

**Moving Music:
Travelling Musicians and the Introduction of the Viol into
James V's Scotland**

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During the first decades of the sixteenth century the popularity of the viol (viola da gamba) enjoyed an expansion throughout much of Western Europe, establishing itself through travelling musical performers in the royal courts and great houses of the Renaissance. Through this cultural exchange smaller courts were provided with first-hand information about continental musical tastes, and strove to imitate the sophistication and refinement of the magnificent royal courts in France, Italy, and Germany. Although travelling musicians brought the viol into Scotland sometime between 1530-1538, there is little published work on the subject.

While it is true that the lack of research on the early viol in Scotland is directly related to the lack of hard facts in the form of surviving documents or instruments, cultural ties in connection to the viol strongly suggest a possibility of gaining a greater understanding of the viol through a comparative study of courtly cultures and musical influence via social and cultural interaction. Such was the case for the viol in sixteenth-century Scotland: the presence of foreign customs and musical tastes imported to Scotland played an important role in the viol's introduction and development in the Scottish court.

This paper will consider how the viol was introduced into a foreign culture, and how that instrument was integrated musically: whether the musical function and repertoire of that instrument was also imported, or whether the instrument was adapted to fit into an already existing musical culture. Historically, traveling musicians have played an important part in the introduction of an instrument into a new culture; it is through the musician's use of a musical instrument that its musical function and

repertoire is communicated to the new audience. It is first necessary to briefly explain what a viol is, and to place it within the social and musical contexts of the Renaissance. The viol is a bowed stringed instrument, played in a downwards position similar to the cello, but it has six strings made of sheep's gut, which gave it a softer, more mellow sound than modern string instruments with metal strings. Viols were, and are, made in a range of sizes, from the smallest treble to alto, tenor, and bass sizes, in a manner that is very similar to the violin family. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was primarily played in a consort, normally numbering three to six viols, and by the turn of the seventeenth century it had become an instrument of utmost refinement, played by gentlemen amateurs throughout Europe.¹ During the first decades of its rising popularity in Europe, viol consorts did not have a specific repertoire, but instead were used to play general instrumental dances, as well as music written for vocal ensembles. Viol consorts lent themselves exceedingly well to vocal music, due to the viol's ability to imitate the expressiveness of the human voice.

The importance of travel fits well within this subject, for the introduction, establishment, and development of the viol in Scotland depended exclusively on a constant stream of musical influence from the continent. From before the viol's first mention in Scottish records in 1535 until the establishment of a dominating British viol presence in the 1550s,² this influence was introduced by highly skilled travelling musicians, sought-after for their mastery of the most refined and current musical tastes.

Travelling musicians were highly prized throughout the Middle Ages as a symbol of prestige and wealth. The trade of minstrels was international, and travel was especially demanded of court musicians. Skilled musicians moved freely between cultural centres, spreading specific skills, instruments, repertoires, and ensemble concepts. Some musicians travelled in place of their patrons as cultural representatives, while royalty and nobility of lesser

¹ Ian Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 117, 196-201.

² *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, Compota thesaurariorum Regum Scotorum*, ed. by Sir James Balfour Paul and Thomas Dickinson, 13 vols (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1882-1916), X, p. 415.

realms would appear with their musicians to create a sense of grandeur and importance.³

Travelling musicians from royal courts in Italy, France, Germany and the Low Countries were lured to great and small courts alike seeking fame and fortune. The promise of artistic patronage pulled continental musicians to the court of James V, King of Scotland (1513-42). James V was a supporter of music, literature, and the arts, and was keenly interested in making his court as worldly as any on the continent.

Records of expenditures at the Scottish court are found throughout *The Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*.⁴ These surviving documents detail the liveries and pensions of members of the royal household, including information on musicians in the service of the king. The accounts are invaluable in the research of sixteenth-century Scottish musical life; in all but a few cases they contain the only known references to courtly musicians in Scotland during this period.

The first mention of a viol in the court of James V comes in 1535, where Richard Hume is given twenty pounds to buy materials to make viols.⁵ The instrument is mysteriously absent from records after this point for a period of three years, and it is unknown if any viol consorts graced the Stuart court during this time. The first mention of a payment to a viol consort comes in 1538, and the name of the lead player suggests a northern European descent. Jakkis Collumbell and his three partners are mentioned in passing as having received a livery of clothing.⁶ On 16 December 1539, the ‘four minstralis that playis upoun the veolis’ are recorded again, this time having a yearly wage and livery.⁷ There are regular mentions of payments to the viol consort in the years up to 1542, the year of James V’s death.⁸ During this time, the viol players are consistently mentioned as a group of four,

³ Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol*, p. 196.

⁴ *Accounts*, I – XIII, passim.

⁵ ‘Item, the samin day, to Richard Hume, Inglisman, quhilk suld mak violis to the Kingis grace, to by stufe to the samin...xx li’ (pounds)’. *Accounts*, VI, p. 261.

⁶ *Accounts*, VII, pp. 118-19.

⁷ *Accounts*, VII, p. 199.

