

Introduction to the Online Database of Antique Viols

1. History

This project originated in the late 1970s, when the American viol maker Peter Tourin travelled to numerous American and European museums and private collections, systematically gathering information on old viols. The result was an electronic database of his own devising (several years before the advent of personal computers and off-the-shelf software), entitled “VIOLLIST: A Comprehensive Catalogue of Historical Viole da Gamba in Public and Private Collections,” which ultimately grew to contain nearly a thousand entries covering all sizes of viol from pardessus to violone, all countries of origin, and all time periods before the 20th century. Customized printouts were available on request, arranged by any desired combination of the fifteen data fields describing each instrument. Half of these were devoted to a set of basic measurements and the rest to answering the fundamental questions of Who, What, When, and Where, along with a few highly abbreviated comments.

In the early 1990s Tourin generously turned the database over to the musicologist (and amateur gambist) Thomas MacCracken, who has managed it since then, seeking both to add additional instruments and to provide more information about each one in a more accessible format. The still-growing list currently contains more than 1600 viols, with more than thirty data fields for each; as a result, it is no longer practical to make complete printouts, though selected subsets have been freely shared with individual players, builders and restorers, curators, and other interested people over the years.

After two decades of intermittent work, in 2011 MacCracken began to prepare the data for public presentation on the website of the VdGSA. The first installment covered viols known or supposed to have been made in England, and was followed in subsequent years by French, Italian, German, and Austrian viols, culminating in a group of instruments from other, peripheral countries of Europe and those whose place of origin remains unknown. An important feature of this online version is that it is an active database which website visitors can manipulate themselves, rather than a list “frozen” in one particular order, equivalent to a paper printout or publication in book form.

2. Content and Conventions

While many viols have been personally examined by either Tourin or MacCracken, other entries are based on published sources of varying completeness and reliability, as well as many private communications from owners, curators, and other collaborators, for whose kind cooperation we are most grateful. Additions, updates, and corrections are very welcome, indeed actively requested: please contact the compiler at <tgmac@earthlink.net>.

In this online version of the database only a dozen data fields are shown initially for each instrument. These list

- the (nominal) size of the viol, such as treble, tenor, or bass
- the maker’s first and last names, where the instrument was made, and when
- its current location and ownership
- the number of strings it has (now), its body length, and the vibrating length of its strings

Complete information on any individual viol may be viewed by clicking on it in the list display. This opens a new window in which the above data items are shown together with additional fields providing information on

- the instrument's DHV serial number and its identifying siglum in Tourin's VIOLLIST
- the exact wording of the label
- the shape of the body and soundholes
- whether the instrument (now) has a scroll or carved head
- whether the instrument is privately owned, and the names of any known previous owners
- additional body dimensions (widths and depth)
- sources on which the data record is based
- bibliographical references for published descriptions, photographs, and recordings
- whether it has appeared in an auction

and concluding with a catch-all field of comments on any and all points of interest not specifically indexed elsewhere.

A complete list of the fields used and the conventions or limitations relevant to each is available through a separate link from the database's home page. An empty data field means that no information is currently available about that aspect of the instrument. For a variety of reasons both technical and legal, this database does not include any photographs of viols, but one field is devoted to citations of published photos and also mentions unpublished images that have been gathered over the years.

—Thomas G. MacCracken
(revised 7/2022)