

I Was Always Drawn to the Deeper

Resonances *An interview with viola*

da gamba player

and instrument maker

Jakub Michl

Jakub Michl is one of the leading viola da gamba players in the Czech Republic. Following studies in musicology and cello in Prague, he studied the historical instrument that now defines much of his life in London (Trinity Laban Conservatoire, with Alison Crum) and Salzburg (the Mozarteum, with Vittorio Ghielmi). We spoke about old and new music in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in Europe, about the ensembles that Jakub leads or plays in, about building instruments, and much else besides.

Are you from a musical family?

Not at all – my parents were animators at the Krátký film (Short Film) studios at Barrandov, where they worked on some of the classic Czech bedtime stories (Večerníček) – *Mach a Šebestová*, *Vodník Čepeček*, *Bob a Bobek*, and the like. My grandfather was the academic painter František Michl (the inventor of the Škoda car emblem, by the way), so I was surrounded by fine art since an early age. When my parents discovered that I had a good ear, they decided, for some reason, that I would make a better living as a musician than an artist. Throughout my childhood, and on through my high school studies, I was facing a hard decision: to be a visual artist or a musician. But I always enjoyed doing things that not everyone was doing; niche affairs. In high school, I became very interested in contemporary and modernist music, and then I had a sudden turn and I delved into early music. At the end of high school, I therefore decided to study musicology at Charles University, along with cello at the Prague Conservatory.

So by the time you finished high school, you were set on early music?

Yes, though the journey wasn't easy. I attended a few early music courses – the most famous in the Czech Republic, in Valtice. I liked the event in general, but I travelled there



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playing the Bach cello suites on a modern cello with a modern way of playing, and they told me I was doing everything wrong, which made me develop a distaste for this kind of strictness. But what I have discovered over the years is that many of the principles present in early music can also be applied to all music: listening attentively, focusing on the sound, constructing the phrase carefully, avoiding automatisms like ornamentation and vibrato and only using them where it is musically appropriate, and so on.

Why did you choose the cello?

I began playing the cello when I was six – we had a piano at home and I was supposed to learn piano, but there were too many children who wanted to play the instrument. The teachers noticed that my hearing was decent, so they suggested the cello or the violin. I was always drawn to the deeper resonances, so the choice was obvious, even at that age.

And the viola da gamba? Why not just stick to the Baroque cello?

I had known about the viol's existence since childhood, but only from pictures – it was something of a mythical instrument. I had a book about historical instruments and the gamba in particular fascinated me as a child. Later, there were recordings, books, and films about the viol – perhaps the best advertisement for the instrument is the 1991 film *All the Mornings of the World*. At the time, very, very few of these instruments were available (and not that many more exist today). When I was thirteen, I even saw in a shop window a cello that had been altered to a gamba – I begged my parents to buy it for me, but they wouldn't. I don't know why, but the fascination and the desire was there – in elementary school art class, when we were supposed to draw an album cover, I drew a viol and the CD title was "Viola da Gamba". Even at the conservatory, I knew they had a collection of ancient

instruments and tried to gain access to it, but unfortunately, it was not accessible at the time. It was only through some student work that I got to meet Petr Wagner, who helped me find an instrument I could rent and then became my teacher.

You mentioned an interest in doing what not many people were doing. What do you think is behind this impulse to find a niche? And is it something you share with other musicians dedicated to early music?

I think it varies from person to person. Of course, it's an important element in early music – many musicians have that detective instinct: they go to the archive and rummage through piles and piles of manuscript paper to find a single composition that's worth performing again; to search for good music that no one yet knows. Or they search in ancient treatises and read how the music should be performed from an authentic position. But there are also now many musicians working in the field who entered it on the assumption that there are fewer people competing for work and their life might be a little easier. But when I was first exploring early music, all of my peers were motivated by fascination; by searching for something new.

And for you personally? Is there something in your character or temperament that led you to the newest and oldest music in high school, rather than Mozart and Beethoven?

I definitely have that detective instinct. When something has already been discovered, I'm not really interested in learning what other people already know how to do. This is also the case with the construction of instruments – I'm not as interested in a perfect violin construction designed by Stradivari that is used by most contemporary violin makers (although studying Stradivari's building techniques is very inspiring) as in researching constructions of different kinds of earlier instruments with unusual sound characteristics. That's what I'm really interested in: discovering something hidden.

