

## **Musick's Recreation:**

### **At-Home Viol-Playing in 17th and Early 18th Century Massachusetts**

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In this program, we explore the question, “Who played the viol in colonial Massachusetts?” Our interest in this question grew out of our experience during the pandemic, which until quite recently, confined most musicians to making music exclusively at home. From our own apartment just outside Boston, we began researching the local history of at-home recreational music making on the viol from roughly 1650-1750.

In his book *America's Musical Life*, musicologist Richard Crawford writes, “the main fact known about music making in early American homes is that it took place.” While we lack documented examples of specific pieces that were played on the viol in colonial MA homes, we can infer from surviving primary sources that some viol players owned sheet music that was published in and brought over from England. One such example that makes specific mentions of viols is an advertisement from a 1716 issue of the *Boston Gazette* that reads: “This is to give notice that there is lately sent over from London a Choice Collection of Musickal Instruments Consisting of...Bass-Viols...Bows, Strings...Books of Instructions for all these Instruments...”

Assuming that colonists were importing instruments and music books from England, we turned to John Playford, who published many volumes of songs to be sung to lute *or* bass viol accompaniment, to curate this program. Playford dominated the music publishing industry in 17th century England, selling commercial music books from his shop in London. While there is no specific mention of Playford's volumes in surviving MA documents, the fact that two Playford publications are known to have been present in another English colony, Virginia, makes their presence in MA all the more likely. While some of Playford's publications are didactic in nature, most are compilations of highly varied songs by the most fashionable composers of his day. We've tried to represent this variety by pairing each viol player featured on this program with songs that speak to some aspect of their musical experiences.

We begin the program with Peter Thacher, a Puritan Reverend who preached in Milton, MA for almost 50 years. He became a vocal advocate for a more uniform method of psalm singing known as “Regular Singing.” In this method, the congregation sings from musical notation rather than by call and response. While instruments were forbidden in congregations like Thacher's, primary sources suggest that Puritans accompanied psalms with instruments at home. For example, a 1698 entry in the diary of MA Puritan judge Samuel Sewall suggests psalm accompaniment on a bass instrument: “I, my wife, Hannah, Elisabeth Joseph, Mary rode in the coach to Muddy-River...Gates and her daughter Sparhawk sung the 114th psalm. Simon catch'd us a bass.” The psalms on this program appear in the Ninth Edition *Bay Psalm Book* (1698), the first book printed in the colonies that contained musical notation. The psalm tunes and bass lines in this edition were lifted from Playford's *A Brief Introduction to the Skill of Musick*, and the inclusion of bass lines in the edition serves as further evidence that Puritans accompanied private-sphere psalm singing with instruments.

The domestic sphere was a more flexible space for Puritans where things like secular music making and alcohol consumption were more acceptable, as demonstrated in the following entry

from Sewall's 1688 diary: "...went on Board the Duke's Yott... Had Sturgeon, Wine, Punch, Musick." We know that Thacher played the viol as a social activity from an entry in his 1681 diary where he recounts an evening spent with a group of men who had earlier helped him cut and cart wood, writing "There was 11 carts, 18 cutters of wood. I made supper for them. Wee had the Viol afterward." Thacher played an active role in the day-to-day lives of his congregants, and it seems that music was one way in which he fostered community. In this spirit, we present a spirited strophic song, a psalm, and two drinking songs as part of our Thacher set.

We know of several additional Puritan clergymen who played the viol. Reverend Charles Morton of Charlestown had a very academic relationship with music and wrote a detailed chapter about the physics of sound and music in his 1687 treatise *Compendium Physicae*. His discussion of the physical phenomena behind musical concepts (although dubious at times by modern standards) paints an interesting picture of some of the thinking behind the art of playing divisions on a ground bass. Morton's discussion of consonance and dissonance, for example, gives one possible theoretical explanation for some of the rules laid out in Christopher Simpson's *The Division Viol*, another popular Playford publication.

For some viol-players, such as Samuel Grainger, music was a profession. Grainger was an Anglican immigrant from London who taught school by day and dancing by night. It seems plausible that Grainger's students may have danced to selections from Playford's *The Dancing Master*, a very popular dance manual that includes notation for numerous tunes and written instructions for how to dance to them.

