

Voice and Viol: History's Forgotten Dynamic Duo

by Ashley Mulcahy and James Perretta

Our inaugural program, "Voice and Viol: History's Forgotten Dynamic Duo," grew out of our research into the art of accompanying a single voice with a single viol, a practice that has long been overshadowed by accompanying the voice with plucked or keyboard instruments. While our research has only scratched the surface, we wanted to share how we arrived at the program we are about to tour, as well as some of the unique possibilities and challenges of accompanying the voice with the viol.

Two-part counterpoint was a strong pedagogical and musical foundation of 16th century music. As music theorist Peter Schubert notes, "The first publication of a young composer was often a collection of duos showing mastery of the craft of composition" (161). Some well-established composers, such as Lassus, even published popular collections of duos as adults. The 16th century composer and theorist Nicola Vicentino argued further that two-part writing required great skill: "The duo, compared to compositions in three, four, and five voices, is like the difference in painting between a nude figure and a clothed one. Any painter can make a fully clothed figure, but not everyone can make a good nude" (Schubert 161). Our program begins with the two-part madrigal "Il bianco e dolce cigno." Although this madrigal is texted, the madrigal repertoire was certainly not limited to voices, and could have been played by any instrument with an appropriate range (Ossi III). In our case, Ashley will sing the top line while James plays the bottom line on the viol.

Another common way to perform madrigals in the 16th century was to sing the top line while a chordal instrument, often the lute, played the remaining lines (Ganassi 78). However, Silvestro Ganassi includes a section in his 1543 treatise, *Regola Rubertina*, on arranging madrigals so they can be sung with viol accompaniment. Since "Qual part oggi del mondo," the second madrigal on our program, has only two parts, James composed a third contrapuntal line and created a chordal accompaniment. Compared to the lute, which can play non-adjacent strings at the same time, the viol has fewer chordal options. Instead, the viol player can take liberties with the original composition in order to create a part that is more idiomatic for the viol. As Ganassi writes, "...if the madrigal mentioned has not been reproduced in the way the composer intended, it should not be a point of criticism...As far as musical effect for its own sake is concerned, one instrument is as good as another (Ganassi 78)."

Given the importance of *Regola Rubertina*, we expected to find a more significant body of madrigals arranged for the viol and printed in tablature. Gambist Thilo Hirsch suggests two reasons for this lack of printed repertoire in *Il "Cantare alla viola" nel cinquecento*, his thesis from the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. First, accompanying the voice with the viol was an improvisational art, and written-down accompaniments were often for personal use and never published. Ganassi's *Regola Rubertina* is an exception because of its didactic nature. Second, the limitations of the viol made this art only attainable by highly skilled players (Hirsch ch.1). The lack of published repertoire prompted us to look to composers who were known to play the viol. This led us to Caccini.

Caccini, although primarily renowned as a tenor and lutenist, was also adept at playing the viol. The following comes from an account of Caccini's performance at the wedding of Francesco Medici in 1579: "...and taking a viol in his hand, he began to play it so sweetly that all other feelings about these circumstances were overcome by pleasure, more so when he began to sing this madrigal with the sweetest tenor voice, which sounded over his viol and many other viols..." (Solerti 9-10). Our program includes two of our favorites from *Le nuove musiche*: "Vedro'l mio sol" and "Amor io parto." The viol's ability to

sustain provides strong support for the voice, and its smooth articulation and warm timbre help it blend with the voice in a unified texture.

Italian song was in vogue in early 17th century England. Caccini's music was especially popular, and prominent lutenist John Dowland published arrangements of select Caccini songs in 1610 (Bass 81). Our program includes a version of "Dolcissimo sospiro" (originally published in Caccini's *Le nuove musiche*) from the Egerton 2971 Manuscript, an eclectic English collection of pieces for voice and viol that was likely published in the 1620's (Cyr 54-55). This arrangement presents unique challenges: many measures are metrically irregular (some contain 4.5 or 5 beats), and there are many lengthy ornaments that are difficult to fit into the song's metric structure. These irregularities suggest that the piece is a transcription of an improvised performance rather than a composition (Bass 82-83). Despite a style of ornamentation that is thoroughly un-Caccini-like in its disruption of the textual rhetoric, whoever performed this transcription clearly knew the original version, as the singer alternates between direct quotes and wild English embellishments (Bass 84). Regardless of the ways this piece deviates from the original, it is a strong example of the practice of adding ornaments in a contemporary idiom to an existing musical framework (Bass 93).

Egerton 2971 is one of many collections of English music for voice and viol. Composers such as Tobias Hume and Robert Jones published books of songs and ayres that included viol tablature roughly two decades before Egerton 2971. Tobias Hume, gambist, soldier, and an eccentric gentleman to say the least, drew the ire of John Dowland by suggesting that the viol could rival the lute in solo playing as well as in its ability to accompany the voice (Traficante). In the introduction to the *First Part of Ayres*, Hume writes, "...the stateful instrument Gambo Violl, shall with ease yeelde full various and as devicefull Musicke as the Lute," and on the cover he notes that some songs are "to bee sung to the Viole, with the Lute, or better with the Viole alone." While some of Hume's pieces for solo viol are simple and humorous (it's hard not to giggle when you hear the rapid bow strokes of "Tickle me quickly"), others are deeply profound and technically challenging. "Life" and "Deth," with their rich chords and intricate polyphonic textures, require the performer to evoke profound emotions.

Although Hume died poor and in obscurity, his claim about the status of the viol was proven right in many respects. Playing the viol had been an essential element of musical education at English choir schools since the mid 16th century, and the tradition of accompanying the voice with a single viol grew in prominence in the early 17th century (Hirsch ch. 8). Robert Jones's *Second Book of Songs and Ayres*, published in 1601, is the first known source to contain song accompaniments in viol tablature (Cyr 61). The viol tablature in this book facilitates the use of an alternate tuning that strongly favors the keys of those songs. William Corkine's *Second Book of Ayres* (1612) also specifies some songs to be accompanied by the bass viol alone. The viol parts for these songs consist of only a bassline, requiring the viol player to improvise chords and divisions, similar to what is required in Caccini's music.

We hope that our work will help give the neglected tradition of accompanying the voice with the viol the attention it deserves. We are excited to perform this wonderful repertoire and look forward to sharing the unique sonic landscape of voice and viol with audiences in Ann Arbor, MI; Rochester, NY; Lexington, MA; and New York, NY this season.

Works Cited

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