

# *Une fantaisie de la Renaissance:* an Introduction

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BY JOHN GRIFFITHS

THIS VOLUME OF THE *JOURNAL* is devoted to a single subject, the fantasia, and those compositions of cognate names such as the *ricercar* that constitute a vital part of lute and keyboard music of the Renaissance. The size of the repertory alone attests to the fantasia's significance, and the quality of the music confirms that it was the medium through which renaissance performer-composers made some of their most individual and original musical utterances. While most prevalent in Italy and Spain, it was not exclusively a southern affair. Fantasia sources show it to have been a pan-European phenomenon, although practised to varying degrees in different centers across the continent. The earliest fantasias are unquestionably Italian, but those that are found republished, for example, as *Priamels* in German lute books of the 1530s are early indication of the rapid transmission of the genre north of the Alps. It travelled as written pages of books and manuscripts, it was carried in the memory of musician travellers in both directions along the north-south axis, and was firmly implanted into northern culture by virtuosi of the stature of Alberto da Ripa who settled in the north and continued to cultivate their fantasia abroad. Fantasias and *ricercars* undoubtedly take pride of place in Italian and Spanish instrumental sources throughout the sixteenth century yet, even though representing a smaller proportion of total national repertories, the fantasias of composers outside Mediterranean Europe—Dowland, Bakfark and Sweelinck, for example—are among the most sophisticated works of their entire output.

Studies of the fantasia have tended to be confined by national boundaries. Key studies of the fantasia repertory are those that concentrate either on national repertories or the fantasias of individual composers. With the exception of Vaccaro's book on French lute music, more attention has been paid to the Italian and Spanish

repertoires than any other.<sup>1</sup> Prefaces to editions of individual composers have included substantial style studies and analytical essays, and there is a small body of similarly focussed journal articles.<sup>2</sup> Given this situation, the purpose of this issue of the *Journal* is to draw together material that looks at the common issues that faced instrumentalist-composers throughout Europe in the sixteenth century.

The genesis of this collection of essays was a small conference—*Une Fantaisie de la Renaissance*—convened by Jean-Michel Vaccaro and myself at the Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de la Renaissance in Tours, France, from 13-16 April 1992. It was a direct response to the need for scholars working in the world of renaissance instrumental music, working with similar materials and confronting similar issues, to have the opportunity to exchange ideas and share the fruit of their labor in a colloquium that would provide immediate reaction and dialogue.

Eight scholars attended the conference. Papers read by five of them, debated and evaluated collegially by the assembled group, form the present collection. A subsequent month in Melbourne gave Victor Coelho and I the opportunity to shape the *Journal*, coordinate revision, and translate the papers read in Italian and French. Coelho's contribution to the conference will appear in a future volume of the *Journal*, and some of the underlying issues of my own contribution have been incorporated into this brief introductory essay. Also present at the conference was the late Howard Mayer Brown, scholarly

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<sup>1</sup> On French music see Jean-Michel Vaccaro, *La musique de luth en France au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, (Paris, 1981). On Italian and Spanish fantasias see H. Colin Slim, "The Keyboard Ricercar and Fantasia in Italy, c.1500-1550, with Reference to Parallel Forms in European Lute Music of the Same Period," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1960; James Meadors, "Italian Lute Fantasias and Ricercars Printed in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1984; John Ward, "The vihuela de mano and its music (1536-1576)," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1953; John Griffiths, "The Vihuela Fantasia: A Comparative Study of Forms and Styles," Ph.D. diss., Monash University, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Influential analytical studies include Otto Gombosi, *Der Lautenist Valentin Bakfark: Leben und Werke (1507-1576)* (Budapest, 1935/rpt. Kassel, 1967), and "A la recherche de la Forme dans la Musique de la Renaissance: Francesco da Milano," in *La Musique Instrumentale de la Renaissance*, ed. Jean Jacquot (Paris, 1955), pp. 165-76; Arthur J. Ness, *The Lute Music of Francesco Canova da Milano (1497-1543)* (Cambridge, MA., 1970); Jean-Michel Vaccaro, *Albert de Rippe: Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. 1 *Fantaisies* (Paris, 1972); A. Howell, "Cabezón: An Essay in Structural Analysis," *The Musical Quarterly* 50 (1964), pp. 18ff, and "Paired Imitation in 16th-Century Spanish Keyboard Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 53 (1967), pp. 377-96.