In addition to teaching dance, historian Barbara Lambert believes that Grainger may have taught singing and/or the viol. Lambert points to a surviving account book from 1721-1722 that lists "a singing book" among the items purchased by one of Grainger's students. Lambert wonders if Grainger, who owned four bass viols, was also teaching students to accompany their own singing on the viol, given the popularity of that practice. Our selections by John Blow and James Hart are good examples of pieces that might have challenged Grainger's more skilled singing students. Blow's "Awake my Lyre" is also one of the many pieces in Playford's publications that were originally written for the court, the theatre, or other formal occasions and adapted to be more suitable to at-home music-making. Playford describes his adaptation in a footnote: "This SONG was by Dr. Blow Composed, to be performed with instrumental Musick, Symphony's and Ritornello's, of four Parts betwixt every Verse; and likewise Chorus's of four Voices betwixt every Verse: But as it is here printed, you have all which is to be sung to the Theorbo, and suitable to the rest in the Book." Although Playford only mentions the theorbo in this description, bass viol accompaniment seems equally appropriate due to its specific mention on the cover of the volume that contains this ayre.

In our attempt to answer the question "who played the viol in colonial Massachusetts?" we also have to consider who was left out of official records. Primary sources dated between 1630 and 1730 list just 19 viols in colonial MA, but these likely only represent a fraction of the actual number of viols and players in MA during that period. Most of these sources are probate records, which only document the property of "heads of household," that is, almost exclusively white men. Several enslaved people (named or unnamed) are inhumanely listed as property in probate records along with the instruments they played. We know that Peter Thatcher, Samuel Granger,

and possibly other viol owners on this program owned slaves. These records do not list any people of color (enslaved or free) who played the viol, and Barbara Lambert believes that, compared to instruments like the fiddle or trumpet, the viol's social function makes it less likely to have been played by people of color; however, there is also no evidence that such viol players did *not* exist.

Probate records also exclude women; however, other sources demonstrate that women in colonial MA *did* play the viol. For example, a 1764 issue of the *Boston Gazette* advertises “a six-string bass viol for a girl.” This is unsurprising, as several sources demonstrate that women in 17th century England played the viol, such as this 1662 entry in the diary of Samuel Pepys: “This afternoon came my wife’s brother and his wife...Balty’s wife is a most little and yet, I believe, pretty old girl...she plays mighty well on the Base Violl.” Since England and New England were very interconnected, we can assume that women in colonial MA were playing the viol long before the 1764 advertisement was printed.

We were able to identify several women who contributed to Playford’s volumes, such as Lady Mary Deering, the first female composer in England to have her works published, and poet and translator Katherine Philips, whose English translation “O Solitude” was set to music by Purcell. To pay further homage to the women viol players left out of historical records, we’ve taken excerpts from the Prologue of Anne Bradstreet’s “Several poems compiled with great variety of wit and learning,” and set them to a tune from Playford’s *Choice Ayres & Songs Book 2*. Bradstreet was an English immigrant to Massachusetts and the “first woman to be recognized as an accomplished New World Poet.” Coincidentally, that volume of ayres was printed by a woman, Anne Godbid.

The latest-living viol player we feature, James Joan, must have been a real character. A French immigrant to Massachusetts, Joan was a musical jack of all trades. He taught dancing, French, and several instruments, including the viol, made, sold, and repaired instruments, and performed. In 1770, in response to a ban on public theatre in Boston, Joan gave a one-man performance of the hugely popular English musical theatre piece *The Beggar’s Opera*, in which he likely accompanied his own singing. He was apparently a much better musician than actor, as a surviving account of one of his performances states that “he read but indifferently but Sung in Taste.” In this spirit, we present a scene from *The Beggar’s Opera*.

We conclude with Edward Enstone, who was recruited from London to Boston to serve as the first organist at Boston’s King’s Chapel. Although we don’t know much about Enstone’s employment in England or his musical education, his recruitment speaks to his musical notoriety. Like Samuel Grainger, Enstone likely educated viol players in New England. He taught music and dancing and sold sheet music, viols, and other instruments. His cross-Atlantic recruitment and business dealings are further evidence of the interconnectivity of musical culture between England and New England. We conclude the program with some of our favorite pieces that may have challenged Enstone’s more skilled students.

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