



## Discovering the Viola d'Amore

Jennie Hansen

It has fourteen strings in all, or maybe twelve, or in a few cases even twenty-one, but one normally plays on seven of them at best. The others are called sympathetic or resonance strings, and they lie close to the belly of the instrument, away from normal bow strokes. It has a name that sounds like a harlequin romance, but scholars think the idea for it might just possibly have come west with the spice trades in the seventeenth century, making it a cousin of the Arabic *Kemangeh roumy*. With its Islamic flame-shaped tone holes and its gamba-shaped body, it may be a true example of cross-culturalism.

I was introduced to the viola d'amore in 1968, at the Carmel Bach Festival, when Walter Trampler and Karen Phillips waltzed on stage to play arias Nos. 31 and 32 of the *Saint John Passion*. As if in some sweet distant dream, the sound lingered in the air like a pastel wash at sunset. I knew someday I would play this amazing instrument, though this proved to be a more elusive goal than I might have thought.

In 1980 a friend loaned me an instrument, and after weeks of struggling to make it work, I gave up. Before returning it to its owner, I fortuitously decided to show it to William Monical, a luthier in Staten Island who specializes in period instruments. He took one look at the instrument and said: "My, my! How can you play this? The bridge is nearly flat. It must be impossible to play anything but chords." By serendipity, I had found one of the only people on the globe who specializes in violas d'amore, and he was able to help me find a proper instrument and start again in earnest.

He also suggested I call Myron Rosenblum and Daniel Thomason, the codirectors of the Viola d'amore Society of America. For a fee of \$18 a year, members gain access to a net-



An engraving of a viola d'amore circa 1700 from *Musicalisches Threattrum*, by Johann Christian Weigel, provided courtesy of Daniel Thomason, Viola d'Amore Society of America.

work of players and a wonderful wealth of information. The Society sponsors semi-annual Congresses where viola d'amore players from all over the world meet, play for one another, present their pet research projects, and discuss nitty-gritty issues such as who's been tuning their upper strings in fourths, and which violin E strings are long enough to be used for a top string in the Telemann Triple Concerto. Newcomers can absorb a mini-history of the instrument, its proponents, and repertoire in one of these three- to four-day sessions.

The Society also publishes a biannual newsletter full of scholarly articles, concert announcements, reviews, reports of members' activities, and listings of instruments for sale. It acts as a go-between in obtaining useful research materials—such as Harry Dank's informative book *The Viola d'amore*—and is one of the richest sources of music for the instrument.

### FINDING MUSIC

A serious problem for the budding violist d'amore is the almost complete absence of music on the shelves of even the largest music store. Music does exist, and a wealth of it is directly available through the Viola d'amore Society, through its own publications and the offerings of its members. Many important publications, however, are out of print. The place to find these is in libraries. My favorite libraries are those at the Eastman School of Music, Harvard University, the University of California in Los Angeles, Northwestern University, the New York Public Library, and the Library of Congress, which also contains many interesting original manuscripts.

For the more adventurous researcher, writing to European libraries in London, Dresden, Berlin, and Turin can net copies

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on microfilm of manuscripts as far back as the seventeenth century. Copies of some of these manuscripts may at times be found in libraries here, or can be accessed through inter-library loan. As for the foreign libraries, don't hesitate to write in English.

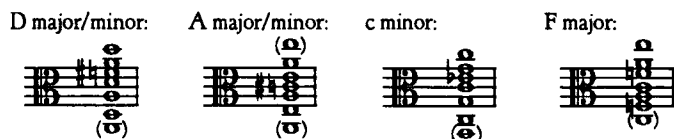
An essential guide to all the existing repertoire for the *Liebesgeige* is Heinz Berck's *Viola d'amore Bibliographie*. Originally published in 1986, it has been recently updated and republished by Friedrich Hofmeister Musik Verlag; Hofheim-Leipzig. The book is in German and English, lists each work according to its instrumentation, and gives the key, tuning, a designation of original or arrangement, and all possible clues as to where to find it. It has comprehensive lists of libraries, archives, and articles about the instrument.

