

Re-envisioning the Broken Consort: Doing More with Less

by Andrew Hartig

Introduction

Though most lutenists eventually find an opportunity to play through at least some of the extant duet repertoire (especially the English repertoire of treble-ground duets), probably very few have ever had an opportunity to play through any of the consort works because of a perceived lack of appropriate instrumentation. This had been the case for myself until this last year when our ensemble decided to grapple with consort works from the Cambridge manuscripts, despite only having lutes, a cittern, and a bass-viol at our disposal. Based on this experience, it is the goal of this article 1) to share the knowledge that consort music can be divided into an early and late style and 2) to show how an understanding of the early style allows one to create an alternative instrumentation to make a sizable portion of consort music readily available.

The Broken Consort: A “Fixed” Form?

Most lutenists today are familiar with the notion of the English “broken consort,” an ensemble made up of the “exquisite six”: lute, cittern, bandora, flute, treble-viol, and bass-viol. Undeniably, this instrumentation was well known and enjoyed during the late 16th and early 17th centuries, as evidenced by iconography, printed books, and manuscripts:

- ◆ A consort of six is depicted in the painting “The Birth and Death of Sir Henry Unton.”¹
- ◆ Thomas Morley’s *First Booke of Consort Lessons* (first published in 1599 and republished in an expanded edition in 1611), Philip Rosseter’s *Lessons for Consort* (1609), and Sir William Leighton’s *Teares or Lamentacions of a Sorrowfull Soule* (1614 edition only; the 1613 edition of the same name does not contain music) all recommend this instrumentation.
- ◆ The manuscript collections such as the Cambridge consort books and the so-called “Walsingham”/Beverley consort partbooks (although missing the bandora books) also supply ample evidence of the use of this form.

However, evidence also exists that musicians of the late 16th and early 17th centuries were using forms alternate to the “standard” consort of six:

- ◆ The title page of Richard Allison’s *Psalmes of David in Meter* of 1599 calls for the tunes to be sung and played upon “the Lute, Orpharyon, Citterne, or Base Violl, severally or altogether.”
- ◆ Crathes Castle in Scotland has figures painted on the ceiling representing the nine muses playing in a consort comprised of violin, bass-viol, lute, (bass?) flute, harp, cittern, and possibly clavichord.²
- ◆ The pieces in the Cambridge consort books may call for alternative instrumentation, with only 27 definitely arranged for the “exquisite six.” Alternative instrumentation

includes “full consort” minus cittern, “full consort” minus lute, trios or quartets with and without lute, works without any plucked instruments, works for lute duo (including just lute and bass-viol), and works for viols and orpharions of various pitches.³

- ◆ Even the renowned Renaissance theorist Michael Praetorius writes of the English consort as being surprisingly more inclusive: “The English speak, most appositively, to *consortio*, of a *consort* when several persons with a large variety of instruments, such as harpsichord or large virginals, large *lyra*, double harp, lutes, theorboes, bandoras, penorcon[s], cittern[s], viola da gamba, a small treble-violin [tuned c’ g’ d’ a’], a transverse flute or a recorder, sometimes also a softly played trombone or racket, play quietly, delicately and intimately together in one company and society, and harmonise with one another in a pleasing symphony.”⁴

Duet vs. Consort Lesson

In his 1976 article on “The English Lute Duet and the Consort Lesson,” Lyle Nordstrom demonstrated that there may have existed a continued relationship between the duet form and the consort lesson. Nordstrom postulated that “experimentation with accompaniment instruments led in the 1580s to the standardization of the consort lesson ensemble,” and describes a possible evolution of the broken consort as follows: “start with a lute duet; replace the ground with the bandora, cittern, bass-viol combination; add the violin, which plays the basic tune which is part of so many of these duets; and then add the final spice of the flute sound, to provide more inner counterpoint and to balance the prevalent string sound.”⁵

Accordingly, Nordstrom has noted that several pieces survive in the Cambridge books that appear to “have evidently been hastily written to accompany a lute duet.”⁶ These pieces, including “Go Merely Wheele,” “Green Sleeves,” “Chi Passa,” “Holburns Farewell,” and “Green Garters,” use some combination of bass-viol, cittern, and recorder.⁷ Likewise, one piece in the “Walsingham”/Beverley partbooks, “The Spanish Measure,” has parts written in only for the bass-viol and cittern, which fit well with the surviving duet part by Richard Alison in the “Board” Lute Book, f. 4.⁸

