

Jordi Savall, *viola da gamba*

Wednesday, May 12, 2004, 8 pm  
First Congregational Church

*Seven-string viola da gamba by  
Barak Norman, London, 1697*

***Les Voix Humaines***

K.F. Abel	Prelude
Johann Sebastian Bach	Allemande
Johannes Schenck	Aria Burlesca
Le Sieur de Machy	Prelude en Re m
Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe le fils	Fantaisie en Rondeau
Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe	<i>Les Pleurs</i>
J.S. Bach	Bourrée
Sainte-Colombe le fils	Prelude en la m
Marin Marais	<i>Les Voix Humaines</i> – Muzettes
Sainte-Colombe le fils	Fantaisie en mi m

*INTERMISSION*

Tobias Hume	<i>Musical Humors</i>
	A Souldier's March
	Captaine Hume's Pavin & Galliard
	Harke, harke – Wooke doe me no harme
	A Souldier's Resolution

**“Lessons for the Lyra-Viol”**

Alfonso Ferrabosco	Coranto
Thomas Ford	Why not here?
John Playford	La Cloche
Anonymous (ca. 1580)	<i>The Bag-Pipes Tuning</i>
	A Pointe or Preludium
	The Lancashire Pipes
	The Pigges of Rumsey
	Kate of Bardie – A Toye

*This performance has been made possible, in part, by members of the Cal Performances Producers Circle.*

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The Wallace Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Foundation for their generous support.*

**The Bass Viol and the Human Voice**

As early as 1637, Marin Mersenne tells us (in his *Harmonie Universelle*) of the important relationship between the bass viol and the human voice:

Certainly, if instruments are prized to the extent that they imitate the human voice, and if the most admired of all artifice is that which most closely represents Nature, then the viol should not be denied our esteem, since it mimics the human voice in all its modulations, even in its profoundest accents of sadness and joy: because the bow, which produces the effect to which we have referred, is drawn across the strings in approximately the same length of time as the normal breath of the human voice, whose joy, sadness, agility, gentleness, and strength it can imitate by means of its vivaciousness, languor, rapidity, ease, and emphasis. Similarly, the tremolos and delicate fingering of the left hand ingeniously represent its manner and its charm.

In his *Traité de la Violle* (1687), Jean Rousseau also explains how “the playing of melodic pieces involves a simple style of playing, which therefore requires great delicacy and feeling, and it is in this manner of playing that one should be at particular pains to imitate all the pleasing and charming qualities of the human voice....” Again, according to Rousseau,

It was Mr. Hotman who in France began to compose harmonic pieces arranged for the viol, to write beautiful *chants* and imitate the voice, with the result that one often admired him more in the tender rendering of a little *chansonnette* than in more ornate and technically sophisticated pieces. The feeling in his playing lay in his fine bowing, into which he instilled vivacity and sweetness with such skill and appropriateness that he charmed all those who listened to him. It was thus that the viol began to be perfected and to be given pride of place above all other instruments.... It is true that the French viol players, in their feeling imitation of the human voice, are superior to the profuse chords and amazing diminutions of the English players, more admirable for their skill than for their good taste, and which are a poor excuse for the delicacy which is essential to perfect viol playing.

André Maugars, a diplomat in Richelieu’s service and an excellent violist who visited England in 1620 in order to study the technique of the great viol players—probably Tobias Hume (d. 1645), Alfonso Ferrabosco II (1575–1628), and John Cooper (also known as Giovanni Coperario, c. 1575–1626)—tells us in his interesting account of musical life in Italy, *Response faite à un Curieux sur le sentiment de la musique d’Italie. Escrite à Rome le premier Octobre 1639*, that “...the English play the viol to perfection. I confess that I am somewhat indebted to them and have imitated their chords; but in other respects, I have not imitated them, since by birth and by training we French have an advantage over all other nations, and they would be incapable of equalling the beauty of our movements and our pleasing diminutions, particularly in the artless songs of our *courantes* and *ballets*.”

