

The Lute Duet in Italy

The art of duetting is certainly as old as music itself, for what could be more satisfying than one's own instrument but two of the same? The resulting interaction of two performers and their exchange of musical ideas create an intensity and vitality that is perhaps unique in the world of chamber music. Two equal instruments allow the possibility of alternating the musical functions of melody and accompaniment, challenging each performer to match the other, often in quick succession.

Considering the popularity of the lute in the Renaissance, it is hardly surprising that the lute duet became so important and influential. The size and diversity of this repertoire, over five hundred extant pieces representing nearly every style and form of Renaissance music, is remarkable. The duet literature contains many works of great musical sophistication and profundity, such as Danyel's *Passingmeasures Galliard* and Piccinini's *Toccata à dui Liuti*, and others with no pretense beyond entertainment or instruction.

Within this repertoire, Italian duets stand apart in terms of variety and virtuosity. Most European countries treated the lute duet as *Gebrauchsmusik*, but in Italy it was part of the professional's standard repertoire. Whereas in England duets were frequently used as individual display pieces, one performer executing spectacular variations over the chordal accompaniment of the other, in Italy, the same high degree of technical proficiency was often demanded of both players, elaborate flourishes, being tossed back and forth. Not intoxicated by sheer virtuosity, however, the Italians made numerous tonal experiments, combining lutes of various tunings and sizes to create special timbres and to help distinguish polyphonic lines more clearly. The duets on the present program represent seven distinct types:

- 1) Counterpoint against a chanson or madrigal
- 2) Melody over a drone
- 3) Counterpoint over a cantus firmus
- 4) Intabulation of a pre-existing vocal or instrumental work
- 5) Melodic variations over a repeated harmonic pattern (ground)
- 6) A solo fantasia with a new, superimposed second lute part
- 7) Entirely original compositions not based on any pre-existing material.

Early duetting was an improvisatory art, as Johannes Tinctoris explained in his *De Inventione et Usu Musicae* of 1484: "Thus some teams will take the treble of any piece you care to give them and improvise marvelously upon it with such taste that the performance cannot be rivaled. Among such, Pietro Bono, lutenist to Ercole, Duke of Ferrara, is, in my opinion, pre-eminent." Bono, the most renowned virtuoso of the fifteenth century, was assisted by a "tenorista", who supplied a drone, cantus firmus, or the lower voices of a chanson, over which the master improvised fanciful divisions.

The *Saltarello* and *Piva* of Dalza represent the last remnants of the medieval tradition of improvisation over a drone. The repetitive nature of a drone allowed the improviser to utilize his extensive "bag of tricks", including hemiolas and "blue

notes” which clash against the drone. The main responsibilities of the tenorista were to provide rhythmic drive and support, although they certainly might have added cross-rhythms and ornaments of their own.

La Spagna was the most popular *cantus firmus* during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In Francesco da Milano’s setting it is concealed in the middle of a chordal accompaniment over which he composed a graceful, flowing countermelody. Although not one of Francesco’s more profound works, it makes a pleasant contrast to the complex polyphony for which he is primarily known.

In 1559, the Flemish lutenist Johannes Matelart published several of Francesco da Milano’s solo fantasias, to which he had composed a second lute part. These new parts, while partly obscuring the original compositions, enrich the texture with additional points of imitation, parallel thirds, and parallel sixths, creating a lushness of sound unmatched at this early date.

The lutenist Vincenzo Galilei, father of the astronomer Galileo Galilei, published an important treatise on lute playing in 1584 called *Il Fronimo*. In it, he included several duets, including the three heard on this evening’s program. The two *contrapunti* were written by an unidentified Florentine nobleman with the initials B.M. These works are in the style of an improvised ornamentation over a madrigal, a genre in which one lute plays the unembellished madrigal, and the other weaves florid scales in and out of the chordal texture. The *Duo tutti di fantasia* is a two-voice *bicinia*, in which the two lutes play imitative contrapuntal lines back and forth at each other in a delightful exercise in polyphonic independence.

In 1593 and 1599, Giovanni Antonio Terzi published some of the most difficult music ever written for the lute. The first book includes arrangements for two lutes of ensemble canzonas by Claudio Merulo, an organist famous for his particularly virtuoso style of ornamentation. Terzi’s flamboyant passagework is even more spectacular than Merulo’s, utilizing the entire range of the lute, providing each player with hair-raising cascades to throw back and forth at one another in a game of Renaissance one-up-man’s-ship. But beneath all of the fireworks are works of exquisite nobility and beauty.

The last surviving duet in Renaissance lute tuning, and perhaps the most spectacular of all, is the *Toccata à dui liuti* by Alessandro Piccinini. Not content with a strict separation of melody and accompaniment roles, Piccinini at times supplies passagework in both parts simultaneously. Moving either in parallel, or contrary motion, this approach creates an accumulation of energy and momentum which is unparalleled in the repertoire. Although Piccinini’s contrapuntal language is that of the Renaissance, the contrasting sectionalism ushers in the world of the Baroque. The grand dimensions of this piece bring to a close the era of the Renaissance lute duet and serve as an appropriate finale to the first half of this program.

The Lute Duet in England

The playing of lute duets must have been quite a common occurrence in Elizabethan England. Nearly two-thirds of the sources of lute music from the “Golden Age” (1575-1620) contain music for two lutes, a substantial body of literature numbering close to 100 pieces.