If you grow up with classical music, with the sound of the classical orchestra, the sound of early music instruments is an entirely new colour. For me, ancient music was – and still is – something new. For many people, these are instruments that have been overcome. Or, at best, instruments that are only suitable to the particular historical period they pertain to. But for me, the viola da gamba is not a historical instrument – it is simply a musical instrument. I know that your own approach is similar: that of an autonomous instrument that has particular characteristics that need not be limited by the historical repertoire, and that offers new sonic possibilities. I've been thinking about this since my very first encounters with historical instruments: what would new music composed for these instruments sound like? And I'm still as confused as to why so few composers are exploring the possibilities of historical instruments today, though of course there were some 20th century exceptions like György Ligeti or Mauricio Kagel.)

Could you give our readers a short rundown of the history of the gamba?

The instrument first appeared in the early 15th century. It was known at the time as the vihuela da arco (da arco – bowed) and it developed in Spain from the vihuela da mano (da mano – played with the hand), a plucked, guitar-like instrument. The viola da gamba as we know it today then developed from the vihuela da arco during the Renaissance. It is much closer in tuning, construction, and playing technique to the lute family than the modern string family of violins, violas, and cellos. During the course of the 17th century,

the soprano viol practically died out, but the bass instrument, which has great possibilities for chordal playing and accompaniment, survived until the early 18th century. It is generally assumed that the gamba virtually died out in the 18th century, but the most recent musicological research has proven that viols were still constructed and played, though they did become more of a historical curiosity in the 1800s.

Then came the 20th century and the development of historically informed performance practice, whose aim is to perform historical music on historical instruments as close as possible to how this practice would have taken place at the time. Perhaps the most important players in this field are the Dolmetsch family, who began collecting instruments and building replicas, as well as gathering historical information on how to play these instruments, leading to the development of the early music revival.

But what I am most interested in goes beyond this – recently, we have seen these instruments used in modern music, in popular music, in film scores. There are electric and amplified viols. Children who learn these instruments at an early age, in England, for instance, don't just play historical repertoire, and they often get electric instruments and use them in their rock bands. Of course, the gamba has a wonderful historical repertoire from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, but this is where I see the future: in the untapped potential of the instrument for all forms of contemporary music.

This connection between early and new music seems much more apparent abroad. My first encounter with the gamba, for instance, was when the English gambist Liam Byrne and his students from the historical performance department introduced the instrument to the composition department at our school in London. After you completed your studies in Prague, you also had several experiences abroad – how did these influence your perception of the instrument?

I had to travel abroad for a simple reason: there was no possibility at the time, and, in fact, there still isn't, to study the viol systematically in an academic context in the Czech Republic. There were some islands of activity – the Academy of Early Music at the Masaryk University in Brno, various workshops or masterclasses – but no degree course.

The situation you described is very close to my own experience, and it can only really happen in a highly developed system of musical education that has arrived at the conclusion that early music should be an integral component of such a musical education. Schools then offer specialisations in either contemporary music or early music, and it is at that point that the connection between the old and the new can take place. I was at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire, and we also had workshops with the compositional department, with students writing for historical instruments. In the Czech Republic, the systematised education in early music is so lacking that there is no space for developments like these. Perhaps there was a missed opportunity in the 1990s, when many conservative teachers at the academy considered historically informed performance something unworthy of being taught at conservatoires. No historical performance department was fully established (the Prague Conservatoire has an early music department, but they don't teach early instruments, and the academy only teaches harpsichord, JAMU is the most developed today, but one can only study harpsichord, violin, traverso, lute, and cello, while the Academy of Early Music at the Masaryk University in Brno is a remote programme with too much focus on theoretical knowledge) and there is now little interest from today's students. It seems that the conservatories and academies in our country are a little behind the times: they haven't accepted that early music is a tenable career path for a musician, even in the Czech Republic; that musicians playing common practice repertoire need to have experience with historical instruments because it's a great benefit for their performance on the modern instrument.



How would you compare the position of the viol in the musical worlds of London (or the UK in general) in comparison to the Czech Republic?

In England, it is certainly less of a curiosity. Since it is taught on a regular basis, many of the applicants at academies have been playing it since childhood (starting out on the treble viol) and have never played any other instrument. When I was switching from the cello to the bass viol, I brought along many habits that I had to unlearn. Those who started out on the viol are much more natural musicians on the instrument. The viol is part of the culture, it's a common reference – violinists are often told to articulate clearly, like a viol.