In Sainte-Colombe’s (1630? – 1700?) day, a heated controversy broke out between those who favored melodic playing alone and those who favored harmony. Unlike Jean Rousseau, his contemporary de Machy (fl. c. 1686 – 1692) clearly preferred harmonic to melodic playing: “...the first and most usual (manner) is to play harmonic pieces, as is proper to all solo instruments. And since this has always been considered to be the true way of playing the viol, I shall begin by discussing it, after which I shall refer to the other manners (of playing).” Accordingly, from the very first page of his *Pièces de Violle* (1685), he threw himself into a controversy which was subsequently to prove very damaging to his career by publishing his *Advertissement très-necessaire pour connoistre les principales Regles qui enseignent à bien jouer de la Violle, & à éviter les abus qui se sont glissez depuis quelque temps sur cet Instrument*.

De Machy’s defense of a synthesis between melodic and harmonic playing is nevertheless very persuasive:

Finally, to answer those who argue that simple song pieces are preferable to those containing harmony, I would say they err more than they imagine, since they thereby demonstrate that they are ignorant of the latter. And when, to give weight to their

argument, they quote some simple song pieces by a skillful composer (Mr. Hotman), they fail to see that these are written for several viols, as can easily be appreciated. It is possible for a musician to be very skilled and pleasantly to play beautiful although simple songs: but such a person should be compared to one who played perfectly the harpsichord or organ with one hand. The resulting manner of playing might be pleasant, but one could not properly call that harpsichord or organ playing. The same is true of those who wish to confine the viol to simple pieces. Such has never been the practice for this instrument played solo. A player whose skill is more sophisticated can successfully be less sophisticated when he wishes. They believe they are providing good arguments when they say that chords hinder the composition of fine songs and *agrèments*, or graces, and that it is therefore impossible to play with as much delicacy. Thus, they argue that, for harmony, the treble viol and other such instruments are preferable to all those I have mentioned. They are surely mistaken. If a musician is skilled in his profession, chords should not hinder him in the composition of fine songs with all the graces necessary for a delicate rendering of the music.... I agree that these difficulties are found in pieces not written expressly for the instrument, as is the case of operatic airs and others, and that in such cases the song and the graces are preferable to chords which might prevent these being executed; but in the case of pieces which have been composed for the viol, one should, as far as is possible, take care not to interrupt the harmony.

Jean Rousseau’s rejoinder to De Machy is set out at length in his *Traité de la Violle*:

The playing of melodic pieces is quite pleasing, and even quite moving, when well executed, and I fail to understand why the author of the *Advertissement* [Mr. de Machy] is so critical of those who play melodic pieces and still more critical of those who compose them; for all the composers, starting with Mr. Hotman, have won more acclaim on account of their simple airs, played with all the delicacy that musical skill allows, than on account of the

most regular and complicated harmonic pieces. Moreover, it must be said that if the perfection of the viol lies in harmony alone, plucked instruments will certainly have the advantage over it in this respect, particularly the organ and the harpsichord, which surpass all others as regards harmony.... The viol is an instrument in which melody should predominate over harmony, because the delicacy of song is its very spirit, and it is for this alone that it is prized: for its close resemblance to the human voice, which all other instruments strive to imitate.

This admiration for the delicate playing of Mr. Hotman was not understood in circles that were dominated by the English influence, as can be seen from the exchanges of musical examples between the Dutch musician Constantyn Huygens and Hotman, which gave rise to some very disdainful comments concerning the latter’s pieces for the viol. In a letter addressed to Henry du Mont, dated October 7, 1660, Huygens gave full vent to his anger:

...I cannot conclude this letter without sending you the enclosed copy of an amusing letter from Mr. Hotman, together with two or three flimsy pieces of his own that he has sent me, rather like a school-master handing out a few samples of his own handwriting to little children so that they can begin to form their letters.

