

J.S. Bach
Bartolotti
M. Corrette
Dowland
A. Forqueray
J.-B. Forqueray
M. Forqueray
Ganassi
Kühnel
Le Roux
Marais
Morel
Ortiz
Purcell
Rameau
Schenck
Telemann
Visée

Viola da Gamba *Edition*



The viola da gamba (or ‘leg-viol’) is so named because it is held between the legs. All the members of the viol family were similarly played in an upright position. The viola da gamba seems to have descended more directly from the medieval fiddle (known during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance by such names as ffythele, ffidil, fiele or fithele) than the violin, but it is clear that both violin and gamba families became established at about the same time, in the 16th century. The differences in the gamba’s proportions, when compared with the violin family, may be summarised thus – a shorter sound box in relation to the length of the strings, wider ribs and a flat back. Other ways in which the gamba differs from the violin include its six strings (later a seventh was added), a tuning system in fourths with a third between the middle two strings, and frets, as on the lute. The earliest gamba consorts (or ensembles) date from the early 1500s. Different-sized instruments were constructed to play in the soprano, alto, tenor and bass ranges respectively. At that time, such consorts would generally play adaptations of vocal works, the voice parts suitably embellished for the instrumental style. These various kinds of embellishment were described in early treatises by the Spanish composer Diego Ortiz and the Italian Silvestro Ganassi.

The consort of viols was a medium for which many composers wrote chamber music during the 16th to 18th centuries. However, by the end of the 16th century, by which time England was established as one of the most important musical centres in Europe, the violin was in the ascendancy, especially in Italy. The Italians became associated with concertante music for string ensembles of the violin family, of an extrovert character generally associated with their nationality, whereas English composers devoted themselves to the more intimate sphere of chamber music. Apparently the viol consort had a natural home in England. As the distinguished conductor and musicologist Nikolaus Harnoncourt wrote: ‘The viola da gamba must have appealed to the English in a very special way, because in a period of about a hundred years a rich variety of exceptionally beautiful and profound music for two to seven gambas was written.’ Compared with the violin family, the gamba, because of its structure and frets, had a finer, more direct tone. Given the special character of the gamba, with its range of expression lying primarily in the finest nuances, Harnoncourt adds: ‘The music was always protected from a dynamically exaggerated rendition, which would coarsen and destroy its effect.’ He also perfectly evokes the tone quality of a viol consort: ‘...The exceptional floating and translucent sound of these instruments...’ The rich repertoire of English consort music is in many ways comparable to the string quartet repertoire, which flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, it was in France, at the end

of the 17th century, that the capabilities of the gamba as a solo instrument were most fully realised, especially in the works of Marin Marais and Antoine Forqueray (see below, CD7–13).

Born in London, John Dowland (1563–1626) became one of the most celebrated English composers of his day. His *Lachrimæ, or Seaven Teares figured in Seaven Passionate Pavans* were published in London in 1604 when he was employed as lutenist at the court of the Danish King Christian IV. These seven pavans are variations on a theme, the *Lachrimæ pavan*, derived from Dowland’s song *Flow my tears*. In his dedication Dowland observes that ‘The teares which Musicke weeps [are not] always in sorrow but sometime in joy and gladnesse’. Nevertheless, Dowland excelled in evoking the currently fashionable state of melancholy.

The Venetian-born Silvestro di Ganassi dal Fontego (1492–c.1550), or Silvestro Ganassi, was a player of the viola da gamba and recorder who also published important treatises. His *Regola Rubertina* (pub. Venice, 1542) and *Lettione seconda* (pub. Venice, 1543) are the two volumes of his gamba treatise. Existing madrigals or songs were often used as the basis for instrumental improvisation, a skill that earned many performer/composers more acclaim than their compositions. On this recording are works based on songs by the Franco-Flemish Jacques Arcadelt, one of the most famous early madrigal composers (his music is seen in a Caravaggio painting), and the lesser-known Flemish Pierre Sandrin who, according to the surviving evidence, composed only secular music. Ganassi’s own song *Io vorei Dio d’amore* is possibly a unique example with accompaniment for gamba only.

Born in Toledo, Diego Ortiz (c.1510–c.1570) also produced treatises, among them *Trattado de glosas* (pub. Rome, 1553), and he seems to have been the instigator of the ricercar genre in which a madrigal would be elaborated. The treatises by Ganassi and Ortiz represent the earliest collections of music composed exclusively for the gamba.

Henry Purcell (1658/59–1695) was an extremely versatile composer, equally at ease with incidental music for plays or anthems for the Anglican Church, with bawdy catches or devotional songs. He composed his viol fantasias, a collection of 16 pieces, in 1680. By this time the viol consort was an outmoded medium, having been superseded in popularity by the violin family. There has been much speculation as to why Purcell composed viol fantasias, but the quotations from Dowland’s *Lachrimæ* (towards the end) may suggest one motivation in the form of a tribute.

