

Intimate Nuances: A Viol's Voice

"If one were to esteem naturalness as the highest accomplishment, so I believe that one cannot deny the viol the first prize, because it can imitate the human voice in all its modulations, even in its most intimate nuances: that of grief and joy."

Marin Mersenne, 17th-century music theorist

Those of us who play instruments are always trying to find the vocal in our non-vocal sounds. We try to "sing with our instruments," breathe even if our instruments don't require breath, give our notes consonants, shape vowels. All instruments strive for this to some extent. If the viol has any particular quality to back up Mersenne's assertion that we do it best, perhaps it might be found in the ease of pulling sound from the resonant body of the instrument, constructed of thinner wood than the violin family. Perhaps it is found in the bow, held underhand, coaxing the sound out rather than pushing it. Or perhaps it is found in the instrument's range, spanning a full three octaves and beyond, easily covering most of the range of human voices.

Tonight's program has been chosen to put the viol through its paces, running the gamut of human emotion and expression in pursuit of Mersenne's intimate nuances: grief, joy, and all that lies between them. We open with a set by Tobias Hume, a soldier-musician whose exuberant music for the viol speaks to his life's experiences and pushes the limits of playing technique. Johannes Schenck creates a luscious, contemplative sound-world in his writing for two bass viols intertwined. And August Kühnel gives us a bold, learned, and playful sonata to close the first portion of the program. The French master of the viol, Marin Marais, provides incredible depth and breadth of feeling in a suite featuring some of his most lyrical writing, and we finish with a show piece that proves just how clever a composer can be with only three notes...though that cleverness might lead to obsession.

Notes on Tonight's Pieces

The Spirit of Gambo – Two Polish Ayres – Harke, Harke – A Souldier's March
From *Musicall Humours, First Part of Ayres*
Captain Tobias Hume (c1579-1645)

Captain Tobias Hume was an interesting character. He considered himself first and foremost a professional soldier, although he is known to us primarily for his viol music. As a soldier, he served as an officer in the Swedish and Russian armies, and his time serving abroad surely influenced his musical compositions. Upon returning to England, he published two volumes, the punningly-named *Musicall Humours* (and its *First Part of Ayres*), published in 1605, and *Captaine Humes Poeticall Musicke* published in 1607. By his own admission he was not a learned musician, but his command of the instrument and its possibilities is readily apparent in his compositions. Unfettered by any sort of conventional wisdom or instruction, and by all accounts rather eccentric to boot, Hume explored the frontier of contemporary technique. In *Harke, Harke*, he gives us the first notated indication of *col legno* playing, that is striking the strings with the wood of the bow, and the piece also includes instructions to "play

nine [notes] with your finger,” a very early indication of *pizzicato*. In *A Souldier’s March*, as in several of his other pieces, the viol is used to evoke the sounds of a battlefield, replete with marching steps, trumpets and drums, and perhaps even part of the battle itself.

Hume’s music, off the beaten path thought it might have been, proved foundational to the style of viol playing known as *lyra*. This style is characterized by its abundance of chords, and its increasing popularity was in no small part thanks to its ability to allow musicians to accompany both themselves and others while singing. The chordal nature of the music is underscored by the fact that it is almost always notated in tablature (see an example below). That form of notation also points us to the repertoire’s relation to the lute, reigning monarch of English music at the time, whose music also appears in tablature. In his preface to *Musicall Humors*, Hume asserts that the *viola da gamba* “shall with ease yeelde full various and as devicefull Musicke as the Lute.” This boldly stated case caught the attention of none other than John Dowland, champion of the lute that he was, who rather crankily responded to the provocation in his own publication, *A Pilgrim’s Solace*, in 1612. There, he says that a recent book had “abased...especially the lute by name” and claimed that more learned musicians, presumably in contrast to the un-taught and somewhat rugged Hume, ought not to let such insults go unanswered. Alas for Dowland though, the coming century would see the lute’s pride of place in England fully overtaken by the viol.



The Spirit of Gambo in its original publication

Sonata II in A Minor, from *Le Nympe di Rheno*, op.8
Allegro – Allemanda – Corrente – Sarabanda – Giga
Johannes Schenck (1660-1717?)

Schenck was a Dutch composer who was a contemporary of Marin Marais, but their approaches to the instrument could hardly be more different. Where Marais’ music is full of the elegant delicacy so characteristic of the French style that he helped define, Schenck’s music

tends to be more focused on the sonority of the instrument and particularly the chords it can create. His solo music, much of it unaccompanied, is full of the rich harmonies available to a single viol. His duets take things a step further and fully exploit the possibilities of having two equal voices. The sonata here covers a huge portion of the range of the instrument, from the very low to the very high, and takes the two players on a journey through the serious, the refined, and the frivolous in a series of dance movements. Throughout, both parts are given virtuosic material to enjoy as they trade roles as soloist and accompanist from instant to instant. At times the music is lyrical and singing, at others enthusiastically chordal. Many of us who end up playing the viol do so because we fall in love with its resonant tone and depth of expression. Hume shows us that the instrument is well suited to creating full sonorities all on its own, but Schenck embraces the certain magic that happens when you put two of them together.

