

The Viol: an introduction

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Fig 1

The genesis of the viol stems from the wonderfully rich culture of late 15th-century Valencia, situated on the Mediterranean coast in eastern Spain, where the Moors, Jews and Spanish had lived together, merging the best ideas from one another's traditions for many centuries. The viol was the result of the marriage around 1475 between the new, mid-15th-century vihuela de mano [plucked vihuela] and the well-established Moorish Aragonese rebec or rabab held downwards either in the lap or between the legs 'da gamba' (hence the alternative name viola da gamba [leg viol]) and played with a bow, underhand. See Fig.1 At this, time frets were in common use and they quickly became an essential characteristic of the viol. In particular the frets lent themselves to chordal playing. It is significant that the vihuela is a common ancestor with the guitar, with which the viol shares its light, highly resonant, waisted construction, frets and basic tuning of six strings tuned in fourths with a third in the middle (later as the sixth string was removed from the treble and added again to the bass the guitar's third moved upwards to between the second and third strings). Musicians would have played both the vihuela de mano and the vihuela d'arco

