

John Dowland (1563-1626): A Fancy

Francesco Canova da Milano (1497-1543): Fantasia

Alfonso Ferrabosco (1543-1588): Fantasia

Dowland: Preludium, Forlorn Hope Fancy

Ferrabosco: Fantasia

Dowland: Farewell (In nomine)

Ferrabosco: Fantasia, Miserere

Dowland: Fantasy, Farewell

When we're mourning and lonely and frightened we find far more comfort in certainty and solidity than we do in cheer.

We need music now of extraordinary quality and emotional depth.

The lute is a bit better suited to introspection than to diversion.

I need to play something for you that I can believe you need to hear.

Counterpoint is the only thing that makes sense to me anymore.

Here is quite a lot of it.

You've noticed already that six of the pieces here are called more or less the same thing:

Fancy/Fantasy/Fantasia. There's very little to say about them except that each one is absolutely typical and that they have nothing in common with each other. Sorry to be gnomic, but it's really the best I can do.

Maybe Thomas Morley (1557-1602) can help: THE MOST PRINCIPAL AND CHIEFEST KIND OF MUSIC WHICH IS MADE WITHOUT A DITTY IS THE [FANTASY/FANTASIA/FANCY];, THAT IS WHEN A MUSICIAN TAKETH A POINT AT HIS PLEASURE AND WRESTETH AND TURNETH IT AS HE LIST, MAKING EITHER MUCH OR LITTLE OF IT ACCORDING AS SHALL SEEM BEST IN HIS OWN CONCEIT. IN THIS MAY MORE ART BE SHOWN THAN IN ANY OTHER MUSIC BECAUSE THE COMPOSER IS TIED TO NOTHING, BUT THAT HE MAY ADD, DIMINISH, AND ALTER AT HIS PLEASURE. AND THIS KIND WILL BEAR ANY ALLOWANCES WHATSOEVER TOLERABLE IN OTHER MUSIC EXCEPT CHANGING THE AIR AND LEAVING THE KEY, WHICH IN FANTASIE MAY NEVER BE SUFFERED [NB Ferrabosco doesn't bother with this rule]. OTHER THINGS YOU MAY USE AT YOUR PLEASURE, BINDINGS WITH DISCORDS, QUICK MOTIONS, SLOW MOTIONS, PROPORTIONS, AND WHAT YOU LIST.

Mm-hmm. Nothing like 400-year-old technical language to clear things up.

Oh, hi, T.S. Eliot. You care to weigh in on the renaissance lute fantasy and its aptness to this season of dispossession?

“That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:

Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle

With words and meanings.

[...]

The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,

For the pattern is new in every moment

And every moment is a new and shocking

Valuation of all we have been.”

I think Mr. Eliot gets at the heart of the matter a little more. Every example of this nominally abstract music, rigidly constrained by the rules of counterpoint and little else, makes a universe of itself and calls forth the entire being of the listener.

The Farewell (In nomine) is based on a snippet of the superius line of the *Benedictus* from John Taverner’s *Missa gloria tibi trinitas*. There were many works of imitative counterpoint for various instruments and ensembles based on the same snippet. Imagine if there were a whole genre of modern music called “*I’ll make you so proud of mes*” that were all based on the fourth and fifth lines of the Ronettes’ “Be my baby,” and every American composer from Duke Ellington to Morton Feldman to Caroline Shaw had written at least one, and in some of them you could hear the excerpted tune clearly, and in some the tune was inaudibly buried in the middle of the texture, they’re happy or sad, fast or slow, dancy or staid. The “In nomine” genre is a little like that but vaguely religious. I don’t know if that bit of trivia will increase your enjoyment of the piece but here’s the thing: most “In nomines” were entitled as such. This one just says “Farewell” on it in the manuscript. Another thing: the “In nomine” was often a compositional showcase sort of piece, like “oh, aren’t I clever.” Dowland could have made his happy or virtuosic, or diverted himself in some compositional games, but Dowland took his farewells seriously. Parting is, after all, “all we know of heaven.” The other “Farewell” fantasy that ends our program is all we need of hell.

Alfonso Ferrabosco was a friend and mentor to William Byrd. The two collaborated on a book of forty choral settings of the *Miserere* (Psalm 51), no copy of which survives. The sole survivor of this incalculable loss is likely this “Miserere,” Ferrabosco’s own lute arrangement of one of his own. If I have the time I may try to reconstruct the vocal original.

Our one break from imitative counterpoint is a Preludium, the only such piece by John Dowland. It’s a rhapsodic little written-out improvisation to let you know that I can play the lute, I’m in g minor, and something serious is coming up.

It is likely that Dowland’s title “Forlorn Hope” adheres to the contemporaneous usage, a military term for a body of troops thrown out in front of the line of battle.

Francesco Canova da Milano and John Dowland are the two greatest lutenist composers. Alfonso Ferrabosco may be the greatest composer who wrote for the lute (If only he had written more than a dozen or so lute works!). Collectively, their music is, as Artur Schnabel would say, "better than it can be performed." I owe you this much, the best that I can offer. I love you, I miss you, take care.