

Playing with Other People When You're by Yourself—"Music Minus One" Comes to the Viola da Gamba World

By Gary O'Connor

I am relatively new to the viola da gamba. I heard the instrument at the Boston Early Music Festival in 2015 and loved the sound (my only previous instrument was the piano, which I started as an adult). With the encouragement of my Silver Spring, Maryland, neighbor Leslie Nero, advice from Phillip Serna, and a viol borrowed from John Moran, I began taking bass viol lessons in 2018 with Amy Domingues. I went to my first Conclave, at Pacific University, last year.

In explaining to my husband why I go to the Greater Washington/Baltimore VdGSA Chapter playing meetings, or smaller gatherings of a local beginner-friendly consort, I have often said "Consort music was meant to be played with other people, and it's difficult to play with other people when you're by yourself." While that statement seemed obviously true at the time, it turns out that it's not actually completely true.

You can play with other people even if you are by yourself at home—and many of us are spending lots of time by ourselves these days because of the pandemic. Unfortunately, because of "latency" issues—the amount of time it takes sound to travel over an internet connection—playing consort music in real time with others appears to be impractical for many people. Fortunately, however, there is another way to play with others when you are alone: "music-minus-one" or "consort-minus-one" recordings of viol consort music. That is, recordings of all the parts of pieces of consort music except one, which you supply.

My personal lockdown began on March 13th, 2020, when the Office of the Maryland Attorney General began mandatory telework. Around that time I had been working on a Byrd three-part fantasia with the goal of playing it with a local consort group. Because the lockdown would postpone our playing it live, on March 19th I asked Amy, my viol teacher, to make a "music-minus-one" recording of it. Her recording was lovely.

That same day, I posted on the VdGSA Facebook page: "Has anyone done 'Music Minus One'-type of recordings for basic consort music repertoire? I know I would definitely pay to have such recordings that omit the bass part—especially since

getting together with other people can be problematic now (and in at least the near future)."

Since that time, there has been a lot of recording of "music-minus-one" or "consort-minus-one" pieces for viols. Like the repertoire viol players love and play most, much of it comes from England. Set forth below is a brief overview of the pre-pandemic and pre-NonClave recordings. Seven people were interviewed for this article: Amy Domingues (of the Sonnambula Consort and a VdGSA Board member), David Hatcher (of the Linarol Consort), Alison Kinder (of the Chelys Consort), Susan Sandman (who was a pioneer in "consort-minus-one" music for viols), Gail Ann Schroeder (of Columbia Baroque and Asheville Baroque), Philip Serna (perhaps the hardest-working guy in early music), and Sam Stadlen (of Fretwork). Esha Neogy also provided helpful information. A list of the relevant websites is at the end of this article.

The History

A little history helps provide some context. The music-minus-one concept predates the COVID-9-related lockdowns by decades. According to Wikipedia, upper-case Music Minus One was founded in 1950 by Irv Kratka, a twenty-four-year-old college student. The company's first recording was devoted to Schubert's "Trout" Quintet. If you type musicminusone.com, it takes you to a musicdispatch.com website. That website boasts of a library of nine hundred titles. However, if you search for "viola da gamba," you get, "Sorry, no products were found matching your search terms."

All of you are probably familiar with another type of MM1—the term we will use from here on. For vocal music, it is called karaoke (an abbreviation of Japanese words for "empty orchestra"). That dates back to the 1970s, with the development of the karaoke machine in Japan.

MM1 is not a new concept for early music. It has been around for some time for recorder players. In response to my post on the American Recorder Society's Facebook page, a number of people recalled using MM1-type recordings in the 1970s.

The term is not entirely new for viol music, either. After Susan Sandman, our US pioneer, received her doctorate at Stanford, she taught early music at Wells College in New York. A lutenist, she started a Renaissance consort there. After studying viol with Martha Blackman, Sandman joined a viol consort in the 1980s and began a MM1 project as an educational tool for that group. Later, this became a commercial enterprise, known as Elizabethan Play Along. The pieces were recorded one part at a time. You had the option of listening to all parts, or of turning the volume down on the part you wanted to play. The collection grew to more than thirty-five recordings that included the standard English composers as well as others such as Ortiz and *Tandemaken* pieces. The intended audience was isolated viol

players, people who went to Conclave but didn't have anyone to play with the rest of the year.