Born in Rouen, Michel Corrette (1707–1795) was a celebrated organist, composer and writer of many treatises. Among his chamber works are *Les Délices de la solitude* op.20 (The Delights of

Solitude), a set of six sonatas for cello (or viola da gamba or bassoon) and continuo. These well-crafted works were among the most fashionable entertainment in Parisian domestic life at the time of Louis XV. The set was originally published around 1739, then again, together with a treatise on the cello, in 1766. Although the cello was becoming increasingly popular in France, many amateurs continued to play the viola da gamba, and such alternative scorings – stimulating sales to a wider range of performers – were commonplace at this time. Of these six consistently engaging sonatas, No.2 in D minor has one of the more technically demanding finales. Marked Allegro staccato, its main theme opens with four ‘hammer blows’: repeated minim Ds. The 6/8 finale of the Fourth Sonata is in hunting style. Originally composed for ‘viole d’Orphée’ (the result of Corrette’s attempt to revive the gamba by means of modifications such as metal strings), these sonatas are truly *délices*, or delights.

J.S. Bach (1685–1750) included important solos for gamba in major works such as the *St John Passion* and the *St Matthew Passion*. The latter includes an aria, ‘Komm, süßes Kreuz’, with a virtuosic obbligato part for the gamba, influenced by French Baroque masters such as Marin Marais. Bach also composed three sonatas for the gamba, probably dating from the late 1730s and early 1740s. Self-borrowing has been practised by composers of every era, but especially those of the Baroque period. These Bach sonatas are believed to be reworkings of much earlier material. The three works belong to the trio-sonata genre, i.e. not composed for three players but written in three parts, in this case the viola da gamba with the treble and bass parts of the keyboard. They are major works of the gamba repertoire.

The Dutch composer Johannes Schenck (1660–after 1716) was also one of the greatest virtuoso gamba players of his time. His singspiel *Bacchus, Ceres en Venus* has been claimed to be the first opera in Dutch. Published in Amsterdam in 1688, Schenck’s *Tyd en Konst-Oeffeningen* op.2 comprises 15 sonatas for viola da gamba, of which six are recorded here. They are actually suites of dance movements.

The Paris-born Marin Marais (1656–1728) studied composition with Lully and the viol with Sainte-Colombe. In 1676, he was employed as a musician at the royal court of Versailles a position he held for nearly 50 years. As the leading French composer for the gamba, he was described, after his death, as having ‘founded and firmly established the empire of the viol’ (Hubert Le Blanc, 1740). Although in England the gamba was used as a solo instrument (as well as in a consort) from very early on, it was in France that its solo potential was most fully exploited. Marais compiled five books of pieces – many technically demanding – including music for one

or two gambas. Of Book III (1711) Marais wrote that he intended to provide less difficult music: ‘The large number of short and easy pieces... is proof that I have wished to satisfy the pressing demands... since my Second Book.’ Marais also composed four operas, but he is best remembered for his numerous gamba pieces. He is credited as one of the earliest composers of programme music, as indicated by the many colourful titles, such as *Marche à la Turque*, *Idée grotesque*, *Gigue ‘La Pagode’*, *Gigue ‘La précieuse’*, *Les Amusements*, *Gigue ‘La pointilleuse’* and *Le Tableau de l’opération de la taille* (referring to bladder surgery and including bizarre performance directions such as ‘The patient is bound with silken chords’ and ‘He screameth’), while *Tombeau pour M. de Sainte-Colombe* is an elegy on the death of his teacher. The ‘tombeau’ was a common type of commemorative work in this period. Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* of 1914–17 is a much later example of a composition in the same spirit. The last CD of this group, CD11, includes pieces by Robert de Visée, Angelo Michele Bartolotti and Gaspard le Roux. With the exception of Bartolotti, who was born about 40 years earlier, they were contemporaries of Marais.

Antoine Forqueray (1672–1745) was a Paris-born composer and virtuoso on the gamba. According to one contemporary account, he was a mere five years old when he performed before Louis XIV, who then financed his music lessons and in 1689 named him *musicien ordinaire* of La Chambre du Roy. Whereas Marin Marais was known for his sweet and gentle playing, Antoine Forqueray’s style was more dramatic and brash. According to Hubert Le Blanc, Marais played like an angel, Forqueray like the devil. With their contrasting styles, the two men were the leading figures in French gamba-playing, but it was Forqueray who pushed the instrument to its limits.

Forqueray’s son Jean-Baptiste (1699–1782) was also an outstanding gamba player, while Antoine’s cousin Michel (1681–1757) had been a child prodigy as a keyboard player and pursued a successful career as an organist. Two years after his father’s death, Jean-Baptiste prepared a volume of 29 pieces, all but three composed by Antoine, the remainder by himself. This collection of pieces, published in 1747 as *Pièces de viole*, is generally considered to be the most virtuosic in the gamba repertoire.