godfather and friend to us all, who acted as moderator, discussant, and *provocateur*. Regrettably, it was to be one of the last conferences that Howard attended. Given the profound respect, admiration and affection that we all felt for him, it is fitting that this volume should be dedicated to his memory. It is a personal tribute from us all.

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As music, fantasia is a living organism, ephemeral and amorphous; it is cellular substance shaped into matter by its creators, reconstituted—perhaps even reincarnated—in each successive performance, but always remaining malleable, always adaptable and able to change its physiognomy in response to new conditions, personalities and environments. Performers today as much as in the past revere the fantasia genre and can identify easily with descriptions like this one that exude fervor and a certain amount of passion. The same may be true for scholars too, especially those whose fingers are not alien to keyboard or fretted fingerboard. A description like the one I have offered also encapsulates the key issues of fantasia research. Jointly and severally, they are the issues of source and substance that pervade the articles herein, investigations of both the life-source from which the fantasia draws its breath, and the substance from which it is fleshed out.

The first of these issues concerns the nature and identity of the fantasia and, by extrapolation, leads to discussion of the significance of the genre both to musicians of the sixteenth century as well as to performers of our own time. From this arise further questions of definition and analysis. I have ventured on numerous occasions that the so-called “problem” of fantasia definition is obviated if one considers fantasia to be a process rather than a form.<sup>3</sup> It is impossible to define the fantasia in terms of a form because it has no archetype that is either described in any source contemporary with the repertory nor that can be derived from the extant repertory. At best, the search for an adequate definition of the fantasia invariably returns to be a description of a set of procedures found in a given set of fantasias. These broad features are reflected in the labels scholars have given various sub-categories of

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, “Der Terminus ‘Ricerca’,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 9 (1952), pp. 137-47.

fantasia to indicate whether they are monothematic or polythematic, or whether they are based on parody or any other definable procedure. Habitually, we encounter *description* rather than *definition* of the illusive but potent substance that is fantasia.

There is no need, however, for any linguistic alchemy to see the relationship between procedure and process. First and foremost, the fantasia is a process of invention achieved by imagination (*fantasia*), and made through investigation or research (*ricerca*) of both the resources of the instrument on which it is played and external materials or conceptual stimuli that might be brought to bear on the musical fabric. The variety of outcomes is innumerable: all that definition can achieve is to encircle the boundaries of the stylistic variables used in a given repertory and to describe its central tendencies. John Ward's definition of the fantasia repertory of the vihuela is a classic attempt to describe it with precision, yet is couched in language that suggests the great variety within the genre. He writes that the fantasia is "a relatively free, monothematic or polythematic, more or less polyphonic, two- or more-voiced, sometimes highly ornamented or toccata-like music of greatly varying length occasionally based on borrowed music (parody) but more often newly invented."<sup>4</sup> It is an admirable description of the stylistic elements of the fantasia but it stops a long way short of telling us what a fantasia really *is*. I have long preferred to call the fantasia an "instrumental motet"—or, in the way Ward refined this descriptor, "the result of the translation of a motet into instrumental terms."—for the reason that the fantasia, for all the amorphous quality of its form, does share with the motet the characteristic of being a musical discourse of variable formal shape whose process is linked to a dramatic or rhetorical conception.<sup>5</sup> The fantasia is directly analogous to the textual discourse with which the motet evolves in musical space, although its rhetoric is abstracted by the absence of text. Analysis of fantasia structure may illuminate this *dynamic* aspect of the process of music through time, or may take a more static approach and examine the fantasia in space, considering it from another viewpoint altogether, through the investigation of thematic or structural relationships, proportion and symmetry and other such facets.

