

Notes On The Program

The similarity between the dance and instrumental music of four hundred years ago and much of the folk or popular music of today is striking, but not surprising. The thread of tradition which spun out with the migrations of Scottish and English farmers and artisans, as well as French fur trappers, and **missionaries**, to the New World has remained unbroken up to the present century. This program follows the paths of dance and balladry from the old world to the new, mixing music from early printed musical sources with that of oral tradition.

The British have long been admired for the music of a "Golden Age" that produced such geniuses as William Byrd. The Renaissance masters of contrapuntal music left a written record, as did the lutenists and keyboard virtuosi. There was, however, another side to Britain's musical life--the popular music--which was equally vibrant in its way, and much more difficult to recapture in our time because the written record is not only incomplete (due to the very nature of popular music), but noted down in comparatively ephemeral media or else embedded in "fyne" musical compositions such as works for solo lute or virginals. This was the music of the public entertainment scene comprised of the theater, the broadside ballad trade, the bourgeois and aristocratic country dancing balls and salon concerts, the bawdy catch clubs, and even the trademark cries of street vendors.

The French, having settled in eastern Canada in the first half of the 17th-century, brought with them a fondness for dance as well as other music. In Quebec, they were known to have taught native inhabitants to play European instruments as early as the 1630's. The French *branles* (circle dances) on our program are found in a treatise on social dancing published in 1589 (*Orchesography*) which records the tunes and choreographies in common use in France a mere two decades before Samuel de Champlain sailed into the St. Lawrence River.

The Baltimore Consort has been performing early popular music for thirty years, beginning with instrumental works for the mixed consort of the Elizabethan period. Originally intrigued by those pop tunes (many appearing in Shakespeare's plays) which were transformed into high musical art for solo instruments or consort, plus the numerous Scottish titles attached to ballads and dances, we sought to reunite the early song and ballad texts with their melodies and to present them, as well as dance tunes, in new artistic arrangements using the old sources and style as a point of departure. In addition to manuscripts and prints from several hundred years ago, our sources include the folk songs and dances of ancient lineage handed down through oral tradition and recorded by field collectors in the early 20th century.

In addition to incorporating earlier musical styles, we have tried to adopt the

mindset of the early arrangers rather than slavishly copy them, meaning that we allow the musical experience of our personal musical lives to inspire our playing, as for example in the final French dance-song on the program which seemed a little like an early rock 'n roll number both in its simple rhythmic verve as well as its naïve teenager-in-love text. In other words, it seems more “authentic” to think like a musician of 300 or 400 years ago than to try for an exact duplication of his style.

In recent years, early music performers have revived the narrative balladry of continental Europe. The Baltimore Consort is fortunate that its British repertory of ancestral songs and ballads is in a language which is immediately comprehensible to its audiences (although every word of the Scots dialect songs may be a bit difficult to understand). Some of the dates of collection and publication may be relatively recent, but these traditional songs seem like *our* medieval music – available to us with a vividness not possible in song-narratives of continental Europe.

– Mary Anne Ballard