### STRANGE TUNINGS

After obtaining an instrument and some music comes the difficulty of dealing with the strange tunings. In the nineteenth-century players only tuned in D major or D minor; many modern performers take this approach but still have to get used to the notes being in funny places. The worst part is that the strings are not equal intervals apart. In general, the open strings are tuned straight up the chord. Here are some examples of possible tunings:

#### Viola d'Amore Scale & Tunings

A basic scale in a standard D major tuning can be fingered like this:



fingerings for D major scale:



This can be pretty disconcerting at first, and even in the long run, it makes quick scale passages difficult. The situation becomes even more mind-bending when the full scordatura possibilities of the instrument are utilized. This simply means that mistuning can be the rule rather than the exception when it comes to the *viola d'amour*. My suggestion, here, is to pick an initial key, and stay in it until comfortable enough to move on. (See the sidebar on page 53 for suggested beginning pieces in several keys.)

Although strings can be hard to find, in the D keys all manner are available: Gut strings by Eudoxa and Dlugolecki, perlon by Thomastic, and even steel. The sympathetics are usually steel. Once you get very far away from D major or minor, you have to

### Resource List

- The Viola d'amore Society of America: c/o Dr. Daniel Thomason; 10917 Pickford Way; Culver City, CA 90230. Tel. 310-838-5509. Or c/o Dr. Myron Rosenblum, 39-23 47th St., Sunnyside, NY 11104. Tel. 718-729-3138.
- William Monical, Inc. (also for Damien Dlugolecki strings): 288 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island, NY 10301. Tel. 718-816-7878.
- Heinz Berck's *Bibliographie*: W. Elkan Music, 16 N.E. Fourth St., Suite 140, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301. Tel. 305-791-5067.
- Von Huene Workshop, Inc. and the Early Music Shop of New England; 59-65 Boylston St., Brookline, MA 02146. Tel 617-277-8690; fax 617-277-7217.

experiment a bit with viol, viola, and violin strings, or have them specially made to order by Damien Dlugolecki. William Monical is of enormous help in this area to players all over the world and keeps documentation as to usage and gauges.

From the time the instrument first appeared in the seventeenth century until at least half-way into the eighteenth century, it was tuned according to the key of the piece. This flexibility of tuning and the sympathetic strings, which began to appear in the late seventeenth century, are two hallmarks of the viola d'amore, creating its unusual and evocative timbre.

### THE TIMBRE

A meeting in the air between the resonance of the two sets of strings creates a sort of halo effect, or ghostly resonance. An accompanying sweetness, perhaps due to its viol-shaped body, completes the dramatic effect. Leopold Mozart characterized the viola d'amore as a special kind of violin that sounds lovely in the stillness of the night. Hector Berlioz described it as particularly suited to the legato style, to dreamy melodies, and to the expression of ecstatic or religious feelings. Charles Loeffler characterized it as the only instrument capable of expressing the spirit and mood of the doomed.

The viola d'amore has often been used by composers to fine dramatic effect. Ferenc Erkel, the author of the Hungarian National Anthem, paired the instrument with a suicidal heroine to achieve a heart-stopping climax in his opera *Bánk Bán*. American film composer Bernard Herrmann wrote music featuring the viola d'amore in two feature films and one episode of the "Twilight Zone." The moody film noir *On Dangerous Ground* showcases the romantic playing of Virginia Majewski to capture the inner world of an isolated blind woman. In the *Roadbuilder*,

the instrument highlights the romance of a spinster and a homicidal harmonic player. In *Little Girl Lost*, the viola d'amore accompanies a lost child into the fourth dimension.