During the course of the fifty-year period that these duets were played and enjoyed, they served a number of different functions. Chronologically, the first role for these pieces was that of providing a showcase for virtuoso playing—this was especially true with the duets of John Johnson. Secondly, they were used as musical etudes—that is, pedagogical pieces that facilitated learning the technique of the lute, and improvisation. Many of the existing manuscripts have duets among the first entries, as though a teacher had prescribed them as the official “first pieces for lute”. For example, the best lute tutor of the time, Thomas Robinson’s *The Schoole of Musicke* (1603) begins with six duets. Thirdly, there was the sociability factor. Playing music with another person is often more enjoyable than practicing in isolation.

The earliest duets were those in a treble-ground format, one where one lute repeated a harmonic progression while the other player performed a series of variations over it. This style originated in early-sixteenth century Italy where instrumentalists, including lutenists, were often required to play dance music. They devised these harmonic patterns as the basis for the dance improvisations. The first “grounds” more complex than a simple drone, were the *Passamezzo antico* and *Passamezzo moderno* patterns. These were soon joined by dozens of additional grounds, including the *Bergamasca*, *Romanesca* (known in England as *Greensleeves*), *Caracosa*, *Rogero*, and many others. These *passamezzi* served their function so well, as harmonic underpinning to improvisations of any length or degree of difficulty required, that musicians from all over Europe used them for the next one hundred years until they were gradually supplanted by the *Passacaglia*, *Chaconne* and *Folia* in the 17th century.

The most important composer of lute duets in England was John Johnson, who was appointed by Queen Elizabeth as one of “the musicians for the three lutes” in 1579. None of his trios survive, but he left a large number of excellent duets for two lutes. Many of his duets are built over the old familiar Italian grounds, including some found on this program: *The Queen’s Treble* is a set of 14 delightful variations over the *Bergamasca*, while *Chi Passa* is built on the harmonies of Filippo Azzaiolo’s *villotta*, *Chi passa per ‘sta strada*.

Perhaps the last treble-ground duet to be written in this period was John Danyel’s *Passingmeasures Galliard*, and no other duet surpasses it in style or imagination. Like Johnson’s most virtuosic duets, this set of variations uses the complete range of the lute, which, in this case, is three and a half octaves! Unlike Johnson’s variations, which are primarily stepwise and melodic, several of Danyel’s variations use unusual arpeggiated figures, and in the fifth variation there is even a short chromatic scale. To relieve the potential monotony of a repeated chord progression, Danyel uses unexpected dissonances and cross-relations that are often included to keep the listeners on the edge of their seats.

Although the treble-ground style of duet was the preferred style, especially for the professional performer who could use it as a vehicle for displaying his technical prowess, the player of the ground was relegated to playing a simple, chord pattern over and over again for as many as twenty-five variations! Perhaps in response to this, sometime around 1590, some of these duets began to be divided in a way so that the accompaniment and melody roles were split equally between the two lute parts. Johnson's *Flatt Pavan* and *Galliard* were among the first to be treated this way. They exist as treble-ground duets in manuscripts from around 1580, but in two manuscripts from the middle of the 1590s, they are found in a version in which the two lutes trade roles at the repeat of each section. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not Johnson was responsible for this arrangement. As he died in 1594, it would have been one of the last compositions of his life, which would not be out of the question. Another set of equal duets attributed to Johnson, the *Laveche Pavan* and *Galliard*, seems to have a more definite attribution and could even be the first duets written in this fashion. In the *Ballet Lute Manuscript*, there is an equal duet entitled *A Galliard for two lutes after laveche*. But while Johnson's *Laveche* pieces are built on an Italian ground, the anonymous Ballet duet is based on completely unrelated harmonies. What, then, is the meaning of the title? The likely interpretation of the word "after" is that this piece was written "in imitation of" the *Laveche* duets of Johnson. These duets, perhaps the first truly "equal" lute duets, had inspired progeny! If Johnson was responsible for the *laveches*, then he could have also been responsible for the arrangement of the *Flatt Pavan* and *Galliard*. One way or another, the music is definitely John Johnson's, as the arranger simply divided the music found in the treble-ground version between the two players.

It is interesting that these first equal duets were pavans and galliards, which are dances written in three repeated sections. This form gave ample opportunity for role switching at the section joints. Interestingly enough, none of the variation pieces were thought suitable for "equal" arrangement. Perhaps they thought that the progression through continuous variations was best left to a single artist and that the switching of performers would upset the balance and progression of the piece. Most of the equal duets are technically easier, and most are written in the more popular dance forms—pavans and galliards. The next generation of equal duets, those dating from around 1600, were mostly written in almain form (two major sections, each repeated.) Three of the duets on this program: *Dreweries Accords*, *La Rossignol*, and *A Merry Moode* are of this type. Each of them has a charm that would have made and still makes, the social element of playing duets a true delight.

Elizabethan composers took a very flexible approach to their music, often arranging and re-arranging the same piece for numerous different mediums (solo lute, lute duet, lute trio, viol consort, broken consort, harpsichord, recorder, solo viol, lute and voice, etc.) It is in this spirit that we present Ray Nurse's brilliant arrangement for two lutes of Dowland's beloved *Earl of Essex Galliard*. Assuming that Dowland must have made lute duet versions of his most popular works to suit the performance situations at various courts that he visited--in order to perform together with musicians of that court--this arrangement expands the repertoire in the same way that Dowland himself did, by expanding on his own material.

The Elizabethan lute duet was a popular and varied medium, one to which many of the greatest lute composers of the era contributed, and one that also reflected most of the forms of the time. This variety of forms (variations, dances, ballad tunes, fantasies,) as well as format (treble-ground, equal, obbligato) is represented on tonight's program. Though most have been written nearly four hundred years ago, there is timelessness about them. Like many of the ballad tunes that have survived among folk circles, their melodies seem to fit as well into the twenty-first century as the sixteenth.

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