

Tickle the Minikin

17th-century lyra-viol music
Robert Smith *viola da gamba*



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About Robert Smith:

'Robert Smith thrillingly exploits the full expressive range of the viol'
Classical Ear

'Robert Smith's plaintive expressive poise'
BBC Music Magazine

Pieces in Harpe Sette Sharpe

- Thomas Mace (1612/13-c.1706)
1. **Prelude** [1:17]
Simon Ives (1600-1662)
2. **Allemande** [2:20]
Charles Coleman (1605-1664)
3. **Courante** [1:19]
Anon.
4. **Carillon** [4:16]
Thomas Mace
5. **Air** [2:04]
John Taylor (dates unknown) & Anon.
6. **Allemande & Sarabande** [1:57]
Anon.
7. **Thumping Almaine** [1:23]

Pieces in 'ededf'

- John Jenkins (1592-1678)
8. **Allemande** [2:11]
William Young (d. 1662)
9. **Allemande** [1:37]
10. **Sarabande** [1:31]

Pieces in Lancashire Pipes Tuning

- Anon.
11. **Prelude and Lancashire Pipes** [3:11]
12. **Kate of Hardie, Piggies of Rumsey & Lancashire Pipes** [1:40]

Pieces in French Sette

- John Jenkins
13. **Almaine** [2:52]
14. **Courante** [1:58]
15. **Allemande** [2:01]
16. **Courante** [1:25]
17. **Courante** [1:35]

Pieces in High Harp Flat

- Anon.
18. **Prelude** [1:41]
John Jenkins
19. **Allemande** [1:32]
20. **Courante** [1:37]
Dietrich Steffkins (c. 1600-1673)
21. **Courante** [1:36]
22. **Sarabande** [0:39]
John Jenkins
23. **Allemande** [2:40]
Dietrich Steffkins
24. **Courante** [1:24]
Anon.
25. **Sarabande** [1:19]

Pieces in 'fedef'

Anon.	
26. Air	[1:43]
27. Air	[1:12]

Alfonso Wayne Tuning

Anon.	
28. Jemmye	[5:39]

Pieces in Harpe Sette Flat

Anon.	
29. Courante	[1:09]
John Esto (dates unknown)	
30. Allemande	[1:40]
Simon Ives	
31. Sarabande	[0:32]
John Esto/William Young	
32. Allemande	[1:23]
John Esto/John Jenkins	
33. Courante	[1:13]
John Esto	
34. Sarabande	[0:37]
Anon.	
35. Air	[2:02]

Total playing time	[64:34]
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PH: ALEXGIACOMELLI

Robert Smith

**Tickle the Minikin:
Mysterious lyra-viol music from
seventeenth-century Holland & England**

British Library Manuscript GB-Lbl, Mus. 249
Manchester Lyra-Viol Book, GB-Mp, BRm/832 Vu51

The Lyra-Viol

The lyra-viol was an instrument that flourished in seventeenth-century England; popular with musicians and amateurs alike it was practiced by distinguished gentlemen including such luminaries as the English diarist, Samuel Pepys. Despite three Anglo-Dutch wars the intense cultural exchange between England and Holland during the century ensured the presence of lyra-viol repertoire in the low-countries, with the influential Dutch poet Constantijn Huygens among its more notable enthusiasts.

The lyra-viol's association with playing chords suggests it was named after the lirone (see image right) – a many-stringed instrument originating in Italy with several strings bowed at the same time to produce blocks of harmony. The lyra-viol can be thought of as a bass-viol (or viola da gamba) with some subtle modifications to make chord playing easier such as a flatter bridge, smaller overall size and occasionally sympathetic strings.



(photograph courtesy of
Albert Comper Photography)

The differences between the two instruments were so slight in fact that the prolific English publisher, John Walsh, quickly dropped the term 'Lyra Viol' in favour of 'The Viol, Lyra-Way', suggesting that it was as much a style as an instrument. Players who had access to only one type of viol would most likely have played both repertoires on the one instrument.

