

Book Review: Bettina Hoffmann, *The Viola da Gamba*, trans. Paul Ferguson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018)

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‘What exactly is a viol?’ Bettina Hoffman asks at the start of her book, and with good reason. The history of the viol family is long and complex. The viol as recognised today—with its sloping shoulders, C-shape soundholes, flush ribs, and gut strings and frets—is very much a modern iteration of viol design quite removed from its roots in the plucked and bowed vihuelas of Spain. But it is the modern viol, developed during the sixteenth century and refined in the seventeenth and eighteenth, which has prevailed as the preferred model for performers today. This long lineage of over 400 years means that the subject of the viol, or specifically the viola da gamba, is deserving of ongoing scholarly exploration, and its use by performers merits writings in a variety of styles to meet the curiosity of both academic and public audiences. It is at this cross-section where we locate the English translation of Bettina Hoffman’s *The Viola da Gamba*, which attempts to cover the long history of the instrument in an accessible way.

The history of the viol has received increased attention in recent years, most notably Annette Otterstedt’s *The Viol: History of an Instrument* (2002), and Michael Fleming and John Bryan’s *The Early English Viol* (2016) which deal with the physical object as well as its history. Peter Holman’s *Life after Death: The Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch* (2010) focuses more on the social history of the instrument in the UK, and Ian Woodfield’s *The Early History of the Viol* (1988) still serves as the key source of information on viols pre-1600. Hoffman’s new contribution, being a translation of her original Italian text *La Viola da Gamba* (2010), is therefore in good company, but is also at the mercy of comparison to these particularly strong contributions to the study of musical instruments.

Hoffman’s book is chronologically structured, reaching back as far as the origins of bowed instruments in 10th century Byzantine and Islamic cultures, and covering the viol’s use across Europe from c1500 through to the present revival movement. The scope of the publication is therefore vast, and subjects covered range from iconographical evidence to tuning, performance technique and repertoire, unfortunately let down by an index which only includes names. The breaking down of the ‘baroque and classical’ section by country is to some extent logical, and allows local issues to be explored, but precludes comparison between countries, or commentary on cross-border commonalities particularly where geographical boundaries do not strictly dictate musical styles. For example, the grouping of the German Empire and the Netherlands as a subsection overlooks the distinctions between northern and southern Germany, and particularly the strong Italian influence on the south; this exchange is relegated to the briefest of summaries in the earlier ‘Italy’ subsection. The book concludes with a short overview of what Hoffman brands ‘the revival’, but its brevity misses opportunities to discuss how the viol was brought back into use; the single paragraph given to Arnold Dolmetsch (indexed as ‘Alfred’ Dolmetsch) is just one example where much more could have been said. Such difficulties are, however, inherent of a book

with a broad remit that grapples with a nonlinear subject matter, but a more focussed book would have forfeited the overarching connections that an expansive timeframe permits.

While this breadth may be particularly appreciated by a non-scholarly audience seeking a one-stop source of information, the rich visual content of the book masks its lack of consultation with extant instruments that would have provided much of the meat missing from the bones. Compared to the recently published study of English viols by Michael Fleming and John Bryan, where organological and historical analysis is combined, Hoffman's study skits across opportunities to engage with surviving examples; the section on Italian instruments (pp.190-93), and again English instruments (pp.206-209) would have greatly benefitted from some form of object analysis. Hoffman instead consults the music for viol, often including images from the original editions instead of reproducing them as a modern score; it is here where Hoffman's writing is strongest. Hoffman's discussion of the c1700 German viol composers is informed and enlightening, rooting the style in the German preference for polyphonic self-sufficiency, itself stemming from a newfound interest in the lute, and resulting in complex and virtuosic works. The attention paid to French playing technique is similarly insightful, drawing treatise and scores together in a way that only an expert in historical performance can.

The tone of Hoffmann's writing is very conversational and likely to divide reviewer opinions. Often slipping so much that the information presented is lost in small but distracting digressions, the tone adopted is perhaps an attempt to make the material appealing to enthusiasts rather than confined to academic circles. It may also be a result of translating a book for the English academic book market, known more for a relatively dry academic tone. Indeed, Hoffman's tone shares much in common with Otterstedt's *The Viol* as another text translated into English. The reader is certainly left in no doubt about Hoffmann's passion for the subject matter, as they very much accompany Hoffmann on a journey through the viol's history. What her less scholarly tone masks is a wealth of information, particularly English translations of primary materials, and insightful commentary on tuning and playing technique from an accomplished performer. Hoffman's ability to work with materials in multiple languages is evident in the exploration of German, Italian, French and English sources, creating a repository of translations unavailable elsewhere that will be much appreciated by many working in early music studies. The survey-type nature of the book also points to, rather than develops, many new avenues for exploration: the discussion of the viola bastarda sets the subject on firmer foundations than previous scholarship has achieved and now invites further study in this area. Scholars seeking more traditional in-depth analysis will be left wanting, but for those interested in an accessible but detailed introduction to the viol, especially English translations of key sources and information on historical performance, Hoffmann's book will be much welcomed.