

Alfonso Ferrabosco II: *Four-Part Fantasias*

*Viola
da Gamba
Society
New England*

*25th
Anniversary
Project*



Alfonso Ferrabosco the Younger: *Four-Part Fantasias*

Born around 1575 and brought up in the Elizabethan court in the care of Gomer van Oosterwijk, Ferrabosco was left by his father, who returned to Italy in 1578 after years of composing madrigals in England. Eventually in 1592, Alfonso the Younger was appointed as a viol player in the court of Elizabeth I, and 12 years later served as extraordinary groom of the Privy Chamber, responsible for instructing James I's elder son and heir, Henry, Prince of Wales, in the art of music. Alfonso was celebrated as performer and composer of court masques, especially those of Ben Jonson. But it was for music-making in the private rooms of the Stuart court that Alfonso composed these four-part fantasias—works that established the fantasia as an independent idiom markedly distinct from the madrigal style that influenced so many English composers after the wave of Italian music introduced by the 1588 publication of *Musica Transalpina*.

Alfonso reached his maturity just as viol consort playing burgeoned around 1600, and the popularity of his four-part fantasias is manifest in the 27 extant manuscripts that contain them, often as a virtually complete group. Present knowledge of the manuscripts' origins supports the view that his fantasias were shared and copied by musicians in court, in country homes, and in college rooms at Oxford and Cambridge. The atmosphere of artistic ferment and promise in Henry's court was suddenly halted with his untimely death at the age of 18 in 1612. Ferrabosco's fantasias are assumed to have been composed by then, even though he continued at court, in the service of the new Prince of Wales, Henry's brother, Charles. Ferrabosco was buried at Greenwich in 1628, three years after Charles I came to the throne.

The order of this recording follows that of *Musica Britannica*, Vol. LXII, *Alfonso Ferrabosco the Younger: Four-Part Fantasias*, edited by Andrew Ashbee and Bruce Bellingham, and based upon a manuscript believed to have been copied at the Stuart court. The progression of the fantasias here reveals a deliberate grouping into three sections, based on the range of instrumentation: for nos. 1-7 the second part has the same range as the tenor viol, thus composed for Tr'TTB; for nos. 8-16 (as well as

fantasia no.21, which was not included in the source manuscript but in terms of mode and range fits between nos. 15 and 16), the second part acts as an alto midway between the treble and tenor, thus allowing for either treble or tenor viol to play the part; for nos. 17-20 the second part has the same range as the treble, so that the instrumentation is TrTrTB. Other aspects further confirm this grouping: in each of the three sections there is a progression from modes using a B-flat signature (F Lydian, G Dorian, C Dorian) to modes with no initial accidentals (A Aeolian and G Mixolydian). The pieces are also ordered according to similar melodic or rhythmic character and level of playing demands.

Perhaps because of Alfonso's early upbringing, the fantasias reveal a Netherlandish trait of contrapuntal solidity—points of imitation, subjects and countersubjects—but his counterpoint is never academic or stilted. He employs the Renaissance conventions of *ricercar*, *canzona* (fantasias 2,3,4,5,6,8,13,15,19,20) or “quilt canzona” (fantasia 14), occasionally madrigal (fantasia 16), *villanella* (fantasias 3,5,8,11,14,16, 17,21), *canzonetta* (fantasia 7), duos (fantasias 2,3,4,5,9,12,15,17) and *cantus firmus* (fantasias 14,16) but generally avoids the tendency to compose madrigals for viols as many of his contemporaries did, for example, Coprario, Gibbons, Lupo, Ward. Rather, Ferrabosco continued more in the tradition of Byrd (especially in fantasia 14), with strongly profiled motives masterfully exploited and shaped with harmonic excursions and arrivals—an influence which was maintained especially by John Jenkins. Ferrabosco's use of traditional *musica ficta* devices transcends conventions and creates a very modern exploitation of chromatic alterations. This, combined with his manipulation of thematic material through variable rhythms and intervals, produces melodies and harmonies of fluid mastery.

