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Purcell Fantasias

Purcell's Fantasias represent a final hurrah for viol consort music. The ensemble was no longer fashionable at the time of these works, having ceded ground to the instruments of the violin family. It is a great loss in the history of musical performance, as the reedy, plaintive voice of the viols has a poignant flexibility of nuance and the blend of consort instruments offers unparalleled unctuous richness. Often the opening of the chest of viols was an invitation to an evening to music making among friends, convivial and intimate. In spirit and perhaps in timbre the closest modern institution to the consort is the string quartet, and we believe that a translation of these works into our language is apt, beautiful and potent. We aim to draw our audience into the parlor, to invite our listeners to consort with us.

Clearly the viol consort ignited Purcell's heart and imagination, and these pieces are, as the title indicates, filled with fantasy. They both lament and dance, wail and playfully scurry. They seem to explore the boundary between private and public music, now on this side now on that, and do so with the utmost guileless naturalness. The blend of the parts and their confrontations give a visceral thrill. Particularly exciting are the wild dissonances that blossom in the texture, each with a special frisson. At times a pleading dissonance slips into one even more spicy and anguished. In the spirit of a great massage, these harmonies hurt in the most delicious way and give us a sense of the physicality of musical discourse. Perhaps the more modern game that approximates the sense of being part of a viol consort is Twister! Certainly here limbs converse and collide and all involved are intertwined and intimately connected.

Note by Mark Steinberg