The Elizabethan Play Along recordings were reviewed favorably in the VdGSA News and the British and Australian viola da gamba society newsletters, and some of you may have met Susan at Conclave about ten years ago. She later found that she was unable to do the marketing, but you can still buy a couple of the recordings from Boulder Early Music.

The People

Moving forward to this year—Queen Elizabeth's term for the year 1992, "annus horribilis," seems apt for 2020 also—a lot has happened to the scene established by Sandman and others. Most of the people interviewed for this article were not aware of any pre-pandemic MM1 for viol; the exceptions were Amy Domingues and Gail Ann Schroeder, who were familiar with Sandman's work. Alison Kinder mentioned recordings that were available for singers to practice their parts for big pieces like the *B Minor Mass*.

The idea for starting the various projects came from different sources. Phillip Serna said he had been wanting to do something similar for a while, and it was an outgrowth of a Gibbons project he had worked on. The idea was suggested to Kinder by a member of the British Viola da Gamba Society, as well as by people who followed her YouTube channel. She said it also grew out of "desperation to play together" with other people in her consort, Chelys. Schroeder and Hatcher similarly cited the pandemic and the inability to be with students or do other normal, everyday things.

Sam Stadlen already worked a second job doing video recordings of concerts, so he had professional video and audio gear. Kinder and her consort initially tried recording on mobile phones, which presented a variety of problems, but then applied to the Arts Council and were able to get better microphones for Chelys with the funding they received. Hatcher said that the availability of cheaper hardware has made things easier, but producing MM1s still ended up costing a significant amount.

These artists have a variety of approaches to choosing repertoire. Schroeder has a different theme each month—she started with Lupo ("I love Lupo," she says), then pieces based on popular tunes, then Italian pieces broadly defined to include Signore Coprario. Stadlen's recordings were based on suggestions from his subscribers. Domingues donated a consort piece to the NonClave Auction—the winning bidder would choose it; she also recorded seven works for her NonClave class on Italian convent music. Serna mentioned wanting to have a variety of pieces and to avoid duplicating what others have recorded. He also cited the need to pick pieces that are transparent enough to convey what's going on in the music. Hatcher had just finished editing a sixteenth-century German manuscript, which resulted in recordings

of seventy-eight four-part pieces. He teaches a lot of courses that have a mixture of viols, recorders, and voices, which influenced his choices of sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century works. Partially as a result of the Arts Council funding, Kinder wanted to have variety in her consort's choices. She said their recordings will end up with quite different levels in terms of difficulty, describing their Gibbons piece as doable but their Lawes as much more complicated. "Lawes is just never friendly," she added.

There are, of course, a variety of challenges—not just the time to record, but a lot of additional hours spent mixing (often more than the recording time). And the pieces don't just post themselves on their websites. Stadlen said it was particularly time-consuming to do both the video and audio. Since they are not recording in professional recording studios, noise can be an issue. Weather is an issue as well, especially when you need to keep three instruments in tune.

Kinder says she expected making MM1s to be like recording with the whole consort, only you were doing it by yourself. But the process made everyone realize how much they relied on the physical presence of the other members, appreciating them even more.

There are technical issues, too. Serna talked about "panning"—deciding where to place where each part spatially in the listener's perceived soundscape (to the left, in the middle, etc.).

In doing this type of recording, it is a process of trial and error and there were some surprises, such as the order in which the parts were recorded. At first, Kinder said, they expected that with dance pieces, they would always record the bass part first and with fantasias, the first voice to enter with the theme would be the first to be recorded. But it didn't work out that way. The lesson they learned was to record first the part with the most moving notes in the penultimate bar of the piece—she said that you need the busiest parts at the end recorded so that everyone can fit in their part.

The artists uniformly rated it as a positive experience. Serna and Domingues described how it helps them scrutinize and improve their own playing; Domingues adds that she would recommend it to any professional or amateur player. Feedback from fans is another plus. Schroeder referred to players telling her how it made them a better consort player. Stadlen said that people have told him that the recording boosted their emotional states during the pandemic. He adds that while the project started out as a way to provide music when people couldn't get together with their friends, now his aim is to make it like IMSLP (the International Music Score Library Project)—a valuable resource for viol players everywhere that players will turn to as an essential resource.

