

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

The Database of Historical Viols contains records for 434 instruments thought to have been made in France before approximately 1900, including a handful from the earliest years of the 20th century. Only about 60% of these viols are dated, the oldest having been made in 1617 and the most recent in 1914. However, within the historical period of viol making the production of both trebles and basses had effectively ceased in France by about 1750, though five-string pardessus and quintons continued to be made for another quarter-century.

(It is worth noting that 18th-century makers and musicians did not follow the modern convention of using the term “quinton” to distinguish a five-stringed instrument with sloping shoulders but many violin-like features—such as pointed body corners, F-holes, overhanging edges, shallow ribs, and an arched back—from a viol-shaped instrument of similar size, tuned identically, to which the names pardessus and quinton were applied interchangeably at the time. Myrna Herzog has argued convincingly, in an article published in *Early Music* in 2000, that quintons are in fact a kind of viol and were, at least for the most part, played in a “da gamba” position and with frets rather than on the shoulder like a violin.)

By far the most prolific French maker of viols, at least to judge by the number of currently-extant instruments, was Louis Guersan, from whose workshop we have more than 60 pardessus, almost all of them five-string models. Remarkably, therefore, he alone is responsible for making nearly half of all known examples of this type, along with a handful of quintons and a few six-string pardessus. His closest rival in terms of overall quantity is Nicolas Bertrand, whose surviving output consists of at least 15 basses—far more than survive from any other French maker—together with 3 trebles and 4 pardessus, for a total of 22 instruments.

Next in line are the brothers Augustin and Nicolas Chappuy with 21 examples between them (mostly quintons, plus a few pardessus), followed by J.B.D. Salomon with 16, François Gaviniès with 12, and Jean Ouvrard with 11 (in each case exclusively small sizes except for a single bass). In addition to Bertrand, makers of significant numbers of basses include Michel Collichon with 7 (plus 2 pardessus and 1 treble) and Guillaume Barbey with 3 or perhaps 4 (plus 3 pardessus). Nearly all other makers known by name are represented by no more than half a dozen viols each, and three dozen instruments are unique examples of their creators’ work, at least within the viol family. Meanwhile, a fifth of the total remain anonymous.

Approximately 45% of all known French viols are pardessus, among which five-string models outnumber six-string examples by a ratio of more than five to two. Nearly a quarter are basses and a slightly smaller number are quintons, with the remainder (less than 8%) being trebles. There are no known instruments made in France that could be described as violones, while only a handful of instruments come up for consideration as possible tenors, in each case accompanied by numerous questions that have disqualified them for inclusion here. This distribution fits well with what we know about the musical uses of viols in France, where consort playing never found much of a foothold but a rich repertoire for solo bass flourished for several decades either side of 1700, followed by a lengthy vogue for the pardessus, an instrument on which ladies and other amateurs could more easily and gracefully play violin music when that became popular in the mid-18th century. As was also true in other countries, after the viol went out of fashion many basses survived by being converted into odd-looking cellos; however, very few pardessus were ever turned into violins or violas, perhaps because they could, if desired, be played on the shoulder without requiring significant physical alterations.

Whereas nearly all English viols of known origin were made in London, only about three-quarters of extant French viols by identifiable makers were manufactured in Paris, with the rest coming from more than a dozen provincial cities, notably Mirecourt, an important center for violin-making from the mid-17th century to the present.

In the years since they were made, most of these French viols have remained in Europe: about 15% are now located in North America and Great Britain, while the current location of nearly a fifth is unknown, typically following sale in an auction, though this fraction also includes some that were lost during World War II, on the admittedly remote chance that they might one day come to light. By far the largest single group may be found at the Musée de la Musique in Paris, home to more than 50 examples and rivaled only by the 26 at the Musée des Instruments de Musique in Brussels. Elsewhere, it is rare to find more than half a dozen French viols in the same location, with the remaining 40% scattered across more than a dozen European countries plus Japan and Israel.

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(revised 11/2022)