**TECHNICAL IDIOSYNCRACIES**

The viola d'amore has some unusual technical problems worthy of mention. First and foremost, the strings tend to be very close together, and the angle of the bridge is critical in avoiding hitting extra strings. Additionally, the tunings often necessitate hopping across one or more strings. Good marksmanship is greatly aided by economy of gesture. Playing octaves can range from difficult to impossible. On the other hand, thirds, appropriately situated, can be a breeze. And rolling arpeggios on open strings and natural harmonics are some of the natural glories of the instrument and can often be added to fine effect in the cadences of Baroque concertos.

Some performers use the Baroque bow exclusively. Perhaps this is because of its wonderful clinging ability, which facilitates execution of all those arpeggiated passages for which the viola d'amore is famous. Some performers use only the modern violin or viola bow. This can increase the clarity and projection of the instrument and make it easier to isolate one string at a time. I prefer the historical approach, matching the bow to the period of the piece. The viola d'amore allows a variety of approaches and still remains very much its idiosyncratic self.

**A FEW SUGGESTIONS**

All over the world museums contain instrument collections with beautiful examples of violas d'amore, many with their original fittings, and often with beautifully carved scrolls depicting blind-folded cupids. Usually they aren't set up for performance, but occasionally a collection will allow visitors to borrow an instrument for a special

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**Composers and Repertoire**

- Baroque Era: Trio sonatas, cantatas and concertos by Ariosti, Biber, Telemann, Scarlatti, Bach, Graupner, Jan Krumlovsky, and Vivaldi.
- Classical Era: Works by Carl Stamitz, Hoffmeister, Rust, Borghi, Albrechtsberger, Neruda, Benda, Locatelli, Petzold, Pepusch, Quantz, and Toeschi. In the nineteenth century, the viola d'amore was used mainly in operas of Massenet, Meyerbeer, Puccini (*Madama Butterfly*), Charpentier, Pfitzner, and Erkel.
- Twentieth Century: Composers such as C. M. Loeffler, Hindemith, Casadesus, Frank Martin, Ginastera, York Bowen, Arcidiacono, Stumpf, Janáček, Armin Kaufman, Prokofiev, and Henze wrote a great variety of music, from opera and orchestral tone poems, to concertos, concert etudes, and chamber music. Several of my favorites are Schnittke's *Suite im alten Style*, for viola d'amore, harpsichord, and percussion; David Finko's Concerto for viola d'amore and guitar or harpsichord; Jacob Glick's *Row for Lou* for solo viola d'amore; and Elizabeth Brown's *Orrey* for shakuhachi, viola d'amore, and percussion. Other contemporary composers writing for viola d'amore include John Steinmetz, Dorothea Austin, Kikuko Massumoto, Henry Brant, Bill Hayes, Max Lifschitz, and Bruno Maderna.
- Methods: can be found in all periods—by Milandre, Kral, Zoeller, Voigtlander, Goldis, Corras, Casadesus, Shirley, Stumpf, and Arcidiacono.

**Beginning Repertoire**

**In the tuning of D major or minor:**

- Duo pour la Viole d'amour avec la Basse; and Trios No. 1 and No. 2 for Viola d'amore, Violin and Cello from Milandre's *Methode facile pour Viole d'amour*, Op. 5, 1777. (pub. Dante; through the Vda Society of America).
- Borghi, Sonate for Viola d'amore and Contrabass (pub. Gunther, Doblinger).
- Toeschi, Sonata, 1780 for viola d'amore and continuo (Doblinger).
- Vivaldi, Concertos F. II Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, for viola d'amore and strings; Concerto F. XIII, No. 38 in D minor for viola d'amore, lute, and strings (Ricordi).
- Krumlovsky, Partita for viola d'amore and basso (Dante; through the Vda Society of America).

**In the tuning of A major or minor:**

- Vivaldi, Concerto F. II, No. 6 in A minor for viola d'amore, strings, and continuo (Ricordi).
- Ariosti, Lezione No. 2 in A for viola d'amore and continuo (De Santis, Rome 1957; very hard to find).

**In the tuning of C minor:**

- Biber, Partita No. 7 from *Harmonia Artificiosa* (Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich, or Dante for version in D minor)
- Bach, Arias No. 31 and No. 32 from the *Saint John Passion* (Barenreiter, Boosey and Hawkes, Doblinger).

