

## **Taking Up the Viol**

By Eileen Flory

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Four years ago I took up the viola da gamba (also called simply “viol”), a Renaissance and Baroque stringed instrument, after having played modern strings—violin, then viola—for five decades. It wasn’t a move I had planned on—I simply had had enough of a painful neck condition and needed to find a way to make music that wasn’t so hard on me. I declared myself done with the frustrating cycle of giving up playing because it hurt too much, then trying to get back into shape slowly again, just to have to call it off once more.

Now what? Quit music? Not an option. A wind instrument? Way too much of a project. Sing? I’m not so good at that. How about the viola da gamba, which I had briefly experimented with in college? I decided to give it a try.

Like many early instruments, viols come in different sizes. I chose the tenor and took advantage of the Viola da Gamba Society of America’s rental program before I made the leap to purchase an instrument. A year later I was ready to purchase a “factory-made” tenor from the Czech Republic through instrument maker Charlie Ogle in Eugene, Oregon. We consummated the deal in Charlie’s gracious home by drinking tea from china cups, and I felt like a real viol player.

### **New all over again**

The first couple of years were difficult, but an analytical outlook and a sense of humor got me through this period with a minimum of whining. Even so, at first I had trouble even holding the viol without it wobbling around or lurching toward the floor. My legs got tense and tired. The six strings lay on a maddeningly flat curve that made it difficult to play one string at a time—and in amongst the fourths there was this major third!

Then there was the bowing—I somehow adjusted to up bows being down and down bows being up. The strangest part, though, is that you hold the bow underhand by the hair, so for a long time my teeth were on edge; our teacher’s rule in fourth grade violin class never to touch the horsehair was hard to eradicate.

And what about those frets? They seemed like permanent training wheels, a crutch perversely designed never to be thrown away. Where was the infinite range of notes I was used to?

Having chosen the tenor size for its versatility, I now reaped the consequences of that decision. I was surprised to find that my experience with the viola, an alto clef instrument, didn’t help one bit in reading the alto clef now—and most music written for the tenor viol is in that clef. Furthermore, when I joined the local recorder group after a year of playing on my own, I found myself usually reading the bass clef and sometimes

the treble clef an octave lower—and sometimes as written. I came down with a raging case of “clef-lexia,” whose main symptom is a repeated deer-caught-in-the-headlights feeling at the most inopportune moments.

Four years later, I’ve made so much progress I sometimes wonder if this can be the same body playing the same instrument. My knees grasp the viol securely, my flexible (sometimes) bow hand plays one string at a time (usually), my left hand works with the frets to produce a clear tone, and I have longer periods of remission from the dreaded clef-lexia. I still often feel as though I’m just hacking away, but more and more of what I play actually sounds like music.

### **Finding good company**

For me, music is as much a social activity as it is anything else, so it’s been important to find others to play with. I’ve been fortunate in this regard; the Oregon Coast Recorder Society has warmly welcomed me into their group, so every Friday night I play with about a dozen recorders—or krummhorns, or gemshorns, or a rebec or a rackett or a tambourine. Our director, Corlu Collier, draws music from her amazing collection for us to work up and perform in several concerts a year. In addition, Corlu and I meet weekly to play our viols together.

A highlight was summer before last’s Port Townsend Early Music Workshop. After a week on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula, I came back icing my forearms and high on viol consorts, faculty performances, and excellent instruction from Ros Morley, Craig Trompeter, and others.

These experiences have opened up the world of early music to me, an opening described eloquently by Elisabeth LeGuin (“Early Music to the Rescue”) in the September 1989 issue of *MFTLOI*. I no longer think of early music and the viola da gamba as less developed stages of modern forms!

### **What comes next?**

Oh, there’s still plenty of room for improvement. I need to get my left thumb in the proper position. I want to experience what Ros meant when she said to “sort of hang on the frets.” The trajectory of my bow needs straightening. Most important, I know that the only way to keep all those clefs straight is to practice and practice in each one.

Beyond the technical—A certain borrowed treble viol has begun to insinuate its way into my affections. Can the bass be far away now? And my new recorder friends are intent on making a recorder player out of me; my recorder debut had me playing a soprano part that required only three different notes. I’ve also contributed to the liquid sound of a gemshorn quartet. What could top that?

Four years later, my neck isn’t any better, but it’s no longer an obstacle to music-making. Better yet, once or twice recently I’ve even experienced those times I remember so well,

when everything just . . . Well, you know the times I'm talking about. They're the ones that keep us going in spite of it all.

[Sidebar]

Resources for those who make the leap:

- The Port Townsend Early Music Workshop, organized by the Seattle Recorder Society, takes place every two years. [www.seattle-recorder.org](http://www.seattle-recorder.org); Peter Seibert (206) 329-2774; Seattle Recorder Society, 1815 Federal Ave. E., Seattle, WA 98102.
- Charlie Ogle sells his own instruments and less expensive “factory-made” viols from the Czech Republic and China. [www.violadagamba.com](http://www.violadagamba.com); (541) 683-4498.
- The Viola da Gamba Society of America has a newsletter, a journal, a viol rental program, and an annual Conclave. [www.vdgsa.org](http://www.vdgsa.org); Ken Perlow, Membership Secretary, 131 S. Humphrey Ave., Oak Park, IL 60302.
- Alison Crum's excellent method *How to Play the Viol*, plus her collections of easy and intermediate solos, are available from the Boulder Early Music Shop, [www.bems.com](http://www.bems.com); (800) 499-1301; P.O. Box 900, Ouray, CO 81427, and other outlets.

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