Late vs. Early Consort Styles

As lute players, we can begin to understand the nature of consort lessons by dividing them, based on the role of the lute, into what I call the “late style” and the “early style.” The late style is described by Nordstrom as being a “four-part composition in which the original melodic parts (the violin, flute, and bass-viol) were joined by a fourth, in the uppermost line of the lute part,” and in which the “diminutions in the lute part on the repeats were

generally then diminutions of the alto line.”⁹ This form is generally complex and often features a “reporting” style in which various instruments or sections of instruments answer each other thematically. (A good example of this sort of reporting can be heard in both the consort and lute duet versions of the “De La Tromba Pavan.”) This late style comprises the majority of pieces from both Morley and Rosseter and requires not only the use of all six instruments for its complex textures, but also for the lutenist to be adept with very rapid diminutions. This type of consort lesson, often considered the height of the form, is delightful to hear but demands much from the ensemble.

Regarding the early style, Nordstrom notes, “the earlier consort lesson music often placed the melody in both the lute and the violin, producing heterophony in the repeated sections when the lute breaks into elaborate diminutions. This rather subordinate contribution of the violin tends to confirm that it was an instrument ‘added’ to a lute duet.”¹⁰ In short, the distinguishing feature of this earlier style is that the lute features predominantly as a melody instrument and plays what is essentially the treble part of a treble-ground duet. An example of a piece in this style comes from Morley’s well-known setting of “My Lord of Oxenford’s Maske.” While this particular piece may be daunting to some lutenists (especially at a tempo more desirable to the other players who may have no such divisions), in regard to complexity it is certainly within the realm of the typical treble of a treble-ground duet and not above the ability of the average lutenist when taken at a modest tempo.

Implications for Creating Lessons for “Small Consort”

The good news for the modern performer is that this knowledge opens up a number of new works for “small consort.” Consort lessons of this earlier style abound in the Cambridge consort books; likewise, many treble-ground duets are available to be played as lute trebles in this earlier style. In fact, any treble-ground duet could be played¹¹ either by using existing parts (many bandora grounds exist, for instance, in the “Marsh” Lute Book; or parts from the cittern or bass-viol partbooks could be used) or by arranging existing lute duet grounds for whatever instrumentation is desired or available.

One possibility for “small consort” is to use just the cittern and bass-viol, which together more than adequately provide the ground for either a treble-ground duet or lute-melody consort lesson. From personal experience, this combination provides one with both bass and harmony, the sustain of bowed notes and the rhythm of plectrum-plucked strings, and the mellow warmth of gut and the sprightly cheer of metal. The instruments each man-

age to capture their own “sonic space” in which to play without drowning the others out, not too unlike a jazz trio of piano, bass, and guitar.

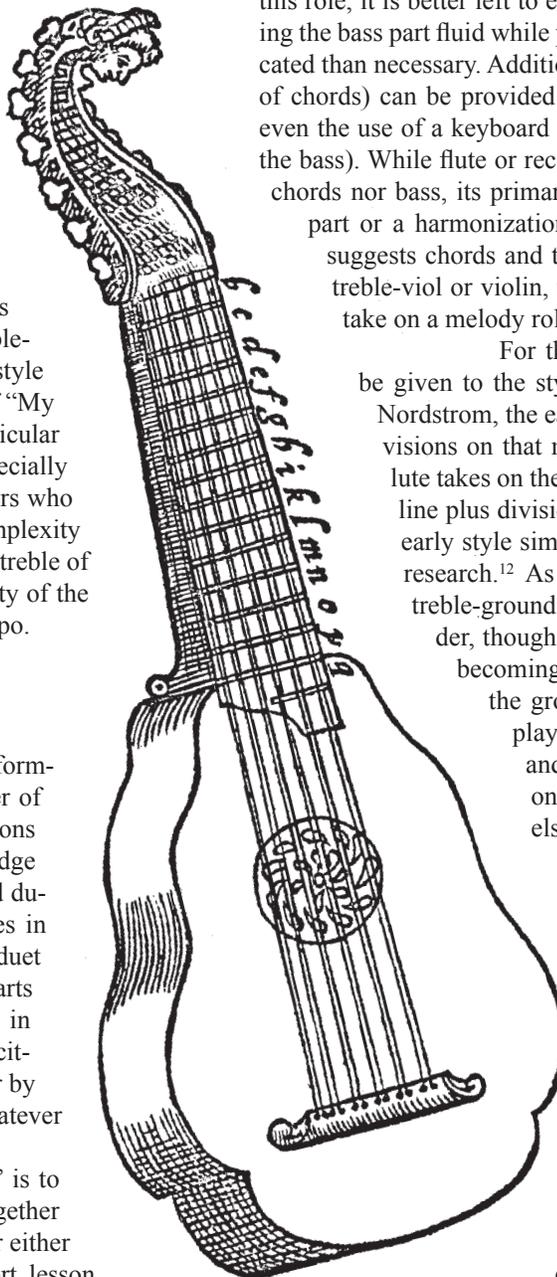
Practical Considerations for Arranging Small Consorts

