

Pan-Pacific Gamba Gathering
 August 2, 2007
 University of Hawaii, Honolulu
 Toshiko Shishido, Lausanne, June 2007

“Pardessus de Viole”

The “pardessus de viole” is even smaller than the “dessus de viole”. But why have the French invented this small instrument that existed in France since the mid-17th century? (1)
 First of all, let us place this instrument in French history.

Louis XIII

I wanted to know what was happening in Louis XIII’s court. In his novel “Les plaisirs de Versailles”, Philippe Beaussant describes Louis XIII as follows: (2)

Louis XIII écoutait la musique; il la chantait, d’une voix de basse qui semble avoir été belle; il la dirigeait; et même il la composait. Bien entendu, comme il était de son temps, il dansait, il composait des musiques de ballet, les chorégraphiait, en dessinait les costumes, avant de les interpréter.

Translation:

Louis XIII listened to the music; he sang it, with a low voice that seemed beautiful; he directed it; and he even composed it. Of course, as he was from his time, he danced, he composed ballet music, coreographed them, drew their costumes, before interpreting them.

The kings of all the European countries were defenders of the arts. Therefore, musicians were paid. Louis XIII employed 28 viola da gambists (with L. Couperin and Hottman as “dessus de violistes”) and 14 luthists in his court. It can be imagined that viola da gambists and luthists would play in an orchestra formation, without the violins, that were yet to be introduced in the court. Violins were used for dancing and were often played in the streets, whereas the family of viola da gamba was used to accompany a choir or a solo voice. Marin Mersenne told in 1636: « *Encore que les Violes soient capables de toutes sortes de Musique, néanmoins elles demandent des pièces plus tristes et plus graves, et dont la mesure soit plus longue et plus tardive ; de là vient qu’elles sont plus propres pour accompagner les voix* ».....

Translation:

Even though viola da gambas are able to play many types of music, they require sadder and lower pieces, whose times are longer and later; hence they are more appropriate to accompany the voices.

Louis XIV

When Louis XIV became an orphan, he was 5 years old. Philippe Beaussant tells : (2)

Louis XIV l’a peu connu que la musique ne s’écoute pas seulement, mais aussi qu’elle se pratique. Guitariste de bonne force, claveciniste un peu, l’oreille juste et fine, il marque toujours un goût particulier pour la mise en œuvre concrète et technique de la musique.

Translation:

Louis XIV knew that music should not only be listened to, but also that it should be practiced. A good guitarist, a bit of a harpsichord player, a right and fine ear, he always shows a particular taste for a concrete and technical staging of the music

Louis XIV being too young, Mazarin was invited from Italy to France as a counsellor. Like in every country at the time, the diplomats, cardinals or kings brought their own musicians to introduce their music to other European courts.

Cardinal Mazarin probably took his own violinists from Italy for the celebrations in Versailles. The king ordered J.B. Lully to compose orchestra and opera plays. He used the “24 violins” in his orchestra. Here is the explanation of a Versailles party from Ph. Beaussant:

Une fête ou réjouissance, en laquelle le roi régala sa cour pendant quelques soirées dans ses appartements qui étaient superbement meublés et éclairés, avec musique, bals, danse, collations, jeux et autres divertissements magnifiques.

Translation:

A party where rejoicing, where the king treated his court for several nights in his apartments that were superbly furnished and illuminated, with music, balls, dancing, food, games and other magnificent entertainment.

Musicians used to be the king’s servants. These violinists played in the orchestra for the celebrations. Aristocrats used to play chamber music themselves using viola da gamba, lutes, harpsichords, etc. And the musicians employed by the king also composed and participated in chamber music. Here are the words of F. Couperin, who composed and presented his “concerts royaux” in 1722:

Je les avais fait pour les petits concerts de chambre où Louis XIV me faisait venir presque tous les dimanches de l’année. Ces pièces étaient exécutées par Messieurs Duval, Philidor, Alarius et Dubois, j’y touchais le clavecin.....

Translation:

I had made them for the little chamber concerts where Louis XIV made me come almost every Sunday in the year. Those pieces were executed by Messieurs Duval, Philidor, Alarius and Dubois, I touched the harpsichord.....

