

### Flanders Recorder Quartet: Consort of fower parts

review by Johan van Veen for Musicweb-International, 2005

When Matthew Locke died in 1677, Henry Purcell realised that an era had come to an end: "What hope for us remains now he is gone?" Music for a consort of instruments was an important part of that era in the history of music, and English music in particular. Although consort pieces were written before William Byrd, it was he who was the first composer to write a considerable number of works of this kind. Consort music was mainly written for private entertainment among friends. The demand must have been huge, considering the amount of pieces written by composers of the first half of the 17th century. This may well reflect the growing wealth in Britain which allowed people to buy instruments to play this kind of repertoire.

Even though most consort music was specifically written for viols, it is historically justifiable to play it on recorders; hence the Flanders Recorder Quartet on this disc. The recorder consort enjoyed great popularity in the Netherlands in the 16th century, which is reflected in the number of pieces for this combination of instruments published, especially in Antwerp. But there was a keen interest in the recorder consort in England as well. King Henry VIII was an avid player of the recorder. He also collected recorders: more than seventy instruments of this kind were listed in an inventory drawn up after his death. It was also Henry who invited five brothers of the Venetian Bassano family to England to play at his court. They were not only virtuosic recorder players, but also active as composers and arrangers of music and made their own instruments. In the booklet, the quartet refers to Samuel Pepys, who wrote in his diary that he went to the theatre in February 1668 and heard a recorder consort. This proves that long after the death of Henry VIII the recorder consort was still in vogue.

In Henry's time the largest part of the repertoire consisted of vocal works - although Henry himself composed a number of pieces for consort. By contrast recorder consorts in the 17th century mostly played consort music originally written for an ensemble of viols. Matthew Locke was one of the last English composers who devoted time and energy to writing for this kind of ensemble.

The collection recorded here probably dates from the mid-1650s. The English theorist Roger North considered the six suites of this collection "a magnifick consort of 4 parts, after the old style, which was the last of the kind that hath bin made". Purcell was right in signalling that Locke's death meant the end of an era. In his time French and Italian music increasingly influenced the style of composing in England, including Purcell's. Locke was outright negative about foreign music: "I never yet saw any foreign composition worthy an English man's transcribing." To label him 'xenophobic', as a reviewer once did, seems to me far out of proportion, though.

As one can read in every article and booklet about Locke he is generally considered a man of rebellious nature, who did nothing to avoid the disapproval of his contemporaries. He had close ties to Prince Charles I, and it was probably when he accompanied the Duke of Newcastle to Antwerp in 1649 that he converted to Catholicism. It seems his intractable character is reflected in his music. The suites on this disc are full of strange harmonies and strong dissonances, in particular the 'fantazies' which open every suite. The fantazie of the Suite No. 2 is a good example: the flow of the music suddenly stops and then follows a series of most unexpected harmonies, before the piece ends with a beautiful consonant chord. The dance movements which follow the fantazies - courante, ayre and saraband - are more in line with the traditional suite, but even here Locke makes his own mark. It should be noted that the saraband is not yet the slow dance it would become in the 18th century. In the first suite the courante is replaced by a galliard (a fact which is ignored in the tracklist in the booklet, which calls the second movement 'courante').

A performance of this music on recorders makes some adaptations inevitable. Three of the suites have been transposed, as the tracklist shows. Apart from that the sound of a recorder consort is considerably different. The dynamic range of the recorder is more limited than that of the viola da gamba. And in a recorder consort the upper instruments tend to dominate - the lower recorders (tenor, bass and contrabass) are relatively soft. In a consort of viols the balance between the instruments is generally more equal.

The Flanders Recorder Quartet is one of the best ensembles of its kind, and it shows in this recording. The playing is technically superb, with a perfect intonation which is difficult to achieve with this grouping. And the character of the single pieces comes across very well. The dances are performed with great flair, and the often obstinate fantasies are perfectly realised. The only question mark regards the choice of baroque recorders. I wonder if renaissance recorders would have been a more logical option as Locke's music is rooted in the style of the renaissance.

To sum up: this is a splendid recording of fascinating repertoire by an ensemble which unites technical brilliance with a thorough understanding of the music. Those who would like to hear this music with a consort of viols need look no further than the superb recording by Phantasm (gmn.com GMNC0109).

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