

VIOLA DA GAMBA

Le Jeu d' Harmonie | Mr. Du Buisson | Th. Steffkins | W. Young | N. Hotman
Roberto Gini

Monsieur Du Buisson

01 Prelude (in d) 01:14

Theodore Steffkins

02 Allemande (in d) 03:47

03 Courante (in d) 01:28

04 Courante (in d) 01:35

William Young

05 Prelude (in a) 02:46

06 Courante (in a) 01:07

07 Ayr (in a) 01:05

Monsieur Du Buisson

08 Prelude (in d) 01:22

09 Allemande (in d) 02:01

10 Courante (in d) 01:17

11 Sarabande grave (in d) 01:55

12 Gigue (in d) 01:10

13 Fantaisie (in d) 04:34

14 Ballet (in d) 01:45

Theodore Steffkins

15 Allemande (in C) 03:03

16 Courante (in C) 01:30

17 Courante (in C) 01:33

Monsieur Du Buisson

18 Prelude (in d) 01:45

Nicolas Hotman

19 Allemande (in F) 02:49

20 Courante (in F) 01:34

21 Sarabande (in F) 02:33

22 Gigue (in F) 01:28

23 Ayr (in d) 00:47

24 Ballet (in d) 00:45

Monsieur Du Buisson

25 Prelude (in g) 00:41

Theodore Steffkins

26 Allemande (in g) 03:27

27 Courante (in g) 01:19

28 Courante (in g) 01:28

29 Sarabande (in g) 02:16

30 Gigue (in g) 01:31

William Young

31 Prelude (in d) 02:54

32 Allemande (in d) 02:58

33 Allemande (in d) 02:33

34 Courante & Variation (in d) 02:08

35 Sarabande (in d) 01:38

Nicolas Hotman

36 Ballet (in d) 02:30

Total Time: 70:16

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Roberto Gini Viola da gamba | Instrument: copy of Henry Jaye, 1624 (Federico Löwenberger, Genoa 2009)

Recording Auditorium of the Antonia Pozzi music school (Milan)

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Le Jeu d'Harmonie

The music included in this recording belongs to the second half of the 17th century, a period in which the viola da gamba became the protagonist of a heated querelle. The different factions argued in treatises, letters and prefaces about the true nature of the instrument: if the ancien Port de main or the nouveau Port de main. The subject of the dispute was therefore the manner of playing the viola (Port de main) and consequently the style of viola da gamba literature as a whole. The arguments of the proponents of the ancien Port de main saw the viola da gamba, in its kinship with the lute and the theorbo, as the ideal stringed instrument that can play alone, combining melody and accompaniment, pursuing an artificial counterpoint of several parts with chords and jumps from one voice to another and offering the illusion of understanding, thanks to the resonance of the instrument and the technique of holding any finger down on the fingerboard ("Holds" – "tenüe"), the progress of two, three and even four voices.

In this style, the element that distinguishes the viola da gamba from its cousin the lute is highlighted: the bow. The fingers of the lutenist's right hand can play distant voices while leaving the middle strings silent; for the bowed instrument, on the other hand, the chord involves three to six consequent strings without being able to leave any silent ones inside. To chase voices on distant strings, the bow must therefore leave one to catch a second one on the fly, leave the new one to catch the first one again or even pass through a third or a fourth voice by touching them and leaving them, according to the movement of the parts.

This technique of broken harmonies mixed with chords, so well represented by the composers of this recording, resembles that of the jugglers when they make the first pin go round in the air while with their hands they throw the next ones, which are then picked up and thrown back in turn. Three or four pins fly "in counterpoint", each making its own parabola. The different voices of the pieces of music played on the viola da gamba undergo the same dynamics: the singing is not abandoned but resonates when the bow picks up the bass and, vice versa, the bass line is not lost when the bow picks up the singing. The different voices are, so to speak, thrown into the air and, in their ideal fall in intensity, picked up by the bow, just as the juggler grasps the pin with his hand. In the juggler we chase with our eyes three or four flying objects, each with its own speed and amplitude of turn; in the viola da gamba we follow several voices that leave and take up each other or that sometimes proceed homophonically in or arpeggiated chords.