Many of Alfonso's fantasias divide into two equal sections, with new motives in the second. However, he was evidently a master of thematic transformation, with some pieces (fantasias 11, 13, 19, 20) displaying his brilliant control of the monothematic *ricercar*, moving into distant harmonic areas beyond the scope of other composers of his day. The climax of his achievement appears with the last fantasia, in two sections: a

Hexachord fantasia, where the six-note *cantus firmus* motive in the treble ascends chromatically from *c* to *g* and in the second section returns chromatically to *c*. As in all of his fantasias, freely-manipulated counterpoints produce a smooth texture that belies its intricacy. This is true chamber music of virtuoso quality, both for the composer and for the performers. Originally composed for both professionals and amateurs, what better way to celebrate an anniversary of viol players of similar stripe than to record Alfonso's fantasias 400 years later?

~ Bruce Bellingham

About the Viola da Gamba Society—New England

Twenty-five years ago Boston was already a center of interest in early music. There were concerts by The Cambridge Society for Early Music, the Boston Camerata, and others; the instruments of the Museum of Fine Arts were being restored and played; the Boston Recorder Society had a full schedule of activities and a large and enthusiastic membership. Lessons in performance on early instruments were available at local schools and colleges, and Gian Lyman Silbiger had taught viola da gamba to scores of students at the Longy School of Music. It is not surprising then that Ellen Powers, with a small organizing group of teachers and players, felt the time was ripe for the establishment of a regular society for amateurs of the viol.

From the "First Gathering" in 1976, workshops devoted to music for the viol have formed the backbone of the program of the VdGS-NE. The Society offers three one-day workshops each year, led by master coaches and ordinarily attended by 30-40 viol players from the region, from other states, and from Canada. A day's program would include classes at various levels based on the proposed repertoire. Some recent topics: *Music from the Tregian Manuscript* with Alison Crum; *Jenkins and More Jenkins* with Lucy Bardo; *Adventurous Music Old and New for Viol Consort* with Judith Davidoff and Jane Hershey; and *The Classical Viol* with Roland Hutchinson.

The Society has also sponsored concerts and masterclasses, and a series of miniclasses on subjects of special or scholarly interest. It publishes a newsletter three times a year, and promotes concerts by its members. There are currently about 100 members of the VdGS-NE, including both amateur and professional players and teachers.

To fulfill its stated purpose, "to promote interest in the viola da gamba by educational and artistic programs," and to reach new audiences for the viol, the Society has established the Gian Lyman Silbiger grants, annual awards for the performance of sacred music with viols in the context of a church or synagogue service.

The Ferrabosco Project. The 2001-2002 season marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Viola da Gamba Society-New England. To celebrate the occasion the Society wanted a permanent memento, and decided a collaborative CD was appropriate. Founding member Bruce Bellingham suggested a subject for the CD, the complete four-part fantasias of Alfonso Ferrabosco II, which have not been recorded in their entirety. The plan was to involve pre-formed amateur consorts, professional groups, and specially constituted ensembles, some with participating coaches. Each consort would prepare one or two fantasias, seek coaching, and be ready to record on a date in May 2002. Everyone recognized the daunting amount of work such a project would involve, but when Sarah Mead offered to serve as musical producer, Don Cantor volunteered to coordinate planning, and the 13 performing groups actually emerged. VdGS-NE president Tracy Hoover put this community effort into motion as the major commemorative event of the anniversary.

These are live performances; for each group the best take of three or four was chosen, without splicing or editing. The recording thus represents where the groups are in the spring of 2002, not perfect but working hard and putting their energies into a project of value to all the participants, and to others interested in consort music and in the compositional voice of Ferrabosco.