The most recent addition to this genre comes from the Viola da Gamba Society of America. On the first day of NonClave

the VdGSA unveiled on its website's Members' Area "Play It Forward: Music Minus One Consorts." Society members contributing to the new project included Lisa Terry and John Moran, as well as Amy Domingues, Motomi Igarashi, Doug Poplin, Phil Serna, James Williamson, and the Nota Bene Viol Consort.

The Music

At this point you may be thinking to yourself, "Which one(s) should I get?" Of course, the correct answer is, "all of them, if you can afford it." But that may not be practical for a lot of people, especially during the pandemic. While there are a lot of similarities among the various offerings, there are also some differences. For almost all of the pieces, the sheet music is provided. Your answers to a few questions might help you decide which ones are right for you.

Are you newer to the viol? Or have you not played it in a while, or maybe you want to play something easier than what you usually play? As a newbie, I was thrilled that Stadlen's website has a section devoted to music for beginners and a list of "other easier options on the site." I was also delighted to see that the VdGSA divided its offerings into easy, intermediate, and advanced. Schroeder's website is conveniently divided by difficulty level with easier works on the left side, intermediate in the middle, and more advanced on the right. The other websites have a variety of types of pieces, but with a less explicit focus on identifying the easier ones.

How many pieces would you like to be able to choose from and what repertoire do you want? When it comes to the number of discrete pieces, there is a wide range. At one end of the spectrum, Chelys has only a handful of works so far; at the other end, David Hatcher has hundreds. In between are the VdGSA (as I write this, twenty-nine), Serna (around thirty, more if you count the same pieces recorded at 440), Schroeder (thirty-nine), and Stadlen (fifty-seven). Of course, with time these numbers will change.

Not surprisingly, English composers dominate. Serna, a double bass player as well, has some pieces for multiple bass viols and pieces with a "great bass" part. Schroeder has had a month of Italian and Italianate pieces. Stadlen has some French composers—Boismortier, François Couperin, and, to the delight of a French Baroque opera fanboy like me, Lully.

Hatcher has perhaps the most distinctive pieces on his website—Savonarolan motets and "The Teddy Bears' Picnic" (contrast is the first law of art). Girolamo Savonarola, of "bonfire of the vanities" fame, was the Renaissance Florence Dominican friar and preacher who had a spectacular rise to power and an even more spectacular fall (excommunication, torture, and death) in 1498. After his fall but before his death, Savonarola wrote a number of pieces—mostly meditations on the Book of Psalms. Composers set those

pieces to polyphonic music—a bit ironic, given the friar's condemnation of complex polyphonic music. Hatcher also has the entire *Odhecaton*, Ottaviano Petrucci's groundbreaking 1501 print of instrumental music, as well as sixteenth-century German songs, and spiritual madrigals by Palestrina and Cipriano di Rore.

Do you prefer the à la carte or the prix fixe menu? If you wish to work on one particular piece, some of the websites offer the option to purchase just that one. If you want to binge-play consort music the way some people binge-watch Netflix TV shows, a number of websites include an "all you can play" option.

Do you want your consort mate(s) to be singular or plural? Hatcher, Schroeder, Serna, and Stadlen play all the parts, as do the performers of the VdGSA pieces; Chelys has different players for the different parts.

Do you want video too? Stadlen's website has video for the pieces; the others do not.

Do you want the option of playing at 440? Serna and Stadlen offer it. Serna also offers his pieces in two tempi.

Amidst this cornucopia of choices, I humbly venture to offer one suggestion. I believe it could help those of us newer to the viol to have the opportunity to listen to a track that is just the part we are learning. This would permit the player to get a feel for the tactus, internalize any rhythms that might be more difficult, and sense the type of sound to aspire to before diving into listening to multiple parts and melding with them. Similar options are commonly available for choral music. We use other senses in learning new pieces of music—sight, touch (clapping or tapping), so why not hearing? Presumably, the artists will have already recorded the separate tracks, so these could simply be added to the menu. End of plea!

