

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

The Database of Historical Viols contains information about 78 instruments that are currently thought to have been made in Austria prior to the 20th century. Two-thirds of these are basses, a situation that is likely due to a combination of two factors, which apply to other countries as well: first, because fewer small-size viols were ever made, and secondly because, after the viol went out of fashion at the end of the 18th century, many basses survived by being converted into odd-looking cellos, but trebles were only occasionally turned into violas, while tenors were of a size unsuitable to be transformed into anything except perhaps a child's cello.

Most of the remaining instruments in this group are classified as either trebles or tenors. However, all of those in the former category, as well as two in the latter, 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, in most cases of the earlier type with five bowed strings but no sympathetic strings. Such instruments typically had flame-shaped soundholes, and it seems highly indicative that whereas only two Austrian bass viols have this feature (both of them in conjunction with a festooned body outline, a correlation also found in the mere handful of English viols with flame holes), it is found on all of the questioned trebles in the database for which this information is available. (Comparable ratios apply to the larger number of extant German viols, leading to the same conclusion for that country.)

The list of Austrian viols currently also includes four classified as violones, while excluding a larger number of similarly-sized or even larger instruments that have sometimes been identified as such but that upon closer scrutiny seem more likely to be contrabasses of the violin family. However, body measurements are lacking for two of these four, which in any case have five rather than six strings and therefore may represent the late, Classical-period variant known as the Viennese violone. Of the remaining two, one is anonymous with only a suggestion of Austrian origin, leaving only a single G-violone by Jacob Stainer to convincingly represent this category in Austria during the Baroque era.

As a result of these restrictions—principally, limiting trebles and tenors to those with non-flame-shaped soundholes—we end up with a total of only 60 instruments that can with some degree of confidence be called Austrian violas da gamba, namely one treble, seven tenors, 51 basses, and one violone. However, for the present the questionable smaller instruments remain in the database, and the following remarks will either include them or specifically distinguish between them and unquestioned examples.

By far the most prolific Austrian maker of viols is Jacob Stainer, with 19 to his credit (plus a further 3 that have either been lost in modern times or are of questionable authenticity), all of them basses except for the G-violone mentioned above. His closest rival in terms of quantity is Hanns Khögl, with two tenors and four basses, followed by Nikolaus Leidolff with three basses. (Antony Posch has four listings, but two are questionable trebles and the tenor is only attributed to him, leaving just one bass as a definite viol by him; there is also a five-string violone by his son, Antony Stephan Posch.) All other makers are represented by only one or two examples, while eight instruments remain anonymous.

Considering the whole group of 78 instruments, about a third are undated; of the rest, the oldest were made in 1655 (two basses by Stainer) and the most recent in 1778 (a bass by Johann Joseph Stadlmann). The latter is an unusually late example from any country, to which the Austrian runners-up, chronologically, are a group of three basses made by Andreas Ferdinand Mayr between 1746 and 1755, together with a tenor by Paul Tanhager (1755).

Just as nearly all English viols of known origin were made in London, and about three-quarters of extant French viols by identifiable makers were manufactured in Paris, more Austrian viols were made in the capital city of Vienna (23) than anywhere else, though with Absam as a close runner-up (with 21), due to the pre-eminence of Stainer, and Salzburg in third place with 12 examples. Three instruments are unique examples from their place of origin, while a dozen are anonymous and therefore of unknown origin.

In the years since they were made, most of these Austrian viols have remained in Europe, more than a third of them in Austria itself and a further 20% in neighboring Germany. The rest have scattered by ones and twos across other European countries, except for six now in the United States, plus two in Japan and one in Canada. About 45% are owned by museums or other public collections, while the rest either belong to individuals (mostly professional gambists), or are instruments whose location and ownership are currently unknown.

—Thomas G. MacCracken
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