



PROGRAM NOTES

Jordi Savall; viola da gamba

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8 PM

Convocation Hall

University of Alberta

The bass viol and the human voice

As early as 1637, Marin Mersenne tells us, in his *Harmonie Universelle*, of the important relationship between the bass viol and the human voice: "Certainly, if instruments are prized to the extent that they imitate the human voice, and if the most admired of all artifice is that which most closely represents Nature, then the viol should not be denied our esteem, since it mimics the human voice in all its modulations, even in its profoundest accents of sadness and joy: because the bow, which produces the effect to which we have referred, is drawn across the strings in approximately the same length of time as the normal breath of the human voice, whose joy, sadness, agility, gentleness and strength it can imitate by means of its vivaciousness, languor, rapidity, ease and emphasis. Similarly, the tremolos and delicate fingering of the left hand ingeniously represent its manner and its charm".

In his *Traité de la Violle* (1687) Jean Rousseau also explains how "the playing of melodic pieces involves a simple style of playing, which therefore requires great delicacy and feeling, and it is in this manner of playing that one should be at particular pains to imitate all the pleasing and charming qualities of the human voice..." Again, according to Rousseau, "It was Mr Hotman who in France began to compose harmonic pieces arranged for the viol, to write beautiful *chants* and imitate the voice, with the result that one often admired him more in the tender rendering of a little *chansonnette* than in more ornate and technically sophisticated pieces. The feeling in his playing lay in his fine bowing, into which he instilled vivacity and sweetness with such skill and appropriateness that he charmed all those who listened to him. It was thus that the viol began to be perfected and to be given pride of place above all other instruments...It is true that the French viola players, in their feeling imitation of the human voice, are superior to the profuse chords and amazing diminutions of the English players, more admirable for their skill than for their good taste, and which are a poor excuse for the delicacy which is essential to perfect viol playing".

André Maugars, a diplomat in Richelieu's service and an excellent violist who visited England in 1620 in order to study the technique of the great viol players, probably Tobias Hume, Alfonso Ferrabosco II (1575-1628) and John Cooper, also known as Giovanni Coperario (c.1575-1626), tells us in his interesting account of musical life in Italy, *Response faite à un Curieux sur le sentiment de la musique d'Italie. Escrite à Rome le premier Octobre 1639*, that "...the English play the viol to perfection. I confess that I am somewhat indebted to them and have imitated their chords; but in other respects I have not imitated them, since by birth and by training we French have an advantage over all other nations, and they would be incapable of equalling the beauty of our movements and our pleasing diminutions, particularly in the artless songs of our *courantes* and *ballets*".

In Sainte Colombe's day, a heated controversy broke out between those who favoured melodic playing alone and those who favoured harmony. Unlike Jean Rousseau, his contemporary De Machy clearly preferred harmonic to melodic playing: "...the first and most usual (manner) is to play harmonic pieces, as is proper to all solo instruments. And since this has always been considered to be the true way of playing the viol, I shall begin by discussing it, after which I shall refer to the other manners (of playing)". Accordingly, from the very first page of his *Pièces de Violle* (1685) he threw himself into a controversy which was subsequently to prove very damaging to his career by publishing his *Advertissement très-necessaire pour connoistre les principales Regles qui enseignent à bien jouer de la Violle, & à éviter les abus qui se sont glissez depuis quelque temps sur cet Instrument*.

De Machy's defence of a synthesis between melodic and harmonic playing is nevertheless very persuasive: "Finally, to answer those who argue that simple song pieces are preferable to those containing harmony, I would say they err more than they imagine, since they thereby demonstrate that are ignorant of the latter. And when, to give weight to their argument, they quote some simple song pieces by a skilful composer, (Mr. Hotman) they fail to see that these are written for several viols, as can easily be appreciated. It is possible for a musician to be very skilled and pleasantly to play beautiful although simple songs: but such a person should be compared to one who played perfectly the harpsichord or organ with one hand. The resulting manner of playing might be pleasant, but one could not properly call that harpsichord or organ playing. The same is true of those who wish to confine the viol to simple pieces. Such has never been the practice for this instrument played solo. A player whose skill is more sophisticated can successfully be less sophisticated when he wishes. They believe they are providing good arguments when they say that chords hinder the composition of fine songs and *agréments*, or graces, and that it is therefore impossible to play with as much delicacy. Thus, they argue that, for harmony, the treble viol and other such instruments are preferable to all those I have mentioned. They are surely mistaken. If a musician is skilled in his profession, chords should not hinder him in the composition of fine songs with all the grace-notes necessary for a delicate rendering of the music...I agree that these difficulties are found in pieces not written expressly for the instrument, as is the case of operatic airs and others, and that in such cases the song and the graces are preferable to chords which might prevent these being executed; but in the case of pieces which have been composed for the viol, one should, as far as is possible, take care not to interrupt the harmony".