The German composer August Kühnel (1645–c.1700) was another fine performer on the gamba. At the age of 16 he was appointed gamba player in the court orchestra of Maurice, Duke of Saxe-Zeitz. In 1698 he published his first collection of 14 trio sonatas, *Sonatas or partitas for one or two violas da gamba*. Eight of these are scored for one gamba while the remaining six require two. Several of these important additions to the gamba repertoire are recorded here.

Among the most notable attributes of the prolific and versatile German composer Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) was his deep understanding of the individual character of every instrument, displayed in the variety of combinations he employed in his concertos. Unlike many of his contemporaries, in whose works different instruments could often be interchanged without detriment, Telemann in his concertos specially exploits the differences in tone colour and technique. No other composer explores more different varieties of concertino groups than Telemann's two, three or four instruments in concertos or suites. Among his compositions featuring several diverse solo instruments is the splendid Concerto in A minor for recorder and gamba TWV52:a1. As in numerous pieces by Telemann, the influence of Polish folk music in its final movement reminds us of his three-year period as Kapellmeister to the court of Count Erdmann II of Promnitz in Sorau (now Zary in Poland). After hearing a Polish dance ensemble of bagpipes and violins, Telemann wrote: 'One would hardly believe what wonderful inspirations come to these pipers and fiddlers... In eight days an astute listener could snap up enough ideas to last a lifetime.' Telemann's skill in assimilation meant that he was able to incorporate Polish elements, melodic or rhythmic, into many other works which have no explicit Polish connections. Indeed, he himself admitted that he had written entire concertos drawn from Polish influences, without necessarily advertising the fact with Polish titles. The Overture in D TWV55:D6, scored for solo gamba and solo transverse flute and including a movement entitled *La Trompette*, is typically engaging. The Sinfonia in F TWV50:F3 is remarkable in its scoring for pairs of cornets and trombones, as well as recorder, gamba and oboe. The B minor Concerto TWV43:h3 requires flute, gamba and bassoon, while the Concerto in A TWV51:A5, with a soulful Adagio as its third movement, is scored for gamba (actually specified as a three-stringed violetta) and two violin parts.

Telemann included the gamba in numerous chamber works, from solo sonatas for violin and bass viol to trio sonatas. In his autobiography he wrote: '...how could I possibly remember everything I composed for strings and winds? I particularly devoted myself to the composing of trios... people even flattered me as having done my best work here.' These trios are indeed delightfully varied and written in a very practical and idiomatic manner for each instrument, as one might expect from a composer who was proficient on nearly every member of the string, keyboard, wind and brass families. The Sonata in F TWV42:F3 includes a movement marked Mesto, brief but unusually solemn.

The French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) is best known today for his operas, but he was 50 before he composed the first of these, *Hippolyte et Aricie*. Previously he had established a reputation as a theorist (*Treatise on Harmony*, 1722), then as a composer of harpsichord pieces. Although the unconventional *Hippolyte et Aricie* proved very controversial, Rameau went on to write about 30 stage works. Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin en concerts*, published in Paris in 1741, should not be confused with his collections of *Pièces de clavecin*, published between 1706 and 1727. The 'concerted' pieces are scored for violin, gamba and harpsichord, but the harpsichord is treated as a soloist, not as an accompanist. The term 'concerts' reflects the fact that the three instruments are of different families. Nearly all the movements of these suites have titles befitting character pieces, a popular genre exploited by François Couperin and many other Baroque composers, including Daquin's famous *Le Coucou*. Some of the movement titles in Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* are not straightforwardly explained. Thus *La Livri* could refer to either a place (there are many settlements of this name in France) or a person such as Louis Sanguin, comte de Livry. *La Coulacam* is a phonetic spelling of Kouli Khan, a Persian Sufik who had featured in a recent book by Du Cerneau. *La Poplinière* is the name of a financier–patron of the composer, while *L'Agaçante* (meaning 'irritating' in modern French) was probably intended in the 18th-century sense of 'the thousand little things a woman does or says to attract a man who does not displease her'. *Le Vézinet* seems to be a mystery, having defeated the detective work of the Rameau experts. Also among these various attractive movements are tributes to those supreme masters of the gamba – Marais and Forqueray.

Very little is known about the French composer and viol player Jacques Morel (fl. c.1700–1749). His compositions show the influence of his teacher Marin Marais. Dedicated to Marais, Morel's *Premier Livre de Pièces de Viole*, comprising four suites, was first published in 1709. Those who have become familiar with his music have been surprised by its almost total neglect. Previous recordings of his works are almost non-existent, the main exception being the celebrated Chaconne en trio.

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