It is, however, the style of the lyra-viol repertoire that provides the richest area of interest. As with the lute, the numerous strings and frets allow the viol to accompany itself and it was therefore the perfect instrument for a gentleman to play alone at home. Because of this feature, the writing tended to be polyphonic albeit within the limitations of the instrument – one cannot bow the top and bottom strings simultaneously for example. Dozens of alternative tunings existed in order to achieve maximum sonority in certain keys, and music was notated in tablature which facilitated playing pieces in these different tunings. All sorts of ornaments were developed including, perhaps the most striking, plucking the strings with the left-hand – a 'Thumpe'.

Eighteen printed sources emerged in England between 1601 and 1682 and in addition to this there exist over seventy-five manuscript

collections from England and abroad. Almost a century of music still remains, for the most part, unexplored. A small number of sources have entered general circulation of viol players such as the 'Manchester' and 'Marsh' lyra-viol books as well as the publications by Tobias Hume and John Playford. While a handful of pieces presented in this recording originate from the Manchester Lyra-Viol Book, the majority of pieces come from the hitherto obscure British Library Manuscript: Mus. 249.

It's possible to think of these various manuscript collections as seventeenth-century music-playlists, with players compiling their favourite pieces into one volume. The most popular pieces are found in many sources, and each manuscript tends to contain a number of rarer pieces, often unique. MS. 249 contains sixty-two different pieces with twenty-four of them unique to the manuscript. In addition, transmission was not at all 'digital' and interesting differences occur between sources – often minor and occasionally radical.

Manuscript 249

Many years ago, in the Royal Library of The Hague, I discovered a photocopy simply titled 'Manuscript for the Lyra-Viol c.1670'. It contained works by John Jenkins, William Lawes and Thomas Mace, amongst others,

and I made a copy for myself to explore with my instrument. At the time, as a relative newcomer to the viol, I failed to make much sense of the contents – the challenge of learning to read tablature and figure out the tunings was a little overwhelming. I filed the manuscript away and forgot about it for a few years.

More recently, I looked again at the manuscript, being better equipped to decipher it. The manuscript is often unclear, with a sparing use of bar lines and frequent absence of rhythmic notation but, despite this, the high quality of the music in the collection persuaded me to devote further study to the manuscript. Correspondence with English music expert Andrew Ashbee revealed that the manuscript was now in the British Library and that he had indexed the collection some years earlier.

Having an index was the key to understanding and performing the works from the manuscript. Although the manuscript itself is largely unknown, many pieces contained within it often occur in other sources (known as a concordance) and this is where the detective work begins. The index lists the manuscripts in which the concordances occur and, since MS. 249 is particularly unclear for a *lyra-viol*

manuscript, a glance at another version often answers questions and resolves ambiguities. How does one find concordances? By painstakingly trawling through other indices and manuscripts and comparing the tablature to find matches. Performers were expected to embellish their performances and although tables of ornaments and their symbols exist, the number of surviving scores and parts with embellishments written in is few. With this in mind, a good reason to play from MS. 249 instead of a clearer version is the unique embellishments notated in the pieces.

MS. 249 was quite possibly compiled in Holland but it is not known by whom. The paper originated in Basel at the beginning of the seventeenth-century while the script and binding indicate that the manuscript was made around the 1670s.

Perhaps the most intriguing question raised by this manuscript is to whom did it belong? From studying and playing the manuscript it is possible to hypothesise as to the type of person. It was obviously someone who was able on the *viol* as some of the pieces provide technical challenges. Not only that, this player appeared to have a tendency to show off – the pieces are often liberally peppered with ornaments and are often rhythmically more elaborate than in other sources. It was clearly

someone who could identify work of quality – the manuscript is full of musically interesting and entertaining pieces. If the original owner was indeed living in The Netherlands they probably had access to a variety of sources of *lyra-viol* music on the continent as well as in Britain. Perhaps tradesmen or diplomats passed through with their instruments, or maybe the latest compositions were exchanged by post with contacts in foreign lands. The person may have been more interested in performing the works rather than collecting for posterity – the untidy notation points to the manuscript's use as a memory aid.

Could it have been a professional musician such as Dietrich Steffkins? Steffkins spent large amounts of time in England, Holland and Germany, exchanged pieces with John Jenkins by post and was for a time the teacher of Constantijn Huygens. Huygens wrote about him, 'I have been told that the marvellous Stephkins performs more miracles on the *viola da gamba* than any man before.'

