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TRICHET'S TREATISE
A 17th Century Description of the Viols
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Pierre Trichet's *Traité des Instruments de Musique*, although known to historians since the discovery of the manuscript¹ in 1753, has so far received little attention from modern musicologists. The recent (1957) publication of it, with an introduction and notes, by François Lesure,² is therefore a welcome addition to the growing body of valuable contemporaneous material on the music of the 17th century.

Of particular interest is the fact that Trichet, lawyer, humanist and a collector of instruments, was writing his work at the same time Mersenne was producing his monumental *Harmonie Universelle* and that there was an epistolary exchange between these two authors. Trichet's treatise, substantially complete in 1631,³ appears to have been still in process of final revision as late as 1638, since he cites (p. 347) a work published in that year.⁴ Why Trichet's treatise remained unpublished is not known; Lesure conjectures that publication may have been prevented by the author's death ca. 1640.

The portion of the work presented here for the first time in English translation is taken from Section 13 of Part II (beginning on fol. 107) and was chosen as of immediate interest to viol-players.

Of The Viol

I concede that the viol is a rather common instrument. Nevertheless I shall not neglect to speak of it here; for since I want to treat of all musical instruments, the familiar (cogneus) as well as the unfamiliar (incogneus), this one does not merit being forgotten. I have the opinion that it was not formerly in use, any more than the French lyra, which is not greatly dissimilar to it, as I have said in the foregoing. I am well aware that some would like to make the viol out to be very ancient, such as Baptiste Folengius in his Latin commentaries on the Psalms of David, who says that the viol is nothing other than the psaltery; but I have demonstrated else-

¹ Now in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, filed as ms. 1070.

² Pierre Trichet, *Traité des Instruments de Musique* (vers 1640), ed. with introduction and notes by François Lesure (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Société de Musique d'Autrefois, 1957).

³ *Ibid.* (Introduction), p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

where that this can not be, since the psaltery produces its harmony from its superior part. What Jules Bulenger (l. 2 de the, c. 36) says about a passage by Philostratus does not apply either, since he explains it as about a player of the viol, confounding it with cithara, for it is the cithara that is spoken of in this place.

Viols are named "phioles" by the Germans, and are highly suitable for consorts of music, whether one should want to mingle them with voices or to combine them with other kinds of instruments: for the distinctness of their sound, the ease of handling them, and the sweet harmony that results therefrom, causes them to be employed more gladly than other instruments; it must also be avowed that, next to excellent human voices, there is nothing so charming as the tiny tremblings made on the fingerboard and nothing so ravishing as the dying-out strokes of the bow. In order to avail oneself of the latter properly it is necessary that it be strongly tensed and fitted with horse's hair, and that it be sufficiently rubbed with rosin so that it does not slide and slip over the strings too softly. If one wants to make up a well-filled and harmonious consort of viols it takes at least four, differing in size and dimension according to the rank they hold--something to be observed also with every other kind of musical instrument.

Baldesar Castiglione, in the second of his books of instruction for the Courtier⁵, places a high value on viol playing; and says that if it is indeed praiseworthy to know well how to intone musical notes and to diversify one's voice according to the rules of art, it is all the more worthy of praise to know how to adapt and adjust one's voice to the sound of the viol; he says besides that one can not express how the four parts playing in harmony together caress the ears of the listeners, and how pleasant and agreeable this artful harmony is. This is why he counsels his Courtier to make himself moderately familiar with it: but that the more facility and adroitness he has in playing the more he will be taken up by everyone; nevertheless he should be careful above all not to play in the presence of ignorant people and those of low condition. In this it is just as necessary that reason and judgment control the rudder as it is in all other human actions. It is also necessary that one who practices it consider his age: for it is unseemly and ridiculous for an old fellow with white hair to sound the viol or the lute or, indeed to sing in an assembly of women. I am not on that account of the opinion that it should be necessary to forbid old men the exercise of music altogether; for it is permissible for them to occupy themselves with it, provided it be secretly and with moderation, after

⁵ Cf. Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, Anchor Book A 186, pp. 104-105 (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1959).

having attended to more important business; and then they will savor the same pleasures that were formerly relished by Socrates and Pythagoras. But if they proceed otherwise it is to be feared that they will only serve as laughing-stocks for those who seek occasions for censuring the actions of others, as happened to Roderic Carras (of whom Jovianus Pontanus makes mention), who, being eighty years old often had a fondness for playing the flute at home. A certain joker, passing his house, having noticed this, asked: "What children are being taught to dance here?" He was told that it was Roderic fluting away as a pastime. "How now," he said, "Has Roderic been given orders from the other world that among the dead one should give some ball or celebrate some festival?" These do better to desist from these pleasures of the present to seek out the contemplative ones, which are much nobler.