Leaving aside the fact that Hotman, Sainte-Colombe, and de Machy were outstanding virtuosos and improvisers of the viol rather than composers of new musical forms, we can see in this reaction of Huygens’ a profound misunderstanding of one of the essential aspects of the French style, in which what is not written and the ways of expressing it are as important as, if not more important than, the objective or formal elements of the musical composition itself. It is this admiration for the way in which “simple airs (when they are) played with all the delicacy musical skill allows” (Jean Rousseau) that enables us to understand the importance of this unwritten dimension that was so well expressed by La Fontaine: “Grace, more beautiful still than beauty itself....”

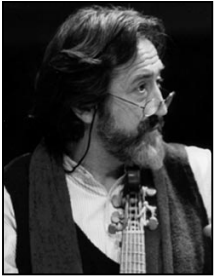
## PROGRAM NOTES

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The synthesis of this perfection in the delicacy of the song, accompanied by supporting harmonies, was finally to be achieved by the great masters of the new generation such as Marin Marais (1656–1728), Caix d’Hervelois (1670–1760), and later, Antoine Forqueray (1672–1745) and his son Jean-Baptiste Antoine (1699–1782), not forgetting Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) and Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767). While the unique charm of the viol as a melodic instrument was to be immortalized in the purest manner by the works of Marin Marais, François Couperin (1668–1733) and Johann Sebastian Bach (the aria “Es ist vollbracht,” *St. John Passion*, and Sonatas for Harpsichord and Bass Viol).

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

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Jordi Savall (*viola da gamba*) is unanimously acclaimed as one of today’s foremost interpreters of early music. Among the most gifted musicians of his generation, he is a violist, music director, and the creator of an unmistakable style, and his activities as a concert performer, teacher, and researcher make him one of the chief architects of the currently ongoing reevaluation of historic music. The pivotal part he played in Alain Corneau’s award-winning film *Tous les Matins du Monde* has proved that early music does not have to be elitist or of interest to only a minority, and, indeed, that it can—and does—appeal to an increasingly young and wide audience.

Jordi Savall’s aim in creating the ensembles Hespèrion XXI (1974), La Capella Reial de Catalunya (1987), and Le Concert des Nations (1989) has been to increase the public’s knowledge of a repertoire spanning from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 19th

century, driven by a new concept of performance characterized by great musical verve combined with rigorous historical accuracy. It should be remembered that the bass viol repertoire was often the preserve of virtuoso-composers who, in fact, had exclusive rights to publish works for their instruments; this accounts for the fact that even François Couperin was not entitled to sign his *Pièces de Viòle*, published in 1728, with anything more than the letters F.C., or that Hubert le Blanc wrote in his *Défense de la Basse de viòle*, in 1740, that the instrument “would have been lost forever if the art of the bass viol had indeed been a family secret.” Also, the fact that these virtuoso-composers were great improvisers explains why there should be so few works for solo bass viol by their non-viol-playing colleagues, among them Johann Sebastian Bach and François Couperin.

—Jordi Savall

Translated by Jacqueline Minett

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Savall’s extraordinary concert activity regularly takes him to the major early music festivals around the world (in Europe, the United States, Latin America, the Middle East, the Far East, Australia, and New Zealand). He has recorded over 100 albums, and in 1998, he created his own recording label, Aliavox.

Throughout his more than 30 years of intense musical activity, Savall has received numerous awards and distinctions, most notably the Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French Ministry of Culture and Communication (1988); the Sant Jordi Cross of the Generalitat (Autonomous Government) of Catalonia (1990); the Gold Medal for Fine Arts from the Spanish Ministry of Culture and the Arts (1999); Honorary Member of the Konzerthaus, Vienna (1999); Doctor *honoris causa* of the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium (2001); the Gold Medal of the Parliament of Catalonia (2003); and the German “Preise der deutschen Schallplattenkritik” (2003).