

WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 27 December 2025
7.30pm

An English Chest of Six – Consorts for six viols

Phantasm

Laurence Dreyfus treble viol and director
Emilia Benjamin treble viol
Jonathan Manson tenor viol

Heidi Gröger tenor viol
Christopher Terepin bass viol
Markku Luolajan-Mikkola bass viol

Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625)

Fantasy a6 No. 5
In Nomine a5 No. 1 (c.1610)
Fantasy a6 No. 6 (c.1620)
Fantasy a6 No. 3

John Ward (c.1589-1638)

Fantasia a6 No. 4
In Nomine a6 No. 2
Fantasia a6 No. 2

Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656)

Fantasia a6 No. 18
Fantasia a6 No. 17
Pavan and Galliard a6

Interval

William Lawes (1602-1645)

Consort Set a6 in B flat
I. Fantazia • II. Aire • III. Inominy

Orlando Gibbons

In Nomine a5 No. 2
Fantasy a6 No. 1
Fantasy a6 No. 2
Fantasy a6 No. 4
Go from my window (c.1620)
Pavan and Galliard a6 (c.1612)



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Rightly celebrated for his Anglican choral music, madrigals and keyboard music, **Orlando Gibbons** is an especially beloved figure in the world of consort music. After William Byrd, he stands as the central figure of the Jacobean age. At a time when consort music was a private matter, a high-brow entertainment cultivated by court musicians, university dons and by families in the great country houses, only a handful of consort works in three parts made it into a printed edition during the composer's lifetime. Compositions usually travelled around the country in manuscript parts copied by hand, gaining a following among connoisseurs. All the more striking is the astounding quality of Gibbons's consort music and the sophisticated efforts evident in them, even when, sadly, they were heard by so few people.

The pinnacle of Gibbons's art is seen in his fantasies for six viols, in which the composer pulls off a succession of striking polyphonic stunts. Listening to them is like peering into a kaleidoscope: one can decide to follow the fortunes of one pattern over that of another, thereby gaining new insights each time into the coherence of the whole. Not that one knows exactly where to fix one's attention, even when the patterns appear exceedingly simple. It's often no mean feat for both players and listeners to find the pulse, and the Elysian fields of consort playing are littered with those who, even after several tries, still failed to enter some pieces on the right beat. For the most extreme frolics of metrical confusion and energetic counterpoint, the term 'syncopation' is inadequate, and Gibbons can only have dared to engage in this kind of glorious metrical experimentation when he had six individual players at his disposal.

Gibbons's *In Nomines* inhabit a more rarefied, spiritual sphere as befits a venerable genre harking back to the mid-16th Century. Gibbons's assays in this genre are especially poetic, and MB 28 with its opening marked by memorable suspensions was probably the most copied piece of consort music in the 17th Century. Composed over a mournful falling lament, the piece briefly invokes a pavane before rising up in spectacular spirals toward an ecstatic conclusion.

The Pavan and Galliard pair (MB 41, MB 42) inhabit a different world altogether and indulge merrily in raucous high jinks. These are pieces which invite a sympathetic stomping of the feet, even if Gibbons's examples of the two dances are highly unorthodox, if not intentionally disruptive. And nothing conveys better the joyful vagaries of Gibbons's invention than *Go from my window* with its riot of 'divisions' for the two bass viols erupting just before the conclusion. Based on a well-known folk tune which is easy to hear throughout the piece, we encounter a 'high art' polyphonic rendition recalling a more informal kind of instrumental improvisation which must have been prevalent in popular music of the time.

Thomas Tomkins, a contemporary of Gibbons, composes six-part consorts rather more in the spirit of William Byrd, though *Fantasia No. 17* takes a determined stab at chromatic Mannerism in the Italian vein: The initial 'point' takes a bizarre and serpentine theme that constantly deviates from the proper 'air', as if Gesualdo confronts the witches in *Macbeth*. Tomkins deploys his six viols with a mysterious selectivity – unlike Byrd and Gibbons who keep everybody on their toes once all have entered – at the same time that he keenly exploits the acoustic properties of the viols themselves. Shunning chromaticism, the Pavan and Galliard pair obsess over the identity of the mode, veering giddily between major and minor thirds, unable to decide which is dominant. As the bittersweet modal struggle continues, the Galliard pits the two trebles against another, each vying for ascendancy on a flamboyant if only virtual dance floor.

Writing in 1676, Thomas Mace named 'Mr **John Ward**' as one of those 'diverse famous Englishmen' of 'very great eminence and worth' who composed fantasies 'as fit monuments, and patterns for sober and wise posterity, worthy to be imitated and practiced'. Unlike the more restless Gibbons with his brilliant concentration of catchy phrases and quick-witted ingenuity, Ward projects a sense of unhurried leisure in his consorts which happily indulge in gentle forays, delighting in the way that music can rove and meander in journeys which sound far more protracted than their limited duration might suggest. The leisure in Ward's roving harmonies is best captured in a paradox: with its obsessive love of interrupted cadences, this is music which longs for 'home' while ensuring that it won't return anytime soon.

Finally, there is the genial **William Lawes**, in whom one senses a restlessness in the compositional impulse and a straining for novelty at all costs, attitudes at a considerable remove from Gibbons's classical constraints. Attuned to Lawes's topsy-turvy world, one begins to hear in every piece an undiscovered place that hadn't been mapped before. Lawes consorts are not all darkness and doom, and the pure pastoral sunshine found in the B flat major set is matchless. But like so many great composers writing in the major mode – Purcell or Bach, for example – Lawes cannot refrain from the admixture of piquant dissonances which cast memorably doleful shadows. He also knows how to revel in playfulness in which the pleasures of making music with a group of congenial friends are treated as topics of invention. And for all his attraction to the arcane, Lawes – unexpectedly – has also something delightful to say about innocence with music that can rejoice in its diatonic naïveté.

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