 18 are scattered across half a dozen other European countries, while 21 reside in the United States, with 1 each in Canada, Mexico, and Japan; the current location of a final 10 is unknown. Nearly three-quarters of these instruments are in museums, notably Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum, the Musical Instruments Museum in Brussels, and the National Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota, each of which owns 10 or more. Most private owners are prominent professional gambists, including Jordi Savall and the late Nikolaus Harnoncourt of the older generation and the late José Vázquez among those born after World War II. (At the time of writing, the Harnoncourt and Vázquez collections are still held by family heirs.)

As a final note, the statistics given here supersede those presented in my article “Italian Instruments in a List of Extant Viols Made Before 1900” (listed in the accompanying bibliography as MacCracken 2002), due to a 20% expansion in the size of the database overall since that was written, together with additional scrutiny of both older and newer entries, a process in which the late William Monical was most helpful and generous with his time and knowledge.

—Thomas G. MacCracken  
(revised 11/2022)