The definition of ancien that the French gave to this style refers to the technique of English violists who had taken the expressive possibilities of the viola da gamba to the highest level since the early years of the century. The English school trained French, Flemish and German violists, the English being masters of the two main genres of composition for the instrument: the Division, i.e. the art of inventing virtuoso matches on Grounds, and the Tablature, playing solo compositions in several voices. In the *Response faite à un Curieux* [...] (1639), André Maugars - who from 1620 and for about four years stayed across the Channel to study the style and technique of the English - says that "[...] les Anglois touchent la Viole parfaitement. Je confesse que ie leur ay quelque obligation, & que ie les ay imitez dans leurs accords [...]" ("[...] the English touch the Viole perfectly. I confess that I have some obligation, and I have imitated them in their chords [...]"). It is likely that Maugars was among the first viola masters to import what the French called *Jeu d'Harmonie*, chordal playing, unlike the *Jeu de Mélodie* who sought grace and taste in the sound of simple melodies without too many chords. Ancien Port de main (*Jeu d'Harmonie*) and nouveau Port de main (*Jeu de Mélodie*) were thus the points of controversy that animated the spirits of the French violists. The nouveau Port de main was supported by the virtuosi of the new generation, first and foremost Monsieur de Saint-Colombe and his followers: Jean Rousseau and Danoville, authors of two treatises on viola da gamba published in the same year, 1687, and Marin Marais, who published his *Premier Livre de Pièces* in 1686. Their rival and assessor of the expressive completeness of the viola da gamba in the *Jeu d'Harmonie* is Sieur de Machy, who published in 1685 his *Pièces de Violle en Musique et en Tablature* (Paris, 1685) for solo viol, introduced by a substantial *Avertissement très nécessaire* in which he explains that "[...] l'on peut joué de la Violle de trois manieres [...] la premiere & la plus ordinaire, est celle de jouer les pieces d'harmonie, qui est le propre de tous les Instruments qui doivent estre jouéz seuls [...]" ("[...] the viol can be played in three ways [...] the first & most ordinary is that of playing the pieces of harmony, which is peculiar to all instruments which are to be played solo. [...]"). The first limitation of the *Jeu de mélodie* was the lack of a harmonic foundation. It was felt, not without good reason, that by playing the viola da gamba alone the melody, deprived of harmonic support, was incomplete, empty and lacking in expressive resources, although the graceful sound that the *Basse de Violle* gives to the pieces written in this nouveau Port de main was not denied. The positions of both factions, seen centuries later, were not so rigid. If Sainte-Colombe indulges in pieces de mélodie for solo viola, he nevertheless writes some with chords; similarly, Monsieur de Machy, a proud supporter of the *Jeu d'Harmonie*, did not shy away from including some of the dances in the nouveau Port de main among his pièces.

To conclude this succinct description of the querelle between ancien and nouveau Port de main, i.e. between Jeu d'Harmonie and Jeu de Mélodie, the latter can be said to have been completed by the addition of the basso continuo that accompanied much of the viol literature of the following period, while the former continued to distinguish itself, building on the experience of the viola da gamba and using it as a model, in the repertoire for solo stringed instruments: the cello (think of the Suites for solo cello by Johann Sebastian Bach to the studies and pieces by Duport and 19th century virtuosos such as Franchomme, Dotzauer, Servais, Popper) and the violin.

ROBERTO GINI



Sources:

Tracks 2-4; 15-17; 26-30: NYPL, Ms.Drexel MSS 3551 ("Composed in 1664")

Tracks 6-7; 19-23: Oxford Bodleian Library, Ms.Mus.Sch.f.574

Tracks 1; 5; 8-14; 18; 24-25; 31-36: Warsaw Bibl. Warszawskiego Towarzystwa Muzycznego, MS In377/No.221