Let us see now whether the foreign nations have more invention and address than the French in playing the viol. Pierre Bellon in his *Observations*⁶ (1.2, c. 48; 1.3, c. 48) relates that the Egyptians have certain viols, each of which has but one string or at most two, and that their strings, of horse's hair, are simple, not twisted or braided, such that the bow and the viol are fitted in the same manner. The fingerboards or necks of their viols are very long, requiring that the fingers be spread very far apart on the frets in order to play. The bridge is not supported on any wooden table or plank, any more than those of their lutes and guitars, but on the skin of a fish the modern Greeks call *Glavis*, which is taken in the Nile, which skin is glued on below. The remainder of the body of this instrument is constructed in the same manner as a flat box, from which they cause a long iron (pike) to stick out, which, on being thrust into the ground serves only as a support; for those who play it do not place it against the shoulder, as is done with the violin nor, also, on the thigh, as is done here with the viol: What is the worth of these compared with our excellent players of France? In my opinion, the least of the latter would put their best minstrels to shame. I concede that among the Egyptians more frequently than among the French they would want to produce the four kinds of lyre they customarily have in use fitted with gut strings, which strings are so much in credit in that country, and throughout the whole Empire of the Turk, that there is no merchant or mercer so lowly that he does not have some to sell, of every kind of color--according to the report of this same Bellon.

Before finishing this chapter, it is appropriate to explain the tuning of viols, both separately and combined to form a consort. It will be noticed therefore that the strings of every viol having five courses always ascend in fourths; as for those of six courses,

⁶ Pierre Belon, *Les observations de plusieurs singularitez, et choses memorables trouuees en Grèce, Asie, Judée, Egypte...*, Paris, 1553 (re-ed. 1554, 1555, 1588, etc.).

their tuning consists of two fourths, after which a major third is made, and then two other fourths; this should always be understood to mean the distance existing from one string to the other, struck open. As for the tuning the viols should have between each other, one must first suppose that the bass (*basse-contre*) is well tuned according to the principles that I have just stated, then one will tune with its chanterelle the second string of the tenor viol putting it at the unison.

Jules Pollux makes mention of a certain instrument of the Ancients which has five strings made of bull's hide, which they cause to sound with a plectrum made of the claw of a goat. It is held that the Scythians were the inventors of this instrument, but its true form is not known any more than that of the instrument by which the Apollo of the Lacedaemonians was represented, on which he played with four bands, making by himself alone a powerful consort capable of charming the ears of the listeners with its melodious harmony.

Of the Violin, the Poche, and of the Rebec (14)

(Fol. 109): I concede that the forms of the violin and of the viol are almost alike; I find nevertheless some difference between these two instruments: firstly, in that the viol has a hollower and deeper belly than the violin; secondly, in that the violin is never fitted but with four strings, which ascend by fifths, and that the viol has more, which are tuned in fourths. Thirdly, the violin has no frets marked on its fingerboard, and the viol ordinarily has seven. Moreover, the manner of playing them is quite diverse also, for those who play the viol hold it resting on their knees, and the bowings go contrary to those of the violins because the thick strings of the viols are on the side of the right hand which holds the bow, which it must push toward the chanterelle: but it is otherwise on the violin; for it is held leaning against the left shoulder and the bow is pushed toward the thickest string, except on the one that serves as bass (i.e. the violoncello). The tablature for both of them is expressed as much in notes as by letters: but when it is given in letters, those of violin players is always turned upside down and contrary wise to the other, inasmuch as the chanterelle is taken by the one as first string, and the others reckon it as the last.

