

Parthenia Viol Consort

Beverly Au, treble viol
Rosamund Morley and Lawrence Lipnik, tenor viols
Lisa Terry, bass viol
with
Joanna Blendulf, treble viol, Alice Robbins, bass viol
and David Shuler, organ

William Lawes: Consort sets for six viols and organ

Consort Set a6 in F Major

Fantasy
Aire
Fantasy
Aire

Consort Set a6 in C Minor

Fantazia
Fantazia
Inominy
Aire

Consort Set a6 in C Major

Fantasy
Fantasy
Aire

~ INTERMISSION ~

Consort Set a6 in B-flat Major

Fantazia
Aire
Inominy

Consort Set a6 in G Minor

Paven
Fantasy
Aire

Church of Saint Luke in the Fields
Sunday, May 7, 2017 at 4 p.m.

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

William Lawes (1602–1645)

Consort sets in 6 parts

MUSIC, FOR ANY SELF-RESPECTING MONARCH of the seventeenth century, was a projection of power. Much like having a kitchen willing to bake four-and-twenty live blackbirds into a show-stopping pie, having at one's disposal a band of twenty-four violins to provide light dinner music was simultaneously a display of material wealth and a confirmation of worldly power: for who could deploy riches so lavishly, but a King? Ironically, Charles I, the King of England, Scotland and Ireland, could ill-afford such extravagance during his troubled and financially insolvent reign. But music had been an indispensable trapping of royalty ever since Charles had become Prince of Wales (and thus heir to the English throne), when he had inherited from his deceased brother Henry not only his title, but his private musical establishment as well. For Charles, so fatally attracted to the romance of his own authority—to a notion of absolute power that would eventually plunge his domains into civil war—music was as essential as Parliaments were not. Music accompanied him wherever he went.

In grand processions requiring the pomp and pageantry of the State, the brittle fanfares of trumpets and drums were like the burnished steel of Charles's ceremonial armor, or the ermine trim of his cape: they proclaimed to all and sundry the majesty of the Royal personage. (Later, the same trumpets and drums—possibly the very same trumpeters and drummers—would resound in the fields around Oxford, vainly trying to strike courage into the hearts of Royalist fighters; Charles's armor, at that time, would be all too real.) In the more intimate space of the Privy Chamber, on the other hand, the sumptuous tones of lutes and viols soaked into the heavy silk and damask tapestries lining the walls, while virginals, inlaid with gold and mother-of-pearl, gathered together musical luxury and visual splendor in the same object. All testified to the King's refinement, and his good taste.

Music, like everything else, slotted into a precise hierarchy of life at Court. Musicians were not aristocrats: they were servants, in one sense like cooks, stable hands, and chambermaids. Yet musicians were also quite unlike these others, for they had a level of access to the royal person that courtiers and aristocrats could only dream of. Charles, like many of his forebears, was a keen player himself, of the bass viol. In playing music together, monarch and musicians would have met, not as equals (for that would have seemed preposterous to both parties), but perhaps as intimates. Thus when William Lawes (1602–1645), composer, lutenist and virtuoso lyra-viol player, was appointed to the Royal Music in 1633, he swiftly attracted Charles's high regard. When Lawes died at the height of the Civil War, caught in murderous crossfire at the Siege of Chester despite all efforts to keep him from harm, the beleaguered Charles instituted a special mourning for the composer—even in the face of the impending victory of the Roundheads.

Lawes's end is well known, as is his beginning; he was born in Salisbury, the son of a vicar and youngest of three brothers, all professional musicians. Between these two points, however, precious little is known about the composer's life. Fortunately for posterity, his musical legacy is much more eloquent. Lawes was one of the prime contributors to the various masques (semi-staged theatrical spectacles) that so delighted the Stuart court during the Caroline era, and numerous songs by the composer survive (though his elder brother Henry is generally acknowledged to be the better songsmith). But it is on Lawes's music for viol consort that his reputation, then as now, surely rests—and particularly on two major collections. The first, likely predating his employment at Court, is the Royal Consort: some 70 pieces, grouped into series of dances arranged by key, in a manner typical of later Baroque dance suites across Europe. The second collection was probably composed between 1635 and 1638, and consists of suites (or “sets,” to use the terminology of the time) of fantasias for five and six viols. These sets—and those for six viols in particular, to which tonight's concert is dedicated—constitute Lawes's crowning achievement in ensemble instrumental writing.