How much do the MM1s cost? The best deal is the VdGSA's Play it Forward, which costs nothing for VdGSA members (if you're reading this, you're probably a member, but if not, you should join or rejoin). The cost of the other websites depends on how you will use them. Two of them are strictly à la carte: Hatcher (£4 to £12 each piece, or about \$5.24 to \$15.11) and Chelys (£3 to £4 each piece, about \$3.93 to \$5.24). Two are strictly subscription: Schroeder (\$15 the first month, then \$25 a month after that) and Stadlen (£15 a month, about \$19.45). Serna has both options: individual pieces range from \$5.99 to \$15.99; subscriptions are \$24.99 (one month), \$39.99 (6 months), and \$89.99 (one year).

The pandemic has been difficult for many reasons, including the inability to play the music you love with other people. Nobody knows when it will be practical to get together and play consort music live again. Until that time, the recordings made by these artists provide many options that were not available even a few months ago. We owe them a debt of gratitude for this.

The Websites

Chelys Consort:
chelysconsort.co.uk/consort-minus-one.html

Amy Domingues:
amydomingues.com

David Hatcher:
dhatcher.co.uk/consort-music-minus-one/4594920433

Gail Ann Schroeder:
ashevillebaroque.org/VIOL/

Phillip Serna:
phillipwserna.com/consortsminusone

Sam Stadlen:
samstadlen.co.uk/music-minus-one.html

VdGSA's Play it Forward:
vdgsa.org/pgs/MembersArea/play_it_forward/index.html

Progress on the New Website

In early 2021, a new website will be coming to a viola da gamba society near you! While it's still too early to disclose many details—the Website Committee (aka WebCom) is in the middle of building it right now—I wanted to share a little bit about what it will mean for us and how we've been planning this big undertaking.

First and foremost, this will be only the third website in our history, and we have to reach a high bar to match the features and support of our current version, built by Linda and Peter Payzant over a decade ago. (See John Moran's detailed article "VdGSA Website Honored by Library of Congress" in the Spring 2020 newsletter for more history of vdgsa.org.)

The new site will look familiar and have all the same information and resources you've come to expect. It will be somewhat reorganized for clarity (our current one has grown a lot in the past decade) and there will be a few new features for members, such as the ability to reset one's own password. Most of the initial improvements will be under the hood, made to simplify life for the Treasurer, Membership Secretary, and WebCom. With a site that's easier to manage, more people will be able to update content and WebCom will have more time to create new pages and features to

support our Society's programs.

WebCom is planning to roll out the new site in early January, 2021, and hopes the transition will be as seamless as possible. Look for an email in December with more details.

WebCom's initial members include James Perretta, Doug Poplin, Randolph Miles, James Renken, John Moran, and myself, with most of the technical work being taken care of by James P., Doug, and Randolph. We've logged at least one hundred hours of work so far, and expect to more than double that before we're done. The cost to the VdGSA will be minimal because all of us have donated our time. If you're eager to do the math, the going rate for website coding is about \$100/hr; this is a considerable savings for the Society.

Our process began in April, when we mapped out the current website and identified the key requirements we need to support. After considering several different architectures, we chose one based primarily on the Wix platform that offers us the best blend of features (to simplify development) and flexibility (to support Conclave Registration). Our proposal was presented over two days at the summer Board meeting in late July and, after a solid discussion, approved. We began work immediately.

WebCom has added three new members—Ruby Brallier (Auction Coordinator), Leslie Nero (Executive Secretary), and Zoe Weiss (Chair of the Videos Committee)—to organize the site and help transfer content later this fall. Each team, Content and Technical, will be meeting weekly until the website launches in 2021. As soon as it has gone public, we'll turn our attention to Conclave Registration so it can be ready by April.

Tobi Szuts
 Chair, Website Committee

Support the VdGSA



Gifts to the VdGSA can take many forms: monetary contributions, instruments and bows, sheet music, CD collections, and more. Money that you donate can be either unrestricted, or designated for particular funds or endowments—the Society offers a wide variety of programs to our members.

The "Donate to the VdGSA" webpage, vdgsa.org/pgs/support.html, provides all the information you need to make a gift of any kind, including instruments. Monetary contributions can be made via the secure online donations page or by check to the VdGSA Treasurer.