De Machy's rejoinder to Jean Rousseau is set out at length in his *Traité de la Viole*: "The playing of melodic pieces is quite pleasing, and even quite moving, when well executed, and I fail to understand why the author of the *Advertissement* (Mr. De Machy), is so critical of those who play melodic pieces and still more critical of those who compose them; for all the composers, starting with Mr Hotman, have won more acclaim on account of their simple airs, played with all the delicacy that musical skill allows, than on account of the most regular and complicated harmonic pieces. Moreover, it must be said that if the perfection of the viol lies in harmony alone, plucked instruments will certainly have the advantage over it in this respect, particularly the organ and the harpsichord, which surpass all others as regards harmony.(...) the viol is an instrument in which melody should predominate over harmony, because the delicacy of song is its very spirit, and it is for this alone that it is prized: for its close resemblance to the human voice, which all other instruments strive to imitate".

This admiration for the delicate playing of Mr Hotman was not understood in circles which were dominated by the English influence, as can be seen from the exchanges of musical examples between the Dutch musician, Constantyn Huygens, and Hotman, which gave rise to some very disdainful comments concerning the latter's pieces for the viol. In a letter addressed to Henry du Mont, dated 7th October, 1660, Huygens gave full vent to his anger: "...I cannot conclude this letter without sending you the enclosed copy of an amusing letter from Mr Hotman, together with two or three flimsy pieces of his own that he has sent me, rather like a school-master handing out a few samples of his own handwriting to little children so that they can begin to form their letters". Leaving aside the fact that Hotman, Sainte-Colombe and De Machy were outstanding virtuosi and improvisers of the viol rather than composers of new musical forms, we can see in this reaction of Huygens' a profound misunderstanding of one of the essential aspects of the French style, in which what is not written and the ways of expressing it are as important as, if not more important than the objective or formal elements of the musical composition itself. It is this admiration for the way in which "simple airs (when they are) played with all the delicacy musical skill allows" (Jean Rousseau), which enables us to understand the importance of this unwritten dimension which was so well expressed by La Fontaine: "Grace, more beautiful still than beauty itself..."

The synthesis of this perfection in the delicacy of the song, accompanied by supporting harmonies, was finally to be achieved by the great masters of the new generation such as Marin Marais, Caix d'Hervelois and, later, Antoine Forqueray and his son, Jean-Baptiste Antoine, not forgetting Johann Sebastian Bach (*the aria "Kommt susses Kreuz", St Matthew Passion*) and Georg Philipp Telemann. While the unique charm of the viol as a melodic instrument was to be immortalised in the purest manner by the works of Marin Marais, François Couperin (*Pièces de Viole*) and Johann Sebastian Bach (*the aria "Es ist vollbracht", St John Passion, and Sonatas for Harpsichord and Bass Viol*).

The program for this recording is designed to give a broad view of the bass viol during the Baroque period, and takes the form of a mosaic made up of French- or Italian-inspired pieces, grouped according to affinities of tone, style or character, and punctuated by four bridging pieces by English composers. Compositions in the purest French style such as *Les Voix humaines*, by Marin Marais, and *Fantaisie en Rondeau* and *Prélude en Mi mineur* (the E minor Prelude) by Sainte-Colombe the Younger, are brought together with others more influenced by the Italian

"cantabile", such as *La Plainte*, by Caix d'Hervelois, and the *Sarabande and Double* by Johann Sebastian Bach. Finally, the adaptation of the latter's works, such as the *Allemande in D minor* (of which Bach himself left several versions in the Fifth Cello Suite in C minor, with the opening chord tuned a tone lower, or in the Lute Suite in G minor), the Minuets I-II and the Gigue in C major (originally written for the cello: Suite in G major) or the *Sarabande and its Double* in G minor (originally scored for the violin: Partita I in si minor BWV 1002), are in keeping with a practice which was perfectly normal at a time when the greatest virtuosi had no qualms about adapting and performing on their own instruments the most beautiful musical compositions, regardless of the instruments for which the original versions were written (Antoine Forqueray played transcriptions of sonatas originally composed for the violin, and Bach himself is the most eloquent example of this practice).

It should be remembered that the bass viol repertoire was often the preserve of virtuoso-composers who in fact had exclusive rights to publish works for their instruments; this accounts for the fact that even François Couperin was not entitled to sign his *Pièces de Viole*, published in 1728, with anything more than the letters F.C., or that Hubert le Blanc wrote in his *Défense de la Basse de viole*, in 1740, that the instrument "would have been lost forever if the art of the bass viol had indeed been a family secret." Also, the fact that these virtuoso-composers, such as Marin Marais and Karl-Friedrich Abel, were great improvisers explains why there should be so few works for solo bass viol by their non-viol-playing colleagues, among them Johann Sebastian Bach and François Couperin.