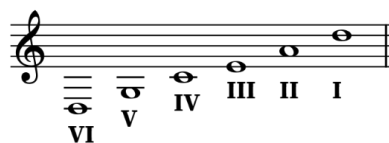
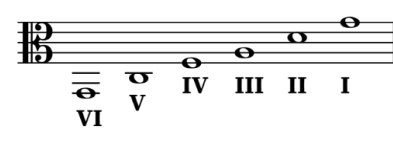
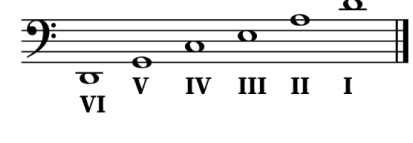


Viola da Gamba Society of America
Composing for the Viola da Gamba

Introduction: The Viola da Gamba, or simply “Viol” or “Gamba” is a family of bowed and fretted stringed instruments popular from the Renaissance to the Baroque periods. During the Renaissance, the “viol consort” was a favored ensemble. By the Baroque period, especially in France, the viol became a significant solo instrument.

Objective: The purpose of this short help-sheet is to aid composers interested in composing consort music for the viol and for the Traynor Composition Contest. It is hoped that this will add much-needed contemporary music to the repertoire of consort music accessible to amateur viol players.


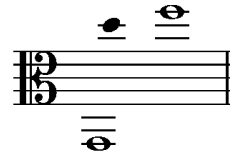

Open Strings:

<p>Treble Viol</p> 	<p>Tenor Viol</p> 	<p>Bass Viol</p> 
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Clefs:

- The *Bass Viol* usually uses the bass clef. The alto clef is sometimes used for passages in the high register of the instrument.
- The *Tenor Viol* usually uses the alto clef.
 - Players may often be asked to play using the octave G-clef, like guitarists.
- The *Treble Viol* always uses the treble clef.

Ranges:*

<p>Treble Viol</p> 	<p>Tenor Viol</p> 	<p>Bass Viol</p> 
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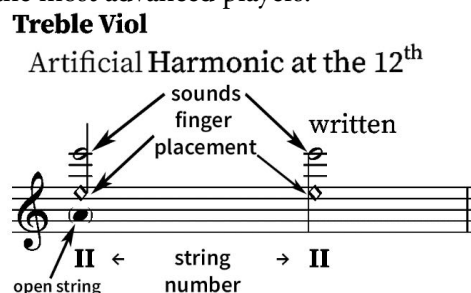
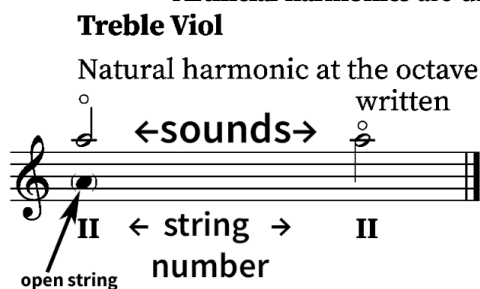
**small black notes indicate suggested upper range. Treble, tenor, and bass viols are non-transposing.*

- **Frets:** The neck of the viol has seven, tied-on frets. These serve to simulate an open string-like quality. Unlike the guitar, the player must place the finger at the fret point. The highest fret yields a note a perfect fifth higher than the open string. This is the most characteristic range and the easiest to play for amateur players.
- **Strings:** The viol uses plain gut strings on the upper three or four strings and metal-wound gut strings on the lower strings. Fully metal or synthetic strings, like on orchestral string instruments (violin, viola, cello, double bass), are not used on viol.
- **Pitch:** Violists da gamba generally tune their instruments to $A = 415 \text{ Hz}$. When composing, it may be helpful to change the tuning in your score-writing software so you can hear the pitch correctly.
- **Texture of Consort Music:** In general, choral music is a good model for the texture and part distribution in viol consort music. It can (and often is) contrapuntal, but with clear musical lines.
 - Choral music is also a good model for the typical phrase of viol consort music. A sense of “breathing” with clear phrase endings makes the apprehension of new music easier for the amateur viol player.
- **Instrumentation:** The three viols, listed above (treble, tenor, bass), are the standard viols usually available to amateur players. In order to increase the size of the consort, it is common to double any of these three instruments. Almost any combination works! Other sizes, such as great bass (G violone), contrabass (D violone), and pardessus, may be hard to come by for the average amateur.
- **Tone:** The tone of a viol is much less “direct” and powerful than that of the violin family. It has a “wider,” less focused, but resonant tone quality. While the violin family projects well in a many acoustical environments, the

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viol tends to “play the room.” Unlike the violin family instruments, viols tend to create a “band” of sound. The room’s resonance is important to the effectiveness of viol music.

- **Tessitura:** For the treble and tenor viols, the upper strings tend to sing out more, while some of the lower strings tend to sound somewhat “boxy” or dull in comparison. The bass viol, however, revels in its lower strings, and can sing beautifully in the upper register. Notes beyond the frets are often thin in their tone, especially on the treble viol. These notes are also difficult for amateurs to play.
- **Bowing:**
 - **Hand position:** Violists da gamba hold the bow underhand. The directions for bowing are opposite that of the violin family. The “push” (up) stroke is strong, the “pull” (down) is weak. Although it is best to leave these to the player, the composer should think about the way a passage may be bowed in order to see if it is idiomatic, especially if the composer is not a viol player.
 - **Slurs:** Most viol bowing is not slurred, but slurring can be effective provided that there are not too many notes under the slur.
 - **Double stops:** These are usable and quite effective, but rare in consort playing.
 - Viols are known for their lyrical and singing tone, but the bass viol is also capable of producing aggressive sounds in the low register.
 - Most bowing techniques used for the violin family are also usable for the viols, although some results are somewhat muted and less effective. The technical level for which one is writing must always be considered.
- **Key Preferences:** The viols tend to prefer flat keys on account of their tuning. This is unlike the violin family, which tends to prefer sharp keys. In general, it is best to avoid too many sharps or flats, as the fingerings can be awkward, and the amateur may find even simple music in such keys too difficult to play.
- **Extended Techniques:**
 - **Pizzicato:** Effective on bass and tenor viols, but less so on treble.
 - **Vibrato:** Viol players tend to play *non-vibrato*, but vibrato can be effective.
 - **Glissando:** Less effective in the fretted area but can work above the frets. However, most amateur players are not comfortable playing above the frets.
 - **Seven-String Bass:** Most amateur bass players will have access to an instrument with six strings, as above. Notes lower than D₂ for bass viol, as those notes are not playable without the seventh string.
 - **Harmonics:**
 - Harmonics are not particularly effective on the viol and can be difficult for less experienced players. Natural harmonics at the octave and twelfth may be usable. Examples below are given using the second string (tuned A) on the treble viol. Always give the Roman numeral of the string, and, in the case of the harmonic at the twelfth, the finger placement with a diamond-shaped notehead.
 - **Artificial harmonics** are unsuitable for all but the most advanced players.



- **Music to Study:** These composers wrote a substantial amount of idiomatic music for viol: Orlando Gibbons, William Byrd, Giovanni Coperario, John Dowland, William Lawes, Thomas Weelkes. Many other Renaissance composers wrote fantasias for the viol.