**In the tuning of F major:**

- Quantz, Trio Sonata for flute, viola d'amore and continuo (Schirmer, Zimmermann).
- Vivaldi, Concerto F. XII, No. 32 in F for viola d'amore, two oboes, bassoon, horn, and continuo (Ricordi).

### A Selected Discography

- Schnittke, *Suite in the Old Style for Viola d'amore, Harpsichord and Percussion*. Igor Boguslavsky, vda. Harmonia Mundi s.a: 1987. LDC288078 CM201.
- Vivaldi, *Concerto for Viola d'amore, Lute and Strings*. Monica Huggett, vda; Jakob Lindberg, lutenist; Drottningholm Ensemble. BIS: 1985. CD 290.
- Hindemith, *Die 7 Kammermusiken No. 6, Op. 46, No. 1*. Joke Vermeulen, vda; Concerto Amsterdam. Telefunken: 1968. SLT43110/12B.
- Bach, *Saint John Passion Arias Nos. 31, 32*. Jennie Hansen and Jane Starkman, vdas; Smithsonian Chamber Players, Kenneth Slowick, conductor. Smithsonian Collection: 1990. ND 0381.
- Biber, *Harmonia Artificio Arios, No. 7*. Thomas Georgi and Eli Winer, vdas. Tafelmusik, Jean Lamon, director. Vivarte: 1994. SK58920.
- *Ariosti Lezione for viola d'amore and continuo*. Joseph Ceo, vda; George Kent, hpchd. Titanic: 1982-83. Ti-75 and 76.
- Loeffler, *La Mort de Tintagiles*. Jennie Hansen, vda; Indianapolis Symphony, John Nelson, conductor. New World: 1985. NW 332-2.

#### Hard-to-find, but worth looking for in used record stores:

- Hindemith *Kleine Sonate for viola d'amore and piano*. Milton Thomas, vda; Sara Compinsky, pno. ALCO (78 rpm).
- Frank Martin, *Sonata da chiesa for viola d'amore and strings*. Marcus Thompson, vda; MIT Symphony Orchestra. Turnabout: 1977. TV34687.
- Wolf-Ferrari, *Duo (Serenata) for viola d'amore and viola da gamba*. Arnt Martin, vda; Alfred Lessing, vdg. Thoro-fon Capella: 1982. MTH 238.
- Telemann, *Concerto in E for Flute, Oboe d'amore, Viola d'amore and Strings*. Emil Seiler, vda. Archiv Produktion: 1952. 37130EPA. Or Decca: 1953. DL7537.
- *Die Viola d'amore "in mancherley Stimmung"*; Rust, *Sonata per il cembalo colla viola d'amore*. Dorteia Jappe, vda; Rolf Junghanns, cembalo. Orpheus: 1980. ORP 0 703.

occasion. I was able to borrow Charles Loeffler's exquisite Thomas Eberle viola d'amore from the Gardner Museum in Boston when I recorded his *La Mort de Tintagiles* with the Indianapolis Symphony.

Commissioning composers to write music is even more fun than haunting the archives of the world. Nothing is as thrilling as being an active partner in the creative process. For me, the compositional spark has lead to such broadening experiences as premiering ballet scores in Basel, performing jazz in Cologne, and starting an eclectic mix of a chamber group with instruments like the glass harmonica and shakuhachi. **AST**

*Jennie Hansen performs internationally on viola, Baroque viola, and viola d'amore. She has recorded Charles Martin Loeffler's La Mort de Tintagiles with the Indianapolis Symphony, Bach's Saint John Passion with the Smithsonian Chamber Players, and jazz on electric viola d'amore for the West German Radio in Cologne. She also performs with the Times Square Music Company, a chamber group that commissions music for viola d'amore and percussion, and with the Hudson River Trio, a string trio. She has taught at Ithaca College and Cornell University.*

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