Antasia	Mode	Performers
1	F	<i>Nutmeg Consort</i> : Carrie Crompton <i>tr</i> , Bruce Bellingham & Douglas Johnson <i>T</i> , Leland Tolo <i>B</i>
2	g★	<i>Brandeis Univ. Early Music Ensemble</i> : Julia Deak <i>tr</i> , Patrick Ramsey & Aaron Moulin <i>T</i> , Jill Wolhandler <i>B</i>
3	g★	<i>Univ. Connecticut Consort</i> : Jeff Chen <i>tr</i> , Colleen Armitage & Hans Twitchell <i>T</i> , Katherine Palmer <i>B</i>
4	g★	Hannah Davidson <i>tr</i> , Ellen Powers & Don Cantor <i>T</i> , Chester Pearlman <i>B</i>
5	a★	Annalisa Pappano <i>tr</i> , Hannah Davidson & Martha Davidson <i>T</i> , Laury Gutiérrez <i>B</i>
6	a★	Joan Boorstein <i>tr</i> , June Matthews & Jill Wolhandler <i>T</i> , Todd Gilman <i>B</i>
7	a★	<i>Phillips Consort of Viols</i> : Michael Hamill <i>tr</i> , Hannah Davidson & Sheila Beardslee <i>T</i> , Sarah McManaway <i>B</i>
8	C [V]	Jean Sawyer Twombly <i>tr</i> , Peter Tourin <i>T</i> , Barbara Kaden & Constance Plunkett <i>B</i>
9	F	<i>Phillips Consort of Viols</i> : Michael Hamill <i>tr</i> , Hannah Davidson & Sheila Beardslee <i>T</i> , Sarah McManaway <i>B</i>
10	c [V]	Hannah Davidson <i>tr</i> , Ellen Powers & Don Cantor <i>T</i> , Chester Pearlman <i>B</i>
11	C [V]	Jean Sawyer Twombly <i>tr</i> , Peter Tourin <i>T</i> , Barbara Kaden & Constance Plunkett <i>B</i>

- 12 F Hannah Davidson *tr*, Tracy Hoover & Martha Davidson T,
Ruth Markowitz B
- 13 c* Hannah Davidson *tr*, Tracy Hoover & Martha Davidson T,
Ruth Markowitz B
- 14 g* Sybille Volz *tr*, Natalie Lowell & Sybil Kevy T,
June Matthews B
- 15 G Joan Boorstein *tr*, June Matthews & Jill Wolhandler T,
Todd Gilman B
- 21 G *Nutmeg Consort*: Carrie Crompton & Bruce Bellingham *tr*,
Douglas Johnson T, Leland Tolo B
- 16 G Sybille Volz & Jane Hershey *tr*, Don Cantor T,
Martha Gruson B
- 17 F Sybille Volz & Natalie Lowell *tr*, Sybil Kevy T,
June Matthews B
- 18 F Annalisa Pappano & Hannah Davidson *tr*, Martha Davidson T,
Laury Gutiérrez B
- 19 G Sybille Volz & Jane Hershey *tr*, Don Cantor T,
Martha Gruson B
- 20 g* Guy Pugh & Lari Smith *tr*, Margo Stark T,
Christopher Mirley B
- Hexachord C *Brewster Village Consort*: Sarah Mead *tr*, Mai-Lan Brockman T,
Rosalind Stowe & Janet Haas B

*denotes *Tierce de Picardy*

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Producer: Sarah Mead for the Viola da Gamba Society–New England.

Recording Engineers: Richard Marr & Karl Mogensen.

Recorded May 2002 at Kissy Pig Studios, Brighton MA.

Cover Art: Robert Peake: *Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, and Sir John Harington*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1944. (44.27) Photograph © 1991 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Music Source: Andrew Ashbee & Bruce Bellingham, eds.: *Alfonso Ferrabosco the Younger, The Four-Part Fantasias. Musica Britannica, Vol. LXII*. Stainer & Bell Ltd for the Musica Britannica Trust, 1992. Stainer & Bell Ltd, 23 Gruneisen Road, London England N3 1DZ. www.stainer.co.uk

Design: Sheila Beardslee, Acton MA.

Printing: Tape Complex, Boston MA.

The VdGS - NE wishes to thank its donors, of both time and money, for their continued generosity, without whom this project would not have been possible.