The viola da gamba enjoyed great popularity from about 1500 to 1750, with specific repertoires in England, France, and Germany. Yet there does not appear to be a similar Italian body of music, a fact which seems strange considering that the instrument almost certainly originated on the Italian peninsula. This dissertation will attempt to fill this lacuna by both cataloging such Italian viol repertoire as is known, and identifying other music that viol players might have played, as well as the performance practice in which they were engaged.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century musical treatises provide information on the instrument’s construction, tuning, and use, and sometimes include musical examples; further, most of them also go to some trouble to differentiate the viol family from its close relatives the violins, leading to some implications concerning choice of music. The most detailed information concerning both solo and ensemble performance practice for the sixteenth-century Italian viol comes from Silvestro Ganassi, who wrote a general tutor for the instrument, and Diego Ortiz, who provides instruction in ornamentation using the viol. These writers are introduced and compared in Chapter Three.

Music intended for the viol includes examples from Ganassi and Ortiz, music for the Roman viol consort associated with Cardinal Francesco Barberini in the 1630s and other published works. Other ensemble and solo music likely to have been played on the viol includes bicinia, vocal ensemble music, music from the Florentine intermedii and embellished madrigals by Dalla Casa; this section continues with canzonas and ricercars such as those found in Musica nova, and publications by Trabaci, and concludes with the ensemble and solo canzonas of Frescobaldi.

Chapter Six discusses viola bastarda music, and the diminution practice associated with it. The penultimate chapter deals specifically with viola bastarda performers and other string players at the courts of Mantua and Ferrara, including Monteverdi, whose quarrel with Artusi is partially intertwined with improvised practices. A final summary reviews issues of terminology and performance practice, identifies a repertoire, and poses questions for further study.