

In Sweetest Sympathy

There's a saying in today's viol playing community: "How many viols do you need? Just one more..." It is common for viol players today and viol players in the 17th century to own several instruments, each suited to a different type of playing. Since the viol is a uniquely versatile instrument capable of playing both chordal textures and sustained musical lines, many varieties of viols have developed to suit its numerous capacities.

In 17th century England, players experimented with one such variety of bass viol called the lyra viol. While physical differences between the lyra viol and the standard bass viol may be imperceptible to the listener, adjustments to the size of the instrument, string weight, and bridge make the lyra viol particularly well suited to playing chords. As such, a "large, specialized and musically valuable repertory" that favored chordal playing was written for the lyra viol, and this is where, as musicologist Frank Traficante argues, the historical importance of the instrument lies. In *In Sweetest Sympathy*, we share both the physical instrument and its "specialized repertoire" with audiences.

The two instruments featured on our program were built as commissions and modeled after original lyra viols from 17th century England. Both have a particularly unique feature that some, but not all, original lyra viols possessed: a set of sympathetic strings, or strings that resonate when another note of the same pitch is played.

While there are no original lyra viols that survive with sympathetic strings, there are a number of original viols with plugged holes that suggest their prior existence. This physical evidence is supported by several written sources:

Francis Bacon, Sylva Sylvanum, 1627

It was devised that a Viall should have a Lay of Wire Strings below, as close to the belly as a Lute; And then the Strings of Guts mounted upon a Bridge as in Ordinary Vialls; To the end, that by this means, the upper Strings stricken, should make the lower resound by Sympathy, and so make the Musick the better.

Michael Praetorius, Syntagma Musicum, 1618

. . . Recently in England the instrument has been fitted with a peculiar addition. Under the six ordinary strings lie eight steel and twisted brass strings on a brass bridge . . . These are tuned to accord exactly with the upper gut strings; then, when one of the latter is excited by the bow or the finger, the lower strings of steel or brass immediately vibrate in sympathy. This considerably adds to the beauty of the sound.

John Playford, Musick's Recreation on the Viol, Lyra-way, 1661

. . . a Lyra Viol, so strung with Lute Strings and Wire Strings, the one above the other. . . These were so laid that they were Equivalent to those above, and were Tun'd Unisons to those above, so that by the striking of those Strings above with a Bow, a Sound was drawn from those of Wire underneath, which made it very Harmonious. Of this Sort of Viols, I have seen many, but time and disuse has set them aside.

By commissioning such an instrument, we can bring the shimmering resonance of the sympathetic strings that enraptured listeners like Bacon, Praetorius, and Playford to today's audiences.

Aside from experimenting with sympathetic strings, 17th century players also experimented with the viol's possibilities for resonance by devising different systems of tuning the instrument. As such, the chordal or "lyra way" manner of playing is associated with a repertoire that exploits a variety of different tunings designed to make chordal hand positions more natural and to favor open strings, which produce a more resonant sound. Most of the lyra viol repertoire is notated in tablature which, just like modern guitar tablature, tells the player how to tune the instrument and where to put their fingers.

We begin the program with music by one of the lyra way style's greatest champions: Tobias Hume, who, in the introduction to a book of pieces published in lyra viol tablature, touted that "...the stateful instrument Gambo Violl, shall with ease yeelde full various and as devicefull Musicke as the Lute." While noting the possibility of lute accompaniment in his vocal pieces, he insists that they are better sung "with the Violle alone."

Hume's comments struck a chord with John Dowland, the well-known English lutenist and composer. Were he alive today, Dowland may not be so pleased to hear us perform his charming "Sleep Wayward Thoughts," which was notated in lyra viol tablature in the Sutherland Manuscript just a few decades after his death, nor may he be pleased to hear us open this program with "Come again sweet love," whose refrain "in sweetest sympathy" provides a delightful double entendre when sung to a lyra viol with sympathetic strings.

In the next set, we sample a few pieces included in commercial volumes printed during the lyra viol's heyday in 17th century England. The significant number of commercially sold publications that feature lyra viol tablature is a testament to the popularity of the lyra way style of playing, and the presence of technically challenging pieces like Fords "Why not here?" and Ferabosco the Elder's "Galliard," suggests a population of highly skilled players.

This set also includes a few selections from Manuscript Egerton 2971, which was owned by an unknown player in England and likely dates to the 1620s. The manuscript provides important evidence for the historical practice of singing to viol accompaniment, as many songs appear with viol accompaniment in tablature written below the vocal line. Other songs, like "This Merrie Pleasant Spring," appear with a bass line that any chordal instrument, including the viol, could have realized. Whoever owned the Egerton Manuscript must have been a highly skilled singer, as many of the songs it contains, including "Crud' Amarilli," feature highly florid vocal embellishments.

Something we particularly enjoy about this program is the chance to engage with music books that, like the Egerton Manuscript, were compiled for an individual owner. Since the viol in general was popular in the domestic sphere, these surviving books provide a glimpse into how an individual musician some 400 years ago, who would have otherwise been excluded from music history, enjoyed music. During the 17th century, a significant number of music books for a variety of instruments were compiled in the modern-day United Kingdom for young women of the upper classes, who often studied music before they married as part of their refinement. Two

such books include music in lyra viol tablature: Manuscript Drexel 4175 and the Sutherland Manuscript.

We know very little about the Drexel Manuscript's owner, Ann Twice, other than that she was likely a skilled singer who was able to accompany her own singing on the lute and viol. Some pieces in her book even appear twice, once with accompaniment in lute tablature, and once with accompaniment in viol tablature. While some pieces like "Ye Heralds of my Mistress Hart" are simpler, others like "Venus went wand'ring" are highly dramatic.

We know only slightly more about the Sutherland Manuscript's owners, sisters Margaret and Helen Cochrane, because of their status as Scottish nobility. It seems that Lady Margaret, for whom the contents of the book were likely bound, and whose married title "Lady mountgomre" is found on one of the book's pages, passed the book on to her younger sister Helen upon marrying. The book contains English and Scottish pieces from both the court tradition, like the aforementioned "Sleep Wayward Thoughts" and the folk tradition, like "Bonny Peg a Ramsey." It is likely that some of the pieces in the book were copied by Margaret and Helen themselves.

In a modern world that approaches music history through the lens of its composers, a vocation that has historically been less accessible to women, books like the Drexel and Sutherland manuscripts provide valuable, tangible insights into the history of female music making.

When we decided to put together a lyra viol program, we knew that we would have many wonderful English pieces to choose from. What surprised us is how many lyra viol manuscripts we've come across that originated outside of England. While many, like the Sutherland Manuscript, come from neighboring Scotland or Ireland, our search has also led us to manuscripts from France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Norway.

These manuscripts contain mostly instrumental pieces, and most contain music written both within and beyond their country of origin. Where vocal music is included, it usually appears in lyra viol tablature without text. While these songs could have certainly been played instrumentally, these books also favor songs that their owners probably already knew the words to, such as songs from internationally famous operas like Lully's "La Beauté la plus sévère" and songs by Gustaf Düben that were published over and over again in other commercial volumes. Together, these manuscripts demonstrate the prevalence of the lyra way style of playing outside of its country of origin.

To close the program, we decided to bring the lyra viol even further from its place and time of origin and a bit closer to our own. We hope audiences will agree that when the rare opportunity to play a lyra viol comes along, "Just one more..." is a justifiable answer to the question "How many viols do you need?"

Reading List

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