Unlike the lighter, dance-based Royal Consort, which might well have served as dinner music, the six-part sets are conceived for connoisseurs: this was music to be savored by performer and listener alike. Indeed, the backbone of these sets is the fantasia (also “fantazy” or “fancie), an antique, free-form contrapuntal genre, generally considered to be the most serious—and therefore most prestigious—genre of English composition in the first half of the seventeenth century. Usually constructed in several sections contrasting in mood, texture, or tempo, the fantasia was very often (though not invariably) an imitative genre, with each new section beginning with a new subject or theme that appears sequentially in all the parts; in this guise, it was a predecessor of what would later become known as fugue. Most of the sets are built around not one, but two fantasias: the first typically grave and solemn, the second brisker and more vigorous. Only the B-flat major set does without a second fantasia; in the G minor set, the initial fantasia is replaced with a pavane—a sober dance form, by the 1630s long-defunct, which for decades had served as a surrogate fantasia.

The B-flat major set, on the other hand, substitutes for the lively, second fantasia an “In Nomine (or “Inominy”), an English instrumental genre whose origins lay in a Mass from 1525 by the Tudor composer John Taverner. Captivated by Taverner's setting of the words “In nomine” [from the line “Benedictus qui venit *in nomine* Domini”], subsequent composers emulated him in ever-more elaborate settings of the relevant Mass plainchant. But by the time Lawes came to write his consort sets, the In Nomine had become very old-fashioned (like all plainchant-based composition). Just as with the fantasia, then, Lawes may have been aiming for deliberate archaism, yet a further gesture towards elevated style, and towards tradition. In both the B-flat major set and the C minor set, where an “Inominy” also appears, the plainchant melody can be heard in long note values—in

the treble in the former instance, in the bass and then the treble in the latter—where its vocal origins can sometimes strain against Lawes’s quintessentially instrumental idiom, replete with angular melodies, chordal effects and wide leaps that can only be executed by viols.

Indeed, part of the appeal of the six-part consort music is the clash it presents between venerable contrapuntal procedures, on the one hand, and Lawes’s seventeenth-century instincts on the other. The implicit equality of voices in an Elizabethan or Jacobean fantasia is replaced, in Lawes’s hands, with a distinct emphasis on a melodic treble and a powerful bass line. And Lawes frequently interrupts or disrupts ideal contrapuntal practice for the sake of an arresting effect or emotional kick. However, individual moments in the sets (like the unexpected, lamenting ending of the Fantasy (II) in the set in F major) remind us that Lawes was composing at a time when the system of major and minor keys with which we are familiar today had not yet fully crystallized from its modal predecessors. On occasion the emerging sense of chords—composite sonorities that follow on logically from one another—grinds against music that is still, for the time being, better understood in terms of interdependent, interlocking lines.

But perhaps most beguilingly, in the sets we see Lawes’s sheer delight in sonority itself. The doubled, “crossing” treble and bass parts (in other words, two instrumental parts operating in exactly the same range, frequently swapping places) add an additional richness to the ensemble, of which Lawes takes full advantage throughout the sets. Consider the opening of the Fantasy (I) from the set in F major, dubbed “Sunrise” by generations of viol players, which opens the concert tonight: out of stillness, all the parts enter one by one, each making achingly slow ascents through arpeggios, in interlocking lines that begin in the lowest register of each instrument and terminate in its highest range, creating a chordal play of ravishing, heart-wrenching effect. Or take the end of Fantasy (I) of the C-major set, where the crossing trebles settle on an alternating, anapestic motto on a high E while the lower parts cycle hypnotically, kaleidoscopically through different ways of harmonizing one note; or the concluding Aire in the set in G minor, which ends the concert tonight, and whose second part is built on an insistent, throbbing pedal in the low range of the bass viol, the deep growl adding ineluctably to the tension that resolves only at the very, very end.

Unexpectedly, perhaps, each set ends with a light, vivacious “Aire,” an abstract genre borrowed from the world of dance. Typically brief, even including the repeats of its two sections, the aires follow the intense intellectual play of the preceding fantasias and bring them to a rousing conclusion. Ranging from the spirited Aire in the C major set (almost a miniature Fantasia in itself), to the pithy affability of the F-major, to the dark intensity of the G-minor, Lawes seems always to have had a sense for what each set required for its individual tendencies to come to a satisfying end. We can imagine an ill-fated King reaching the end of one of these sets and feeling, in the fleeting moment of calm that follows any successful performance, a brief respite from the troubles that lay beyond his window.