⁸ *Accounts*, VII, pp. 415, 478, VIII (1908), 46, 54, 103, 149, 150.

except for one instance in 1542 where five are listed.⁹ After James V's death, recorded payments to viol players become less regular, though payments made for individual performances at Christmas or Easter become more frequent. Jakkis Collumbell and his well-paid partners disappear from the records soon after 1542, at which point Scottish or English players take over in groups of five or six.¹⁰ The lack of yearly pensions is probably the result of strained royal finances, due to a string of failed military campaigns during the regency of Mary of Guise, James V's widow.¹¹

The marriage of James V to Mary of Guise is a pivotal point in the introduction of the viol to Scotland. It is well documented that James V spent a great deal of time in France in the company of Francis I between 1536 and 1538 negotiating marriage arrangements, first to Francis I's daughter, Princess Madeline, who died shortly after coming to Scotland in 1537, and then to Mary of Guise, who he married in the following year.¹² It is certain that during this time he would have been impressed by the grandeur and sophistication of the French royal court.

In order to understand the influence of foreign music and musicians in the Scottish court, it is necessary to look at the rise of the four-part Parisian *chanson* (song) at the French royal court, and the growing importance of the viol as a courtly instrument. Francis I, who ruled as king of France from 1515 to 1547, ardently supported and promoted the literary and musical arts. His court was frequented by poets, philosophers, and musicians writing fashionable music of the time.¹³ Composers such as Clément Janequin and Claudin of Sermisy led the development of the Parisian *chanson*, which was a complete departure from the dense and complex textures found in vocal music by earlier Franco-Flemish composers. Parisian *chansons* can be characterized by their light

⁹ *Accounts*, VIII, p. 240.

¹⁰ *Accounts*, IX, pp. 127, 175, 215, 281, 425, 461, X, pp. 22, 31-32.

¹¹ Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Phoenix Press, 1994), p. 52.

¹² Rosalind K. Marshall, *Mary of Guise, Queen of Scots* (Edinburgh: NMS Publishing Limited, 2001), pp. 22-25.

¹³ Frank Dobbins, 'François I, King of France', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy [Accessed 22 April 2005], <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

uncomplicated texture, with a focus on a lyrical top voice.¹⁴

The King kept an extensive household, which included musicians for his chapel and court. Trained to the highest abilities, foreign musicians often held pride of place, bringing foreign music and absorbing current trends during their residency.¹⁵ The expressive sound of the viol gracefully captured the simplicity and elegance of Parisian *chansons*, and consequently the four-part viol consort flourished at the French court.

After a brief but ill-fated marriage to Princess Madeline, James V married Mary of Guise. Mary was the eldest child of Antoinette of Bourbon and Claud, Count of Guise, both dedicated musical patrons.¹⁶ She was prepared for entry into the royal court in 1529 by her uncle, the Duke of Lorraine, who in the same year is recorded as purchasing four viols for his court at Nancy.¹⁷ In Francis I's court she refined her court etiquette, and was taught to dance and sing. There is no doubt that Mary of Guise knew the sound of the viol, and that *chansons* and dance music played on the viol were an important part of her musical entertainment.¹⁸

It does not seem a coincidence that the first, and indeed only, steady employment of a viol consort in Scotland during this period is recorded directly after James V's return from France.¹⁹ It is probable that the arrival of a four-part viol consort at the Scottish court in 1538 was the result of both James V's entertainment by viol consorts in the French court, and the current and refined tastes of both Princess Madeline and Mary of Guise. It is documented in both the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* and the 'Despences de la maison royale' (a record of Mary of Guise's expenditures in Scotland) that she brought over a large number of French attendants, including musicians, and it seems quite credible that some of these musicians would have been able to perform the music of fashionable

¹⁴ Howard Mayer Brown and Richard Freedman, 'Clément Janequin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy [Accessed 22 April 2005], <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

¹⁵ R. J. Knecht, *Renaissance Warrior and Patron: The Reign of Francis I*, rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 459.

¹⁶ Marshall, *Mary of Guise*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁷ Albert Jacquot, *La Musique en Lorraine étude retrospective d'après les archives locales*, 2nd edn (Paris: Fischbacher, 1882; Paris: Minkoff Reprints, 1972), p. 33.

¹⁸ Marshall, *Mary of Guise*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ *Accounts*, VII, pp. 118-19.

French composers in residence in Paris.²⁰

While the connection between France and Scotland has been highlighted in current scholarly research, it has not been asserted that the introduction, establishment, and early development of the viol in Scotland were intrinsically tied to its use abroad. Furthermore, although no existing records list viol music played in the Stuart court, it can be accurately stated that viol consorts during the first decade of their introduction to Scotland imitated musical tastes of Continental courts, introduced by travelling musicians.

At the heart of this argument lies the evaluation of the musical function of bowed and plucked string instruments in Scotland, and how this contrasts to the musical function of the viol in early sixteenth-century Europe. The term ‘musical function’ signifies in which performance settings the instrument was used, and how it was expected to relate musically to the other performers.

