

# STOUR MUSIC 2021



## John Dowland & Co: the lute ensemble at the English court

Chordophony

*Sponsored by  
Gilbert Holbourn*

**Friday 25th June**  
10pm

**BOUGHTON ALUPH CHURCH**

## Programme

**Robert Johnson** (1583-1633):

3 dances from the Prince's Masque

**John Dowland** (1563-1626);

Paduana; Mrs Nichol's Almain

**Anonymous:** Rossignol

**John Dowland:**

My Lord Willoughby's Welcome Home

**William Byrd** (1639/40-1623):

Monsieur's Almain; My Lord of Oxenford's Masque

**John Coperario** (c.1570-1626):

3 dances from Gray's Inn Masque; The Maypole

**John Dowland:**

The King of Denmark's Galliard; Lachrimae;

The Earl of Essex's Galliard

## Performers

Lynda Sayce - *director, treble lute*

Richard MacKenzie - *alto lute*

Robin Jeffrey - *tenor lute and cittern*

Matthew Nisbet - *bass lute*

## Chordophony

**Chordophony** grew out of director Lynda Sayce's fascination with the tiny surviving repertory of lute ensemble music, and the abundant records from all over Europe, documenting the presence of such ensembles in many courts. For more than a decade she has been on a mission to find these ensembles' missing repertory; this evening's programme includes her reconstructions of well-known works from several Jacobean court lutenists. Chordophony plays on a unique matched lute consort, copied from surviving originals by the Stradivari of the lute world, Wendelin Tieffenbrucker, known as 'il Venere'. Chordophony has recorded on the SFZ label, performed at major festivals including Lufthansa and York early music festivals, has run its own concert series in Cardiff, and recently provided music for the 'Horrible Histories' film 'Bill', an irreverent take on the life of William Shakespeare. No lutes were harmed in the making of that film...

## Programme Notes

In 1579 the lutenist John Johnson was appointed to join two lutenist colleagues in the English court musical establishment, and we find the first mentions of the court lute ensemble, the 'musicians for the three lutes'. The ensemble survived until the dispersal of the Court in the early stages of the Civil War. From very early on it included more than three lute players - the early references appear to refer to three sizes of lute, and that was also later increased. At its height the court lute group could number up to 20 players, and it was common for a dozen or more to be included in masque performances. The players included some of the leading player-composers of the day, and many were also singers - indeed, the lute ensemble, which had started off as an instrumental group - gradually morphed into an ensemble of self-accompanying singers during the reigns of James I and Charles I. However, not a shred of lute ensemble music has survived from this 60-year history. Many English prints and manuscripts include music for lute duet (we include a couple of charming examples here), but of the repertory for larger groups, only a single part survives from a single trio - a mere scrap of tablature in an amateur's manuscript book.

I became fascinated by the lute ensemble when I was at college, after playing some quartets with my former teacher's group. We were handicapped by having a miscellany of ill-matched lutes, and by the absence of some key instruments such as a proper bass lute, so in due course I began researching the surviving lutes and commissioned a matched set, some of which you see before you this evening. All are copied from examples built in the Paduan workshop of Wendelin Tieffenbrucker, known as 'il Venere', between about 1580 and 1610. They were built by the Italian luthier Ivo Magherini, and were conceived as a set from the beginning, so all their backs are made from the same log of cypress wood, and all of their soundboards are from the same wedge of spruce. As the lute family gradually took shape, I turned my attention to the problem of the missing English repertory, beginning with surviving works by the court lutenists. There is actually quite a lot of material - some pieces survive as solos, duets, lute songs, or broken consorts, others such as masque dances survive in score for other instruments, still others were part of the hit parade of the age - pieces which were known to all and arranged for everything, from viol consort to solo recorder. In some cases I found dozens of settings of popular pieces, which I have plundered freely, incorporating original settings in the required keys where I could find them, borrowing divisions from other versions, transposing settings where necessary. Where no lute versions survived, I made my own, using contemporary Continental pieces and the solo works of the English composers as my models. Of the pieces you will hear tonight, only the two duets are original 16th century settings; everything else is reconstructed by me.

Robert Johnson was the son of John Johnson, of the original Elizabethan lute trio, and followed his father into court service, being appointed to the 'musicians for the lutes' by 1606. He took part in many court masques, both as player and composer, and also wrote music for several plays performed in the London theatres. He is the only composer known to have worked with Shakespeare. He worked alongside John Coperario and John Dowland in the court lute ensemble, and payment records indicate that whilst all were paid for performing in court masques, Johnson was frequently paid significantly more for composing the music. Coperario seems to have played mostly viol, though he is frequently listed and paid as part of the 'Three Lutes'. Much of his masque music survives in solo lute versions, as well as scores for other instrumental ensembles.

Dowland was the pre-eminent English lutenist of the age, and the only one to achieve significant international recognition. Although well-known as a player and composer well before 1600, he failed to achieve an English court position until 1612, by which time he was a mature man with many years of service at several continental courts under his belt. Some of his lute pieces are the most frequently arranged and copied works of the era, and it is hard to believe that he and his court colleagues would not have played them in the lute ensemble. The *Paduana* was published (for strings and continuo) by Thomas Simpson in Hamburg in 1621, together with *Mrs Nichol's Almain*. A different version of the latter was published by Dowland himself for 5 viols and lute in 1604, together with versions of his *Lachrymae pavan*, the King of Denmark's *Galliard*, and the Earl of Essex's *Galliard*. The extraordinary treble lute divisions in the King of Denmark's *Galliard* are taken from a solo setting in the *Margaret Board lute book*, a manuscript to which Dowland himself contributed.

William Byrd left no original music for the lute, but some of his keyboard and vocal works were transcribed for it by his contemporaries, whilst other pieces were arranged for broken consort by Thomas Morley. As one of the leading composers of the age, it is inconceivable that the court lutenists would not have known some of his work. Both *Monsieur's Almain* and *My Lord of Oxenford's Masque* survive in broken consort settings, which use three plucked instruments including a cittern – a small, wire-strung instrument which functions rather like a rhythm mandolin in a bluegrass band. The combination of lutes and cittern is one found in several continental sources, as well as the English broken consort; this is our first foray into this unique sound!

Lynda Sayce, 2021