*I was surprised when I saw a rehearsal for a string quartet by the British composer Benedict Mason, with the score asking the players to play *con sordino* to achieve a sound “like a consort of viols” – and everyone knew immediately what to aim for.*

In defence of the Czech environment, however, the history is very different. It might be a stretch to say that the viol is the English national instrument, but it is certainly closely bound to the country's history. The consort of viols was an ensemble that survived in England long after it had fallen out of favour elsewhere.

The history of the viol in the Czech Lands is quite different: it took a while for the instrument to arrive here at first, but through the Habsburg court in the late 17th century, Italian developments arrived here quite promptly. The local aristocratic courts, however, did not support musical activities as much as courts in England, Germany, and France, so the viol consort and solo repertoire never quite flowered here. So the gamba is not characteristic of the Czech Lands, though there were players here, even up to the early 19th century.

What are the differences in the viol's position in the countries whose musical history is most closely connected to it – England, France, Germany, and Italy?

England, France, Germany and Italy are definitely the most significant countries for the viol's repertoire, each developing an own individual way. Germany is in a kind of middle

position in terms of the importance of the viol, though Protestant church music in particular makes copious use of the instrument, often referring to the particular symbolic meaning of the gamba, which is also present in the work of J.S. Bach.

What is the symbolic meaning?

It is based on the sound – the viol has a particular sound, clearly distinguishable from the cello. Whenever you need sounds that come from another world, that are connected to the Passion of Christ, or tied to funereal themes, you reach for the viol. The recitative might have a profane character accompanied by a cello and a divine character supported by a viol. In the Passions, the gamba appears when Jesus is crucified or when he sets out on his journey to Golgotha. This is also true in Italy – when Judith prays before she cuts off the head of Holofernes in the oratorio's finale, Vivaldi scores the music for a viol consort.

And as for the viol in France and England?

It's hard to generalise – though England is known for its consort tradition, there is also an extensive solo repertoire, particularly for the division viol, known for its virtuosity in ornamentation and improvisation, particularly by Christopher Simpson and his circle. The golden age of the solo gamba in France, which took place during the reign of Louis XIV, is perhaps the most famous part of the repertoire: St. Colombe, Marin Marais, Antoine Forqueray. But the French influence was also strong in Germany, so most German composers of the first half of the 18th century wrote gamba sonatas and included the viol in their ensembles, but it does not have the ubiquity it sometimes has as an instrument in the basso continuo section – more often, it is a soloist.

How do you see the Czech viol scene in the European context?

I feel that many Czech conductors and ensemble leaders don't fully appreciate the instrument – most of them don't quite know how to deal with it. They are more comfortable having a cello in 17th-century music because it is a sound they know and they have at their disposal high-quality cellists to play it. A lot of 17th-century repertoire is played with cellos here, even in cases where there is historical proof that there were no cellos where the music was composed; they had viols with a characteristic sound colour and articulation possibilities. I think it's a matter of experience and openness; a willingness to begin changing the interpretive face of the music. We were talking about schools before – that's what allows people to live in a world where the viol is an integral instrument with an unmistakable role in a particular repertoire, so it is out of the question that that music would be performed on a different instrument. Here, the gamba is often relegated to a solo role, which is a shame. It has so many possibilities for accompaniment: different ways of chordal playing (whether pizzicato or arco), not only the simple basso continuo accompaniment, and it seems like Czech conductors are not aware of the possibilities the instrument offers in contrast to the cello. That is not to say, of course, that the cello is worse – they each have their own merits. But sometimes, cellists trying to imitate gamba-like chordal playing can sound a little funny.

How has your own performing life developed since you returned from your studies abroad?

When I was in England and I had the chance to observe what repertoire people were performing, I compared it to what was being played at home and felt the need to establish my

own ensemble. There was certain music I loved from the beginning, and I was driven by my detective instinct to discover this music that I love and play it the way I most enjoy playing it. What I was most interested in was music of the mid-17th century, but in the Czech Republic, we mostly focus on the 18th century, as we also have more local repertoire from this period. Perhaps this is connected to my choice of instrument, but I am far more attracted to music from the 17th century. The presence of Renaissance principles, how the style changes from the Renaissance to the Baroque, the modal tonality, the possibilities for improvisation and the improvisational style – together, all these elements make up the core of the music that I love. I do not claim that my performance as the only way of authenticity, but I've arrived at a particular opinion based on historical treatises as well as learning to “breathe” with the instruments, historical tuning and understanding the relationship between meaning and sound.

