

Home Is Where the Music Is

At-home Music-Making in 17th Century Massachusetts

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The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated that professional musicians shift the focus of their music making from the public sphere to the domestic sphere. Since the viol was important to the culture of recreational music making in 17th century Massachusetts, we as a voice and viol ensemble based in Massachusetts were keen to pursue a project that would allow us to explore at-home music-making through a historic lens and connect our own home-bound music-making to a local historical narrative.

There are many gaps in the recorded history of music-making in 17th century Massachusetts, let alone at-home viol playing. A 1985 study by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts titled *Music in Colonial Massachusetts 1630-1820: Music in Homes and in Churches* helped us make inferences about who owned viols in 17th century Massachusetts. The study examines primary sources—including probate records, diary entries, and advertisements from Essex, Middlesex, and Suffolk counties—dating between 1630 and 1730. These few surviving sources document nineteen cases of viol-ownership in total;¹ however, the Massachusetts Historical Society estimates that the surviving probate records from Suffolk County, which includes Boston, represent just seven percent of records that were filed.² Therefore, it is likely that there were actually far more than nineteen viols in Massachusetts during this hundred year period. The little that we know about the viol owners in these documents demonstrates that they were both Anglicans and Puritans, English immigrants and Massachusetts-born, and practiced varied professions including clergy, schoolteacher, government official, yeoman, and weaver, placing them all within the middle or upper classes.³ Records regarding a few of these individuals demonstrate at-home recreational viol playing. For example, in a diary entry from 1681, Reverend Peter Thacher of Milton recounts an evening of viol playing with a group of men who had earlier helped him cut and cart wood: “There was 11 carts, 18 cutters of wood. I made supper for them. Wee had the Viol afterward.”⁴

Unsurprisingly, the viol owners included in these surviving probate records are all white males because the records only document the property of “heads of household.”⁵ As such, several enslaved people (named or unnamed) are inhumanely listed in these probate records as property along with the instruments they played. Although these records do not include any people of color (enslaved or free) who played the viol (a violinist and several trumpeters are mentioned), there is no evidence to suggest that such viol players did *not* exist.⁶

¹ Lambert

² Lambert

³ Lambert

⁴ Crawford, 76

⁵ Lambert

⁶ Lambert

By looking at other sources, we can gather that some women in colonial Massachusetts played the viol.⁷ For example, a 1764 issue of the *Boston Gazette* advertises “a six-string bass viol for a girl” and several other instruments⁸. Since the Massachusetts Bay Colony was an English settlement, and existing evidence demonstrates that women played the viol in 17th century England, it would not be surprising to learn that women in colonial Massachusetts were playing the viol long before this surviving advertisement was published.⁹

As residents of Quincy, Massachusetts, we hoped to find documented cases of viol ownership in 17th century Quincy. Although our search was unsuccessful, we identified the Quincy family as a good socioeconomic proxy for the kinds of families documented in surviving records as having owned viols. Their home, now a National Historic Landmark and museum known as the Quincy Homestead, was originally constructed in the 1680’s,¹⁰ falling within the 50 year span (1650-1700) during which most instruments, including viols, in the Colonial Society of Massachusetts study are documented.¹¹ We were kindly given permission to record in the home’s “Old Kitchen,” the only room that is still preserved from its original 1680’s construction.¹²

If colonists owned viols and played them recreationally at home, what music did they play? While we lack documented examples of specific pieces, we can infer that some viol owners owned sheet music that was published in and brought over from England. In an advertisement by instrument dealer and dancing master Edward Endstone found in a surviving 1716 issue of the *Boston News-Letter*, Endstone writes: “This is to give Notice that there is lately sent over from London a choice Collection of Musickal Instruments consisting of Flagelets, Flutes, Haut-Boys, Bas-Viols, Violins, Bows, Strings..Books of Instruction for all these Instruments...”¹³ Sheet music was likely being transported from England to Massachusetts decades before Endstone wrote this advertisement. Reverend Edmund Browne of Sudbury, who died in 1678, wrote in his will leaving “[his] base voyall, with all [his] musicall bookes and instruments” to his friend Thomas Walker.¹⁴ Since this entry predates the existence of an established music publishing industry in the colonies,¹⁵ we can deduce that the sheet music Browne (and other viol owners) owned came from England.

⁷ Adams-Hoover

⁸ Adams Hoover

⁹ For examples, see Ludwig, Loren. *Women in the history of the Viola da Gamba*. “Susanna Perwich (c1637-1661). <https://lorenludwig.com/susanna-perwich-c1637-1661/> and *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, “February 1662-1663.” <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4200/4200-h/4200-h.htm>

¹⁰ Stachiw, 11

¹¹ Lambert

¹² Stachiw, 11

¹³ Lambert

¹⁴ Lambert

¹⁵ See Crawford, Richard. “A Historian’s Introduction to Early American Music.” The American Antiquarian Society. <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44539323.pdf>

The music publishing industry in 17th century England was dominated by John Playford, who published and sold many commercial volumes of music from his shop in London.¹⁶ The prevalence of music for solo viol and/or solo voice with bass viol accompaniment in Playford's publications reflects the immense popularity of the viol amongst amateur English musicians as well as the prevalence of the practice of accompanying one voice with one viol. While some of Playford's publications such as *Musick's Recreation On The Viol, Lyra-way* (1682) are didactic in nature, most are compilations of fashionable songs by various composers. We recorded selections from two such compilations published in 1669 whose covers include the instructions "To sing to the Theorbo-Lute or Basse-Viol": [*The Treasury of Musick: Containing Ayres And Dialogues*](#) and [*Select Ayres And dialogues*](#).

Both volumes feature a wide variety of compositional styles that include technically challenging songs by celebrated composers as well as silly strophic songs, drinking songs, and rounds. We tried to represent this stylistic variety in the selections that we chose to record. Our selections from *Musick's Recreation on the Viol Lyra-Way* were intended for viol players learning to play in the chordal lyra-viol style. These pieces are notated in [tablature](#), and the book opens with an explanation of how to read this notation. Henry Lawe's "Why shouldst thou swear I am forsworn" (a.k.a. "Loves Scrutiny") could also have easily been played by a less experienced singer and/or viol player, or perhaps even by someone accompanying their own singing on the viol. In fact, Lawes was an accomplished voice and viol teacher.¹⁷ The comic and bawdy subject matter of this song is a common theme in Playford's publications. In contrast, "No more shall Meads be deckt with flowers" (a.k.a. "Loves Constancy"), has a more formal text that is a variation on an English sonnet. Its composer, Nicholas Lannier, worked as a singer, lutenist, and composer at the courts of Charles I, where he served as "Master of the King's Music."¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, the vocal demands of this piece are much greater, the vocal part as notated spanning an octave and a sixth. In this way, Playford's commercial volumes also allowed skilled amateur musicians to enjoy stylish pieces from court or theatre at home.

As American musicians whose education has primarily focused on European music-making, it was a rare and special experience to record these 17th century songs in an appropriate 17th century space in our own town. This experience helped remind us that much of the music we have studied to perform publicly has, over the centuries, enjoyed a more active role in private spaces and that all music-making, especially in the private sphere, is part of an important historical narrative.

¹⁶ Dean-Smith

¹⁷ Spink, "Lawes, Henry"

¹⁸ Spink, "Lanier family"

Sources

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