The viola da gamba in Louis XIV’s court

The viola da gamba was the king’s favorite instrument. The king employed M. Marais as “the king’s viola da gamba player”. There is a treaty that informs us:

L’emprise de la viole fondé & puissamment établi par M. Marais.
(3)

Translation:

The ascendancy over the viola da gamba founded and strongly established by M. Marais

Marais and the other musicians gave concerts in the king’s room and taught to the children and the dames of the court how to play the viola da gamba. A document informs us:

« La musique n’est pas simplement un amusement, mais une nécessité pour un courtisan. Elle devrait être pratiquée en présence de dames, parce qu’elle prédispose l’individu à toutes sortes de pensées..... ».

Translation:

Music is not only an entertainment, but a necessity for the people who live in the court. It should be practiced in the company of dames, because it predisposes to many kinds of thoughts.....

Probably, Lully didn't use any viola da gamba in his orchestra. The consort of viols had disappeared. The alto and tenor of viola da gamba was not used anymore and the "pardessus" had already been invented. In 1706, a marriage contract confirmed the existence of the "pardessus". The future spouse, Miss Ittier, would bring one painted harpsichord, two "dessus" and one "pardessus" as a marriage portion. (4)

The musicians have composed virtuoso pieces for the bass viole. It is at that time that the music for viola da gamba blossomed and reached its momentum in its history. It has to be said that musics composed for the viola da gamba became more common after J.B. Lully's death in 1687.

The birth of the pardessus

In the year 1665, there were already documents that talked about the "pardessus".

« Mon instrument est un dessus de viole monté en pardessus. Il est à Paris.... Il a un son assez fort et gracieux » (1)

Translation :

My instrument is a dessus de viole changed in a pardessus. It is in Paris... it has a pretty strong and graceful sound.

It has to be said that at the time, an additional high string had been substituted to the low string.

« Pardessus de viole était destiné à permettre aux nobles de jouer la musique de violon à la mode, mais difficile.... » (3)

Translation:

"Pardessus de viole" was made to allow the aristocracy to play the fashionable violin repertoires, but hard to play.....

The birth of the "pardessus" is arcane. Was it made to compete against the importance of the violin? Was it an instrument reserved to the Dames? Or was it simply made to access the body of the literature written for high-pitched voices and to facilitate its playing?

One can observe an ascension of melodic lines towards the higher pitch of instruments in the compositions of the late XVIIth century. Therefore the "dessus de viole" became obsolescent.

(4)

The reason for the invention of the "pardessus" still remains unknown. Nonetheless, it is known that this instrument first appeared in France, that it grew there, and that it disappeared there during the Revolution.

Two tastes

There has been an ongoing debate concerning the two tastes in France. There is the Italian taste and the French taste. F. Couperin, who has wonderfully reunited those two tastes tells in his preface of “les goûts réunis”:

*Le goût italien et le goût français, ont partagé depuis longtemps en France.
Les premiers sonades italiens qui parurent à Paris il y a plus de trente années.*

Translation:

*The Italian and the French tastes, have shared for a long time in France.....
The first Italian sonatas that appeared in Paris over thirty years ago.....*

Later, L. Mozart wrote about the French taste in Versailles in 1764 :

Ici il y a une guerre continue entre la musique italienne et la musique française.

Translation:

Here, there is a continuous war between the Italian music and the French music.

However, it was thought that the two tastes were already reunited by F. Couperin (...). In his “Apothéose de Lully”, he described in 1725:

Apollon persuade Lully et Corelli, Que la réunion des goûts français et italien doit faire la perfection de la Musique ?

Translation:

Apollo persuades Lully and Corelli that the reunion of the French and Italian tastes must bring music to perfection ?

Louis XV

Let us now go back to history. What was going on in Louis XV’s court ? He sometimes employed up to 150 musicians to accompany the ball. Ph. Beaussant tells:

*Le roi fut aussi hier à ce bal, et y resta pendant tout le temps qu’il dura.
(2)*

Translation:

The king was also at that ball yesterday and stayed there until the end.