For the rest, the violin and the viol are largely conformable: for, in addition to the similarity of the fingerboard, of the head, and of the soundholes, these two instruments toward the bottom have a curved and upright bridge which, being placed vertically on the upper table, presses it with the force of the strings that are stretched upon it, these being attached behind the bridge to a wooden tailpiece, which is fastened (*va respondre*) to a button or pulley fixed near the end of the same table and below it. Furthermore, for the violin as well as for the viol, one makes use of a bow fitted

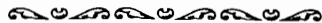
in the same fashion with horse's hair stiffly tensed, which, being rubbed with rosin, by its agitation and beating causes the strings to resound, the thickness of the latter always having to increase from the chanterelle to the bourdon (i.e. from the highest string to the lowest).

The violins are destined principally for dances, balls, ballets, masquerades, serenades, aubades, feasts and other joyous pastimes, having been adjudged more suitable for these recreational exercises than any other sort of instrument.

There is one kind of violin, which is the smallest of all, that is commonly named "poche", because it is kept in a leather pouch to protect it.⁷ The construction of this one most often consists of only two pieces of wood glued together, one of which serves for the back, the sides, the neck and the head, and the other serves as table, being placed on top to cover the body.

The rebec is different from the violin and closely resembles the poche, having a body straight up and down without any voiding of the sides by the cutting away of a semicircle. The name rebec is derived from the word Rebiag, which among the Chaldeans signified an instrument of four strings, whence the Italians took their Ribeba, as attested by Pierre Loyer (l. 8 des Spect., c. 3); nevertheless the rebec ordinarily has only three strings, which are customarily kept highly tensed and tuned in fifths the same as those of the violin. Since the violin was invented the use of the rebechas not been continued, having lost its vogue and its primary credit through the introduction of the other. Those who still use it ordinarily have its whole body made of maple and want its upper table to be of spruce: this is also observed in the fabrication of the majority of stringed instruments.

⁷ This is Mersenne's explanation, which has been retained: ". . . it is so small that the violinists who teach dancing carry it in their pouches" (Harm. Univ., l. 3, p. 177).



When the cloth was ta'en away
Ministrels strait began to play,
And while harps and viols join
Raptur'd bards in strain divine,
Loud the trembling arches rung
With nobel deeds we sung.

Duchesne, Works of Alain Chartier, (Trans. Dr. Burney)

THE VIOL IN FRANCE

by

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In Italy the violin had clearly established its preeminence in concerted music by 1650, and the musical influence of Italian violinist composers was soon to spread thru Europe; the viols were long since forgot. In England the Fantasias of Purcell of 1680 were the final expression of a magnificent tradition of viol playing and viol music going back a century. In France the Vingt-quatre violons du roi, used for the court ballet and imitated all over Europe, had been the rage since the reign of Louis XIII, and the use of violins became established in the opera orchestra. However, for domestic chamber music, including solo playing, the viols have preferable qualities and remained popular in France through the 17th century well into the 18th, during which time fine artists of the bass viol enjoyed royal patronage. In the 18th century treble viol playing became a popular pastime of cultivated ladies, perhaps to show a pretty leg as well as to make pleasing sounds. For a century following the middle 17th century viol playing flowered richly in France: several generations of players of prodigious technical capacity produced an extensive and varied repertory, generally consistent in musical aesthetic and in instrumental treatment, which fully exploited the intrinsic resources of the viol. Fortunately there are many publications of these violists extant in European libraries. Using these, we may today reconstruct the technique of the French violists and bring their music to life again.

The Task

Before the music of this school can be realized in musical sound today, a great deal of work has to be done. Existing material must be located, copied, and described. From the mass of material specific examples must be selected, copied into score, and realized for the harpsichord. The performance may then be prepared consulting those treatises and prefaces in which violists gave instruction in viol playing, and by following the indications marked so carefully by the composers in the engraved editions of their music. Not least is the task of the performer, to train his hands in a sophisticated skill long since in disuse.

Although the music of the French school constitutes the largest and most idiomatic repertory for solo viol, there are but few modern publications of it. One is always well advised to check any modern edition against the original text before using it, and it is usually necessary to reconstruct printed realizations to be suitable for harpsichord.