The determination of the instrumentation of any given “small consort” will depend largely on the resources that one has available. However, if assembling a small group from scratch, one may wish to consider the elements of harmony, rhythm, balance, and timbre. As is the case with treble-ground duets, some form of outlining the bass is necessary. While the lute can take on some of this role, it is better left to either bandora or bass-viol since keeping the bass part fluid while playing divisions can be more complicated than necessary. Additional harmonic suggestion (in the form of chords) can be provided by cittern, bandora, or orpharion, or even the use of a keyboard instrument (which could also provide the bass). While flute or recorder cannot provide the lutenist with chords nor bass, its primary usefulness is in providing an inner part or a harmonization an octave above an inner part that suggests chords and tonalities. The same could be said for treble-viol or violin, though it seems more natural for it to take on a melody role.

For the lute, primary consideration should be given to the style of the piece. As differentiated by Nordstrom, the earlier style is based on melody and divisions on that melody, whereas in the later style the lute takes on the role of playing an independent “alto” line plus divisions on that line. Finding pieces in the early style simply becomes a matter of a little bit of research.¹² As stated previously, the treble of any treble-ground duet could also work as consort fodder, though one runs the risk of the other players becoming bored due to the repetitive nature of the ground.¹³ A quick fix for this is for the players of the ground to provide variation and embellishment of the ground based on historical practice and existing models (for which, see below).

We are fortunate in the case of the cittern that so much music has survived. Most consort works or possible consort works have ready-made parts that can be taken from manuscripts. In particular, the cittern partbook Cambridge manuscript Dd.14.24 contains an abundance of cittern consort parts (including some for works that do not survive in other partbooks).

What is surprising, however, is how often these accompaniments seem to be corrupt. For instance, major/minor clashes and chords built from the wrong root tend to be fairly common. One explanation for this is the theory that many of the cittern parts were created apart from the ensemble



using only a bass part as the basis for construction.¹⁴ Knowing this, such problems can be easily rectified. It is intriguing that the parts in Dd.14.24 are comprised of sparse, simple chords and rhythms since the collector Matthew Holmes also compiled a manuscript (Dd.4.23) containing some of the finest and most elaborate solo cittern pieces of the day. Given the elaborateness of the pieces in Dd.4.23, it is hard to believe that the consort parts in Dd.14.24 are meant to be played as-is. Fortunately for us, these elaborate settings provide us with clues about how one might modify and augment these sparse consort parts as well as other parts from other manuscripts. Likewise, many of these solo pieces also have cognate consort versions, opening up the possibility of using some of these solo settings either directly in the consort or as the inspiration for augmenting the surviving consort parts. Other possible sources for cittern ideas can be found in the printed collections for Holborne and Robinson with, again, a few of the solo pieces being cognates for other surviving consort parts.

When arranging or editing bass viol parts, it may be worth noting that most of the manuscript sources lack barlines for these parts, and the note values do not consistently correspond to the note values found in the lute or cittern parts (especially those in the Cambridge books). The bass parts are usually written in larger note values corresponding to whole and half notes rather than quarters or eighths. Coincident with the lack of barlines is the occasional omission of a note (especially when in a string of repeated values of the same note). The parts at first glance can often appear dry and repetitive; the bass-viol parts in Holborne's *Cittharn Schoole* (1597) may offer some ideas about how the lines can be changed or embellished to suit a smaller consort.

Conclusions and Implications

For the modern player wishing to explore the consort repertoire with limited instrumental resources, the significance of the difference between the early and late styles of consort lessons cannot be overstated. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that the full broken consort of lute, cittern, bandora, flute, treble-viol, and bass-viol was not always the norm for consort music, opening the door for us to be historically justified in altering the instrumentation of the consort to suit our needs. Simply put, successful consort works of the earlier style may be played with limited instrumentation so long as the lute part contains a melody (and hopefully diminutions upon it); any variety of additional instruments can then be added to play the other parts.