Before the viol was introduced to Scotland, the musical function of stringed instruments in the Scottish court was two-fold: it was used primarily to accompany narrative song, and as an extra voice in mixed consorts. The main string instruments used at the beginning of the sixteenth century were the rebec-style fiddle played on the arm, and the lute, which increased in popularity due to the marriage of James IV to Margaret Tudor in 1503. Like in other Celtic countries, the *clàrsach*, or harp, was also an important instrument of the bardic tradition, and maintained a high level of popularity throughout the first half of the sixteenth century.²¹

The fiddle, the closest instrument to the viol played in the Stuart court, was notably mentioned throughout the Middle Ages as being the most adaptable of the court instruments, but its forte was primarily as an accompaniment to singing, recitation of poetry, and dancing. Johannes of Grocheio attested to this flexibility when he wrote in approximately 1300

²⁰National Archives of Scotland, West Register House, E33/1, fols 10^r - 11^v; Paul, *Accounts*, VII, p. 15.

²¹D. James Ross, *Music Fyne: Robert Carver and the Art of Music in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1993), pp. 115-19.

that a good fiddle player should be able to play every type of secular music known at that time.²²

There is, however, an important difference between the medieval fiddle and the Renaissance viol: the shape of the bridge, which greatly influenced the type of music that could be played. There is overwhelming evidence in medieval visual representations and literary references that medieval bowed string instruments had a flat bridge, similar to a guitar, which made these instruments suitable as a drone accompaniment for other instruments and voice.²³ A flat bridge allowed a simple melody to be played on the outer two strings, but any attempts to play the inner strings separately would cause the bow to hit all the strings at once, creating a drone effect. This musical function complemented the musical requirements of string instruments in the Middle Ages. Around the beginning of the sixteenth century, as instrumental music began to take its repertoire directly from the lyrical French *chansons* and Italian madrigals, bowed string instruments were increasingly required to play a complex line over their entire range of strings. In order to allow the bow to play each string individually, the bridge on bowed string instruments had to be made curved instead of flat. This is a small, but profound difference that separates the musical function of the medieval fiddle from the Renaissance viol.

In the last decade of the fifteenth century and the first decade of the sixteenth century, records in the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* list occasional pairs of fiddlers, along with payments to a fiddle player coupled with a harp, lute, or pipes.²⁴ Although it is dangerous to suppose a specific performance practice solely on the manner in which musicians are grouped together in payment records, this arrangement of bowed and plucked string instruments together lends itself well as an accompaniment to narrative singing, and through previous scholarly research it has been established as a common occurrence throughout Britain

²² Christopher Page, *Voices and instruments of the Middle Ages: Instrumental practice and songs in France, 1100-1300* (London: Dent, 1986), p. 68.

²³ Mary Remnant, *English Bowed Instruments from Anglo-Saxon to Tudor Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), illustration plates after p. 133.

²⁴ *Accounts*, I, pp. 326, 330, II, pp. 102, 342, 421, 432.

at the time.²⁵

Judging from the primary ‘drone accompaniment’ function of the fiddle in Scotland, it can be asserted that the musical function of the viol was entirely imported from foreign sources. While it is true that the shape, size, and playing position of the viol were technically known in Britain during the Middle Ages,²⁶ the curved bridge and polyphonic musical repertoire of the viol meant that its introduction brought a new method of playing stringed instruments into Scotland. When the viol was introduced, it was the only string instrument in Scotland to be recorded as part of a specifically devised consort; the only one adhering to this pre-prescribed group structure. The connection between the rise in popularity of the French four-part *chanson* and the establishment of a four-part viol consort in France during the same period strongly suggests that viol music heard in the court of James V did not imitate the drone accompaniment played by Scottish fiddles, but instead consisted primarily of French *chansons* and dance music.

This is also a logical conclusion, considering that foreign musicians were skilled in the musical genres that were popular in their country of origin; their very livelihood depended on the fact they were able to produce the refined and current musical repertoire known to them from their apprenticeship and travels on the continent. It would probably not have been until the viol was taken up by native Scots in the 1550s that Scottish songs and instrumental genres would have been utilized. Nonetheless, a continuing foreign influence was felt throughout the remainder of the century; the French *chanson* style was at the very heart of a musical progression from the dense polyphony of the preceding century, and by the mid-point of the sixteenth century the influence of the French *chanson* was inseparable from developments in Scottish music. Through travelling musicians, cross-cultural interaction not only introduced a new musical instrument, but

²⁵ Remnant, *English Bowed Instruments*, pp. 69-71.

²⁶ During the Middle Ages a larger bowed instrument called the medieval viol was also played in a downward position. It was used for drone accompaniment in a manner similar to the fiddle, due to its flat bridge. The medieval viol was played throughout Europe from around 1100 and died out completely by the first half of the 1400s. It is not considered by any current scholars to be a direct line to the Renaissance viol. Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol*, pp. 9-14.

ultimately established a more cosmopolitan, progressive Renaissance style in Scotland.

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