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R O Y A L
C O L L E G E
O F M U S I C
London

Royal College of Music Museum

Western Classical Music - KS3 & 4
Viola da Gamba Pack

What is a viola da gamba?



The viola da gamba or viol looks a bit like a cello, but has 6 strings instead of 4. It is played with a bow.

'Da gamba' literally means 'for the legs', as it would have been held between the performers legs (see picture).

It also has frets like a guitar and makes a gentle, mellow sound - softer than a cello.

Viols comes in different sizes: bass, tenor and treble.

In England, the first viol players appeared at court around 1515. King Henry VIII invited three musical families from Italy to form an ensemble. When Henry died, someone made a list of all of his possessions which included a substantial number of viols.

By the Baroque Period (1600 – 1750) it had become a very popular instrument and was sometimes used as part of the basso continuo section.

Basso continuo (meaning 'continuous bass') was a type of musical accompaniment used in the Baroque period. The instruments that provided the 'continuous bass' were usually a keyboard instrument (for chords) and viol, cello or bassoon (for the bass line).

Four English viols by Rose, Barak Norman, Jaye and Meares (London, made between 1595 - 1695)

These wonderful viols are on display in the Royal College of Music Museum.



Sometimes, viol players would play together in 'consort'. Music for viol consorts had a polyphonic texture with melodies that weave in and out of each other.

This is what polyphony might look like compared to the other textures.

Monophony



A single melody without accompaniment

Homophony



One part, usually the melody, is accompanied by chords. All the parts tend to play same rhythms.

Polyphony



Two or more melodic parts play at the same time.

The viols in the Royal College of Music Museum have a unique feature – carved heads!



The viol wasn't just popular in royal courts, but was often played by amateur (non-professional) musicians at home in groups as a way of socialising.



WATCH: RCM Baroque Orchestra: Ashley Solomon performs
Telemann Concerto for Recorder and Gamba in A minor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1d2UYupe82o>