So was the « pardessus » used in his balls ? I don’t think so. It was the king who paid the masters of Mesdames. They naturally took part in the orchestra composed by their brother the Dauphin; Mme Henriette played the “basse de viole”, Mme Adélaïde played the violin and Mme Victoire played the guitar. (2)

We know that François de Caix d’Hervelois showed Mme Henriette the art of the viola da gamba. There is a painting in Versailles that depicts her playing the “bass de viole”. She was Louis XV’s favorite daughter and spent her childhood in Versailles with her sisters Adélaïde and Elisabeth. She became passionate about music. But was she taught how to play the “pardessus”? We know that Barthélémy de Caix, from the famous Caix family from Lyon, showed Mme Sophie, whom he dedicated his work to, how to play the “pardessus” (5) Therefore, it can be assumed that she played the “pardessus”.

Instrumentation

I wonder about instrumentation.

M. Marais composed his pieces in trio in 1692 in Paris. He designated the instruments as follows: *Pour les Flûtes, violon, & Dessus de viole*.

I tried to play a few pieces of this trio on the “pardessus” and it worked very well.

L. Heudélinne composed « Second Livre de Pièces pour le Dessus et Basse de Violes et pour le violon et clavecin (en 1705) ». We can imagine that one suite can be played on the “pardessus” and another one on the violin. My opinion is that the composer designated certain pieces to the violin and others to the “pardessus”

F. Couperin explains in his “Concerts royaux”:

Elles conviennent non seulement au clavecin, mais aussi au violon, à la flûte, au hautbois, à la viole, et au basson.

Translation:

They not only suit the harpsichord, but also the violin, the flute, the oboe, the viola da gamba and the bassoon.

However, he is not precise enough in my opinion. When he says “viole”, does he mean “basse de viole”, “dessus de viole” or “pardessus de viole”? I have myself tried to play Couperin’s pieces like « Concerts royaux » and « l’Apothéose de Lully » on the “pardessus”. The result is very good because there is that feeling that the concords are composed for this instrument! Better than the violin. I read an argument against the violin by M. Le Blanc:

Le Violon se tâtant le poulx, avoit senti que ses cordes étant courtes & grosses, l’archet y mordoit avec peine, il étoit besoin d’une pression qui le rendoit fatiguant au joueur ; & la tension extraordinaire des cordes ayant peu d’étendue, le rendoit criard.

La viole est donc un instrument plus flatteur que le violon. (3)

Translation :

The violin being exciting, the player had felt that its strings were short and fat, the bow bit them with difficulty, it required a pressure that made it tiring for the player; & the extraordinary tension of the strings made it piercing

The viola da gamba is therefore a more flattering instrument than the violin.

It was also more elegant for a Dame to play the viola da gamba than the violin.

Les partisans de l’ancienne musique.... Semblent vouloir perpétuer leur goût en inspirant à leurs enfants et surtout aux jeunes Demoiselles, de préférer le « pardessus » aux autres instruments, comme s’il étoit moins honnête de mettre un violon sur l’épaule qu’un « pardessus » entre les jambes. (8)

Translation:

The partisans of the ancient music..... Seem to be willing to perpetuate their taste, advising their children and most of all to the young ladies to prefer the “pardessus” over other instruments, as if it were less honest to put a violin on the shoulder than a “pardessus” between the legs.

It has to be said that “pardessus” players used to play pieces composed for the violin. However, there are pieces specifically composed for the “pardessus”. In 1747, Antoine Forqueray published his father’s pieces « *Pièces de viole composés par Mr. Forqueray le Père, ordinaire de la Musique de la Chambre du Roi dédiées A Mme Henriette de France* ». *Ces pièces peuvent se jouer sur le « pardessus de viole ».*

Has this last sentence been added by Forqueray’s son? (“These pieces can be played on the pardessus de viole”). It appears that Mme Henriette took lessons with the Forquerays. Has she also played the “pardessus”?

Pardessus de viole with 5 or 6 strings ?