Marco Ladd
Yale University

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The viol quartet PARTHENIA brings early music into the present with its repertoire that animates ancient and fresh-commissioned contemporary works with a ravishing sound and a remarkable sense of ensemble. These “local early-music stars,” hailed by *The New Yorker* and music critics throughout the world, are “one of the brightest lights in New York’s early-music scene.” Parthenia is presented in concerts across America, and produces its own series in New York City, collaborating regularly with the world’s foremost early music specialists. The quartet has been featured in prestigious festivals and series as wide-ranging as Music Before 1800, the Harriman-Jewell Series, Maverick Concerts, the Regensburg Täge Alter Musik, the Shalin Liu Performing Arts Center, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Yale Center for British Art, Columbia University’s Miller Theatre, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Parthenia’s performances range from its popular touring program, *When Music & Sweet Poetry Agree*, a celebration of Elizabethan poetry and music with actor Paul Hecht, to the complete viol fantasies of Henry Purcell, as well as the complete instrumental works of Robert Parsons, and commissions and premieres of new works annually. Parthenia has recorded *As it Fell on a Holie Eve - Music for an Elizabethan Christmas*, with soprano Julianne Baird, *Les Amours de Mai*, with Ms. Baird and violinist Robert Mealy, *A Reliquary for William Blake*, *Within the Labyrinth*, and *The Flaming Fire*, with vocalist Ryland Angel and keyboard player Dongsok Shin. Parthenia’s next CD release, coming in October 2017, will feature four works by three living women composers: Kristin Norderval, Frances White, and Tawnie Olson.

JOANNA BLENDULF has performed and recorded with leading early music ensembles throughout the United States and is a sought-after instructor and chamber music coach. She maintains an active concert schedule on viols and baroque cello, performing with the Nota Bene Viol Consort, Wildcat Viols, the Catacoustic Consort, the Portland Baroque Orchestra and Pacific MusicWorks. Ms. Blendulf holds performance degrees with honors from the Cleveland Institute of Music and the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University where she was awarded the prestigious Performer's Certificate for her accomplishments in early music performance. Joanna’s summer engagements have included performances at Täge Alter Musik Regensburg, Musica Antigua en Villa de Lleyva in Colombia, the Bloomington, Boston and Berkeley Early Music Festivals, the

Ojai Music Festivals as well as the Carmel and Oregon Bach Festivals. Ms. Blendulf has been on the faculties of the University of Oregon and Indiana University Historical Performance Institute as well as viol workshops across the country.

ALICE ROBBINS received degrees from Indiana University and the Schola Cantorum of Basel, where she was a student of Hannelore Mueller. She has performed widely on baroque cello and viola da gamba in various chamber ensembles, including the Early Music Quartet (Studio der frühen Musik), Concerto Vocale, Smithsonian Chamber Players, Boston Camerata, and the Oberlin and Boston Consorts of Viols. She was a founding member of Concerto Castello, an international quintet specializing in the music of the early seventeenth century, and currently performs with Arcadia Players, Opera Lafayette, Arcadia Viols, Oberlin Consort of Viols and other ensembles. Ms Robbins has recorded for Naxos, Centaur, Telefunken, EMI-Reflexe, Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, Smithsonian and Gasparo Records, as well as for many radio stations. A resident of Amherst, Massachusetts, Ms. Robbins teaches at Smith and Mount Holyoke Colleges in the Five College Early Music Program.

DAVID SHULER is Director of Music and Organist at the historic Church of Saint Luke in the Fields in New York City, where he oversees an extensive music program. The choir is featured in an annual concert series of sacred music, and has made numerous recordings. Mr. Shuler is also active as a synagogue musician and is the Music Director of the Dalton Chorale in Manhattan. David Shuler has been particularly active as a champion of contemporary music. He has premiered organ works of Charles Wuorinen, William Albright, Ralph Shapey, Gunther Schuller, and Frank Retzel, among others. Mr. Shuler received a National Endowment for the Arts Consortium Commissioning Grant to commission works from Ralph Shapey, Charles Wuorinen, and Gunther Schuller as well as a grant from the Washington, D.C. American Guild of Organists Foundation for the promotion of contemporary music.