A final (and ironic) implication of the ideas of this article is that one might conversely transform some of the consort lessons of the earlier style into new duets by taking the existing cittern and bass-viol parts from a consort lesson and arranging them as a ground for a second lute. In such a manner it may be possible to play as a duet a masterful piece such as "Holburns Farewell," which, until now, has only been acknowledged as a piece for either full consort or duet for cittern and bass-viol.¹⁵

For now, however, I will leave you with this same piece as adapted for our ensemble's "small consort" of lute, cittern, and bass-viol using the principles of editing, embellishment, and invention as outlined in this article. I hope that this article and arrangement will inspire other to try a "new old thing" as did our ensemble.

For the complete score, individual parts, and additional versions of "Holburn's Farewell" (including the original, unedited and unarranged parts for cittern and bass viol) in both PDF and Fronimo formats, visit <http://tm.theaterofmusic.com/music/>.

Suggested Reading:

Harwood, Ian, "The Origins of the Cambridge Lute Manuscripts," *LSJ* vol. V (1963), pp.32-48.

Harwood, Ian, "Rosseter's Lessons for Consort of 1609," *LSJ* vol. VII (1965), pp.15-23. Includes contents of the Rosseter books and concordances.

Nordstrom, Lyle, "The Cambridge Consort Books," *JLSA* vol. V (1972), p.70-103. Includes an inventory of pieces in the lute (Dd.3.18), cittern (Dd.14.24), bass-viol (Dd.5.20), and flute/recorder (Dd.5.21) partbooks.

Nordstrom, Lyle, "The English Lute Duet and the Consort Lesson," *LSJ* vol. XVIII (1976), pp.5-22.

Spring, Matthew, "Reconstructing the consort lessons of Richard Reade," in *Lute News* vol. 54 (June 2000), pp.6-14. Includes an inventory with incipits.

Footnotes:

¹For an image, see The Renaissance Cittern Site: Art Gallery "Consort." Detail from "Birth and Death of Sir Henry Unton." Available: <http://www.cittern.theaterofmusic.com/art/nton.html>.

²Forrester, Peter, "A Scottish Consort," *LSJ* vol. XXVII (1987), pp.38-42.

³"Richard Read and his music: a rejoinder from Robert Webb," *Lute News* vol. 57 (April 2001), p.31. The fact that it is not known exactly how the manuscripts and the music within them were used compounds the problem of trying to understand which instrumentation may have been used. For a summary of findings and some theories on ways the Cambridge books may have been used, see Matthew Spring's talk to the Lute Society, "Reconstructing the consort lessons of Richard Reade," *Lute News* vol. 54 (June 2000), pp.6-14.

⁴Quote taken from a translation by Michael Graubart of selections from the "Termini Musici," the third part of Praetorius's *Syntagma Musicum* of 1619, found in *LSJ* vol. II (1960), p.32.

⁵Nordstrom, Lyle, "The English Lute Duet and the Consort Lesson," *LSJ* vol. XVIII (1976), p.9.

⁶*Ibid.*, p.8.

⁷It may be possible that some of these pieces were intended to have a bandora part, but as no bandora part book survives, it would be impossible to tell. "Chi passa," for instance, has a surviving recorder and lute part, but no bass-viol part, leading one to suspect that a bandora accompaniment was also intended.

⁸Nordstrom, Lyle, "The English Lute Duet and the Consort Lesson," *LSJ* vol. XVIII (1976), p.8.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.10.

¹¹It should be noted here that "equal" lute duets (i.e. duets in which each lute plays an equal, interlocked part) may be inappropriate for small consort because of the difficulty in creating an arrangement. This is, in part, due to the equal duet having possibly developed as a response to the sound and style of the full consort, including the "reporting" mentioned earlier. For a complete discussion of the evolution of the duet style in relation to the consort lesson, see Nordstrom, "The English Lute Duet and the Consort Lesson," *LSJ* vol. XVIII (1976), pp.5-22.

¹²For dealing with the Cambridge partbooks, Nordstrom's "The Cambridge Consort Books," *JLSA* vol. V (1972), pp.70-103, is highly recommended, as it includes an inventory of the books plus a description of the pieces including whether or not a melody is present in a lute part.

¹³Nordstrom mentions that this boredom due to repetition may be one of the reasons that consort lessons often took the form of dance pieces: "The basic three-section form, as opposed to the single, repeated ground, gave longer, more interesting parts to the added instruments, while still retaining the virtues of the variation form by including divisions and diminutions for the lute ... on the repeats of each section." *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁴Spring, p.11.

¹⁵For the cittern and bass-viol duet, see "A Farewell" in Anthony Holborne's *Cittharn Schoole*, 1597, f. P2v-Q.

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