In 1736, J. Bodin de Boismortier composed “VI Sonates pour le pardessus de viole avec la Basse”. All of the sonatas present chords that are only realisable on the “pardessus” with 6 strings that was used in the early XVIIIth century; this was however replaced around the 1730s by the “pardessus” with 5 strings, which was tuned in a way that facilitated the execution of sonatas and concertos with the Italian style of the violin. (6)

The instrument with 6 strings, used in the first half of the XVIIIth century, can be tuned in fourth and third as follows: G, C, E (F), A, D, and G (from low to high). The pardessus with 5 strings “au Quinton”, which appeared before 1738 can be tuned in fourths and fifths: G, D, A, D, and G (from low to high).

Overall, it can be said that the “pardessus” with 6 strings, whose characteristic construction and sonority are those of the viola da gamba, can be identified with the old French style, whereas the “pardessus” with 5 strings, which is closer to the violin, is associated with the brilliant style of the Italian sonata. (7)

Miss Lévi, from Rouen, was a famous virtuoso who executed the most brilliant concertos on the “pardessus” at the “concerts spirituels” of 1745. This concert already existed in 1650 and was renewed in 1725. “Le Mercure de France” announced in 1745 that Miss Lévi was a virtuoso on the “pardessus”. One has to believe that her playing really ranked her among the best musicians since on the holy Wednesday, the concerto that Miss Lévi executed was preceded and followed by violin pieces “played by Mr. Guignon and Mr. De Mondonville”. She managed to get sharper and more perfect sounds out of this instrument. Corette, who already mentioned her in 1738 as a sonata interpreter, probably played violin music on the “pardessus” with 5 strings.

Louis XVI

80 musicians conducted by F. Rebel (violin player) played for the wedding of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette (M-A), on May 16th, 1770. One day was enough to transform the hall: at the evening of May 17th, it had become a theatre. “Persée” by Lully was played. The lullist tradition was still very strong in the court. (2)

Louis XVI confided to M-A some sort of unofficial direction of the spectacles of the court. After Louis XV’s death in 1774, the King left it up to the Queen to take all the arrangements that she wished to in order to make the court pleasant and brilliant for the winter. Thus, the Queen decided that there would be three spectacles a week, two “Comédies Françaises” and one “Comédie Italienne”. (2)

So was there any music in those shows?

Was the “pardessus” being played in those spectacles in Louis XVI’s court?. The concerts were also moved outside of the court as “concerts spirituels”, “Comédies Françaises”, “Comédies Italiennes” and “operas”.

It is known that M-A herself played the harp.

However, there is too little information about the “pardessus” at this time. What is known, is that it disappeared at the Revolution!

If the viola da gamba ended up disappearing, it is because the violin, originally a street and cabaret instrument that the nobility couldn't play, came up strong. Furthermore, during and after the French revolution, the “pardessus” was probably judged as being too aristocratic.

PS: I invented a seven-string pardessus; in collaboration with instrument maker Pierre Bohr, we took a *dessus* model and added a seventh string on the top. With this instrument one can easily play the pieces of Forqueray or one can play for example the pieces of “Orgel Werke”, “Die Kunst der Fuge”, “Das Wohltemperierte Klavier” or “Inventionen und Sinfonien” from J.S. Bach.

(1) une lettre de Sarrau de Boynet, secrétaire de l'Académie de Bordeaux, « mon instrument est un dessus de viole monté en pardessus, en 1665.... Il a un son assez fort et gracieux »

(2) Louis XIV par Ph. Beaussant « Les plaisirs de Versailles » 1996 (Fayard)

(3) Défense de la basse de viole contre les entreprises du violon et les présentations du violoncelle, Hubert le Blanc, à Amsterdam, 1740

(4) « Le pardessus de viole au XVIIIe siècle... » Ch. Dubuquoy, Paris
Instrumentistes et Luthiers parisiens XVII-XIV siècles, 1988

(5) Sonates pour deux pardessus de viole à cinq cordes. Violons ou Basse de Viole « A Madame » Mr De CAIX l'AINE Premier œuvre

(6) Michel Corrette : Méthode pour apprendre facilement à jouer du pardessus de viole à 5 et à 6 cordes..... A Paris, 1738

(7) Dans la préface de « Œuvre soixante-unième de Mr. Boismortier contenant VI Sonates pour le pardessus de viole avec la Basse »

(8) Ancelet : Observations sur la musique, les musiciens et les instruments. Amsterdam, aux dépens de la compagnie, 1757 (Minkoff)