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<sup>4</sup> Ward "The vihuela de mano," p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> John Ward, "The Use of Borrowed Material in 16th-Century Instrumental Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 5 (1952), p. 98.

The main study in the present collection that deals directly with questions of identity is Pozniak's discussion of the *ricercars* of Spinacino and Bossinensis, although much of the focus is on questions of mode and function. These and the other *ricercars* of the early sixteenth-century preserved in the Petrucci prints, however, appear to have a different *modus operandi* to the repertory in sources dating from mid 1530s onwards, and sit least comfortably into the discussion above. Jean-Michel Vaccaro's study also addresses the issue, but from the more pointed focus of parody composition. At the other end of the historical spectrum, Victor Coelho's article to appear in a future volume of the *Journal* deals with the fantasias in the manuscript Como, Biblioteca Comunale (1601) which, like many anthologies of the time, contains fantasias of at least two generations of lutenists. He discusses the types of fantasias of earlier generations that the compiler of this source chose to copy alongside the current fantasias of Laurencini, the Cavalier of the Lute and others, in an environment of changing musical aesthetics. It thus offers a snapshot of the fantasia at the end of the sixteenth century and the incipient period of its transformation into the fugue.

The second issue concerns the materials used in fantasia composition. In this area, substantial new work has come to fulfil John Ward's prophecy first postulated some forty years ago that "beyond the acknowledged use of borrowed music... are the countless fantasias which, like many *canzoni francesi*, disclose no indebtedness in their titles but often betray gleanings from other composers."<sup>6</sup> In this and other articles, Ward drew our attention to the fact that much more borrowed material lies beneath the surface of many renaissance fantasias.<sup>7</sup> One of the methods of learning to play fantasia, as we learn from Bermudo and others, was through the assimilation of vocal music. It is not therefore surprising to find references to vocal music in fantasias "sine nomine" such as Stefano Mengozzi reveals in his article on parody in the fantasias of Francesco da Milano. Jean-Michel Vaccaro's study of Paladin's parody fantasias makes a similar comparison of vocal models and corresponding fantasias and leads him to hypothesize four levels at which composers worked, on an axis from

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<sup>6</sup> Ward, "Borrowed Material," p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> These are cited in Robert Judd's article below.

complete dependence to complete independence from vocal models, leading him to conclude that it was not so much the materials, but rather the structures created from them that are the most significant measure of creative genius.

Robert Judd's study of Cabezón's keyboard fantasia on *Malheur me bat* follows a similar line and makes clear the common conceptual basis of keyboard and lute music, while Dinko Fabris's article traces the use of the solmization theme from vocal beginnings in a Mass by Josquin through a century of instrumental versions, and uses it both to draw attention to the little-studied lutenist Fabrizio Dentice, as well as the basis for a study in sources and attributions that inverts traditional methodology with speculative, yet interesting outcomes.

What remains to be said concerns performance. Engaging interpretation of the fantasia repertory depends on the musician's capacity to absorb the unwritten codes of sixteenth-century instrumental language, and to reactivate sleeping relics of a musical past in a way that rekindles their spirit as much as their artifice. Each of the articles that follow presents case studies that offer pathways to this end. The close examination of deciphered parody material not only provides insight into that sub-stratum of fantasia that alludes to vocal works, but is also a means of comprehending the abstraction of non-referential works and their rhetorical and dramatic structure. In this way the two interdependent issues identified above, substance and form, can be reunited and reconciled. A more fundamental cogency and cohesion awaits the interpreter who researches the fantasia with a vigor equal to that of the composer-performers who created them, with the promise that its rewards to both listener and performer will be multiplied many times over.

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