

Overview of Extant German Viols Larger and Smaller than Bass Size by Maker, Date, Place Made, and Current Location

The Database of Historical Viols contains records for approximately 150 instruments that are currently thought to have been made in Germany prior to the 20th century and are either larger or smaller than bass size. (German bass viols are discussed in a separate essay.)

The larger instruments, here called violones, have body lengths (and also string lengths) ranging from 79 to 94 cm, making them suitable for tuning in GG (an octave below a tenor viol) and for playing in a seated position. Intentionally omitted are a number of even larger instruments which one would have to stand up to play, because in nearly all cases it is unclear if they are truly contrabass violas da gamba (to be tuned an octave below the bass viol), or instead double basses of the kind typically found in orchestras. This decision yields a group of 13 instruments, of which at least six (and probably seven) are by the mid-17th-century Nuremberg maker Ernst Busch. Three of the others are anonymous, while each of the final three is a special case: one bears a 1563 label of the earlier Nuremberg maker Hanns Vogel, but may be a composite; one, whose original configuration is unknown, was made in 1715 by Mathias Klotz (the founder of that large family of luthiers based in Mittenwald); and one by Ignaz Hoffmann II, dated 1771, is included only provisionally, as information about it is both partial and contradictory.

The smaller instruments comprise those classified as either trebles or tenors. However, a majority of instruments in the former group, and a significant minority of those in the latter group, have a question mark appended to their designation in the Size field of the database. This is because, based on recent research, it appears likely that they are not really violas da gamba but instead were originally built as violas d'amore of the earlier type with five bowed strings (four of them metal) but no sympathetic strings. Such instruments typically had flame-shaped soundholes, and it seems highly indicative that whereas only about 15% of German bass viols have this feature, it is found on more than three-quarters of so-called trebles in the database, as well as more than a quarter of the tenors.

Closer scrutiny of the instruments presently identified as tenors reveals that they fall into two distinct groups: those with body lengths of 49 cm or more have C-shaped soundholes, whereas those measuring 47 cm or less have flames. Because the theorist J.F.B.C. Meier noted (in 1732) that violas d'amore came in two sizes, with the larger ones being comparable in size to violas, and because we know that 17th-century luthiers made tenor viols with body lengths as large as 47 or 48 cm (which therefore must not have been considered too big for contemporary musicians to play resting on their shoulders), it is here proposed that this second group of smaller "tenor viols" with flame-shaped soundholes should instead be recognized as alto-range violas d'amore. (Four instruments made in Nuremberg during the first half of the 17th century, before the viola d'amore came into existence, are exceptions that prove the rule, qualifying as true tenor viols despite having flame holes and body lengths very close to 48 cm.)

Similarly, of the German instruments currently listed in the database as trebles for which information about soundhole shape is available, more than three-quarters have flame holes. These are therefore provisionally considered to be violas d'amore rather than da gamba, as are a further eight instruments by Joachim Tielke with C- or crescent-shaped soundholes that have been so identified by Friedemann and Barbara Hellwig in their definitive study of that maker's output. After subtracting five other instruments whose classification is questionable on other grounds, we are left with only a dozen convincing examples of German treble viols, eleven of which have C-shaped soundholes. However, at least for now all the others have been kept in the database, and biographies provided of their makers, firstly because they have in the past been identified as violas da gamba, and secondly because some of them may yet qualify to be accepted as such, remembering that flame-shaped soundholes are not unheard of on German basses.

As a result of these restrictions—limiting violones to those small enough to be tuned in G, and trebles and tenors (mostly) to those with non-flame-shaped soundholes—we end up with a total of 13 violones, 22 tenors, and 12 trebles that can confidently be called violas da gamba, with the potential addition of up to a dozen more trebles for which no soundhole information is presently available. This is a stark contrast to the existence of 283 German basses, far more than survive from any other country.

Considering the three different sizes of non-bass viols together, we find the name of Ernst Busch in Nuremberg appearing most often, with 7 violones and 3 tenors. In second place is Johann Christian Hoffmann of Leipzig with 3 trebles and 2 tenors, closely followed by Paul Alletsee of Munich with 3 trebles and 1 tenor. Other makers represented by multiple instruments in these three lists are Paul Hiltz of Nuremberg and Gregor Karpp of Königsberg with 2 tenors apiece, and Jeremias Würffel of Greifswald with 2 trebles. (Each of these makers also

produced bass viols: listed and discussed elsewhere are 6 by Busch, 9 by Alletsee, at least 10 by Hoffmann [plus another 10 by his father, Martin], 1 or perhaps 2 by Hiltz, 8 by Karpp, and 3 by the Würffel family.) There are also single instruments by a dozen other makers, only 3 of whom also made basses. Finally, 3 trebles (plus 8 more with unknown soundhole shapes), 5 tenors, and 3 violones remain anonymous.

Chronologically, the 47 instruments under consideration range from the mid-17th century through the second quarter of the 18th. The earliest by far of all extant German viols (of any size, including bass) is the violone by Hanns Vogel from 1563, followed here by the tenors made by his fellow Nurembergers Hiltz and Busch in the 1630s and 40s. The latest examples of both smaller sizes were made by J. C. Hoffmann in 1728, 1731, and c. 1740, contemporaneously with a 1737 tenor by Christa and another tenor that may have been made by Mathias Fichtl of Vienna in 1740.

Perhaps not surprisingly, nearly half of these viols remain in Germany, with multiple examples otherwise found only in Denmark, Switzerland, and the United States. But individual instruments have migrated fairly widely, including to half a dozen other European countries and as far away as Israel and Japan. Most are owned by museums and other public entities, with only 4 unquestioned trebles, 2 tenors, and 2 violones currently in private hands.

—Thomas G. MacCracken
(revised 11/2022)