Sonata VII for Viola da Gamba and Basso Continuo
[prelude]-Allegro-Adagio-Aria [and variations]
August Kühnel (1645-c1700)

In his time, the well-traveled August Kühnel was an important viol player. We have record of him spending time in Paris and London as well as in several cities in his native Germany where he performed as a soloist as well as serving as music director for various institutions. Like Schenck, his music reflects the *stylus phantasticus* impulses of their time. While Kühnel's piece has fewer of the sudden shifts of mood and bursts of virtuosity that are so characteristic of that emphatically instrumental style, its influence can be found in the short and freely composed contrasting sections of the opening movement and in the rapid changes of character throughout the set of variations. The sonata opens with a brief prelude which begins in G major and rapidly modulates rather shockingly up and down through a whole slew of keys until it finally finds its way back home. A quick section follows, ramping up in energy until it seemingly cannot continue, at last coming to rest in the final Adagio. The sweet, simple aria that follows is used as the starting point for an elaborate set of variations, but somewhat unusually, Kühnel uses this aria only for the first variation. He then changes to something entirely new, shifting meter as well as musical material. He develops that second idea for four variations, and when he's wrung what he can out of it, he changes again, back to triple time like the opening, but with an entirely different theme. This flashy sonata demonstrates the fun that a learned and skilled composer can have when they let their imagination run wild, utilizing the strengths of the instrument as only a virtuoso performer-composer can, and letting his sense of humor shine through in a truly gratuitous number of low D strings.

Pause

For much of its life, the viol enjoyed a fairly standard set up of six strings, but in France in the late 17th century, a seventh, lower string was added. Although both forms of the instrument always existed side-by-side, it is the seven-string instrument that is generally intended by Marais. I'll be switching out six strings for seven for the second half of the performance.

Suite in D Major, *Pièces de Viole, Troisième Livre*
Prelude – Fantasie – Allemande — Plainte – La Brillante - La Follette
Marin Marais (1656-1728)

The luxuriant tone of our instrument means that we often find ourselves reveling in the exquisite misery of minor keys, angst-filled chords, and agitated string-crossings. But, as Mersenne suggests, the viol is capable of so much more. French composer and viol virtuoso Marin Marais fully understood the capabilities of his instrument, and his writing epitomizes the expressive, refined, and infinitely varied style of French viol music. His music is full of resonant chords, elegant graces, and idiomatic writing, with compositions in keys that take advantage of the instrument's strengths. D major is one of the viol player's favorite keys since it allows us to take full advantage of open D and A strings at the upper and lower extremes of the instrument.

Even against the backdrop of Marais' other music, tonight's suite is particularly vivid in its palette of expression. The Prelude is gorgeously lyrical, with soaring high notes in the solo part balanced by the depth of support from the continuo line. This open, welcoming movement is followed immediately by a lively Fantasie, full of running eighth notes and playful string crossings. It culminates in an extravagantly long slur that propels the solo part forward with such pent-up excitement that it can't quite confine itself to the final downbeat. The Allemande comes as a welcome invitation to a calmer state, featuring the regularity and uprightness that often characterizes the dance. There is a playfulness in this movement, found in the winkingly serious but short-lived harmonic shift in the first half and a breathless moment in the second. The optimism of the Allemande gives way to the Plainte, the emotional heart of the suite. Here is an exceptional piece, characterized by long singing lines, wistful shifts of mood, and ravishing harmonic journeys. La Brillante is an exuberant rondeau filled with flourishes of brilliance indeed, and we close the suite with the simple and charming La Follette.

Sonnerie de Sainte-Geneviève du Mont de Paris (The Bells of Saint Geneviève)
Marin Marais

From Marais at his most sublime, we turn to something else entirely. Marais' Sonnerie is a curious creature. The entire piece is based on a three note repeating bass pattern, evoking the constant swing of the largest bell in a church tower. Marais takes these three simple notes and builds a dizzying set of variations in which viol and violin converse, argue, and generally egg each other on. Often, when paired with the violin the viol tends to settle into an

accompanimental role. But here, after a brief exploration of ideas by the violin, the viol butts in as an equal partner. Despite the simplicity of the bass line, this is a work of impressive compositional creativity, with bits of musical material being picked up and tossed around not only between the solo parts but the continuo as well. It might well teeter on the edge of obsession, but it's an exhilarating ride.

Acknowledgments

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Jane Leggiero
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