The ensemble you are talking about is Motus Harmonicus, founded in 2010.

Yes. Rather than playing concerts with repertoire of different music compositions, I and my ensemble developed a particular way of delivering a colourful story based on myths, fairy tales, or motives from ancient, medieval, or early modern literature. The most important element for me when building a programme is probably to tell the story in the most rhetorical way using the colours of the voices and instruments, finding hidden meanings of the text or music itself. Although this is, in a way, my most personal contribution to the musical world, I also perform a lot with other ensembles that have other approaches and opinions.

And you perform not only early music, but contemporary music too.

There are several Czech composers, like Tomáš Hanzlík and his Ensemble Damian, or his frequent collaborator Vít Zouhar, who create contemporary music that has a relation to early music (and the Baroque period in particular). It's not that I am fed up with early music and no longer enjoy playing it, but I feel myself becoming more and more distant from the notion that what we are doing is creating a kind of musical or sonic museum. This is not to say that I scorn this approach. What I experience with Tomáš, Vít and others is music that goes beyond the confines and borders of the museum approach (which, of course, when done well, is a beautiful discipline). Also, I cannot live without improvisation – not only historically informed one, but also exploring different contemporary styles of music with any musician on an early or modern instrument.

A few years ago, you also began building instruments.

It started as a hobby several years ago, but I only really applied myself to this discipline during covid. Musical life virtually stopped, which meant that I had the time to push this hobby into a more sustainable form, allowing me to partly support myself through instrument-making. I soon realised that the setup I had was insufficient: my workshop was a section of my kitchen and I used exclusively hand-powered tools. So in order to shift onto a professional level, I exchanged my relatively large apartment for a smaller one and also rented out a workshop where I also teach.

And now that the pandemic is over and all that free time is gone, how do you manage to find a balance between performing, building, and teaching?

You've really hit on a question that has been fundamental to my life lately. I love performing, but I'm also fascinated by instrument making. Both could easily be a full-time position, but there is not enough time to try and do both as a full time job. This allows me to accept just the most interesting musical opportunities and develop an ideal balance between them and instrument making.

During covid, building instruments was a great way to fill up a lot of empty time, but now that we've gone to our previous tempo, building instruments provides a great escape - a chance to slow down time. Many people struggled during the pandemic, but for me, it was a great opportunity to relax my mind and get my priorities in order - to do more of what I love and less of what I have to do.

Something you mentioned at the beginning that seems to illustrate a paradox present in early music: though one tries to emulate a historical reality, what is truly exciting is that you are discovering and creating something new for us today.

Absolutely. When we study surviving historical instruments, these are of great value to us, allowing us to build faithful copies that might provide new qualities not to be found in modern instruments. At the same time, I can design and produce a new gamba model that reflects my experiences as a performer making use of meaningful innovations. But it's very important to distinguish these two approaches: either we are aiming for as faithful a historical reconstruction as possible, and then we need as good a copy as possible, and my innovations certainly have no place here, or I am designing a new viol, which might well be more appropriate for the performance of contemporary music.

Have you made such new designs and innovations, or have you mostly stuck to building historical copies?

I study old instruments, and one instrument that is now almost finished is a precise historical copy. But another one I have in the works presents no such demands, so I can allow myself more liberties; deviations from the original Bertrand 7-string French Baroque model it is based on. When I am faced with a decision in which my experience tells me that one course of action will lead to greater resonance and thereby a brighter tone, I go for it, even if it is ahistorical. As I become more established as a luthier, I'd like to clearly divide these two approaches: if someone wants a copy, they will get a faithful copy, or they can choose to have a model made by me, based on my experiences as both a player and an instrument maker.

Could you recommend to our readers some viola da gamba performers, composers, albums...?

Of course, there are many: I am sure people know the famous repertoire of Jordi Savall, but there are others, too: Paolo Pandolfo's album of Bach cello suites performed on viol might be very interesting for first hearing the difference - how it sounds when cello repertoire is played on the viol. Pandolfo's CD *Improvizando* shows his improvisation abilities and music invention. My favourite is Vittorio Ghielmi's album *Short Tales for a Viol*. If you like Bach's music, you will love his organ pieces (*Alio modo*) or *The Art of Fugue* played by the British viol consort Fretwork. I shouldn't forget to mention the album *Gottfried Finger* by Czech viol player (and my teacher) Petr Wagner, which is an example of viola da gamba tradition in the Czech Lands of the Baroque era.