Could it have been somebody like Huygens himself, for whom music was a serious hobby next to his job as secretary to the Prince of Orange? Huygens claimed to have written over 800 works for lute, guitar, *viol* and more, though sadly only

one remains extant. Working for the prince would have given him daily access to a great many visitors from different lands, and surely a perfect opportunity to exchange music.

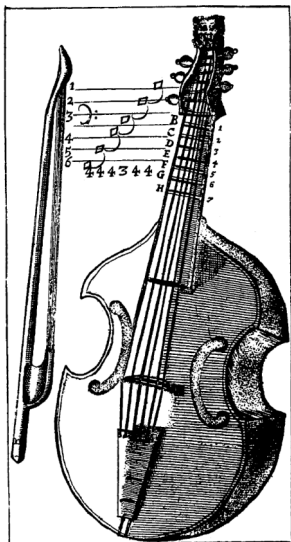
Or could it have been an Englishman, like Samuel Pepys, who travelled to The Netherlands on political business, making music on the sea-voyage along the way, 'I went to play two trebles [viols] in the great cabin below, which my Lord hearing, after supper he called for our instruments, and played a set of [Matthew] Lock's [*sic*], two trebles, and a base, and that being done, he fell to singing of a song made upon the Rump [Parliament].'

The exact provenance of the manuscript may never be discovered – and further details of its journey to the collections of the British Library are also scant. Most recently, it was auctioned by Sotheby's in 1995 from an anonymous seller on 'the continent' – details of the purchase could not be provided owing to reasons of confidentiality, further deepening this tantalising mystery.

Tablature and Scordatura

The issues of music notation and tuning systems are closely connected here. Music for *lyra-viol* is almost always written in tablature, that is to say a set of six lines representing the strings and letters or

numbers on the lines representing the frets, 'a' for an open string, 'b' for the first fret etc. The consequence of this is that you are told directly where to put the fingers on your instrument. (Mensural, or common, notation assumes the player knows where all the notes are on his instrument and tells us which notes to play, but not where to play them!) The tablature system has clear advantages for playing the lyra-viol.



In the eighteenth century the viol had a standardised tuning of d'-a-e-c-G-D-(A), which allowed the viol to play well in all tonalities, an increasing requirement. The seventeenth-century saw over sixty different tunings for the viol that tended to be biased to a particular key. The advantage is that the home key sounds extra resonant with open strings vibrating sympathetically. The disadvantages are that modulations to other tonalities become a challenge with more difficult left-hand positions and a lack of resonating open strings. With all these different tunings, tablature allowed players to quickly switch from one to another without having to think too much about the location of the notes.

This recording uses eight different tunings – some of them were common enough to have names such as 'High Harp Flat', and 'French Sette', while some of them just have a reference to the frets where unisons occur with open strings, e.g. 'ededf'. The most extreme tuning used here is the Lancashire Pipes which requires the player to twist two strings across each other in order to create a large interval – the drone of the bagpipes.

With each tuning applying different tensions to the strings, and therefore to the instrument, different characteristics are created.



Sometimes the sound is open and bright, sometimes more closed or nasal; the tuning can dramatically affect the mood of the compositions.

Instrument

I have to a certain extent chosen convenience over authenticity for this recording. For want of a more historically appropriate instrument I used my seven-string Colichon copy made by Pierre Bohr in Milan in 2010. The seventh (bass) string was never present on the lyra-viol so I removed it from my instrument. The decrease in tension on the instrument body resulted in a more open and resonant tone. The different tunings required that the upper two strings changed in pitch by as much as 4 whole-tones and for this reason I used thinner strings for the higher tunings, and thicker strings for the lower tunings. I tried to achieve an intonation approaching pure and this was largely possible because of the harmonic limitations of the repertoire. In order to do this I had to move the frets around with each different tuning, sometimes sticking an extra bit of fret on the fingerboard for enharmonic notes.

The Minikin

Minikin is a sixteenth-century term for the top

string of a viol or lute. For a long time it was thought to be of Dutch origin, where minneken can also mean sweetheart, or darling, but more recently it has been suggested that minikin was an English pronunciation of 'Munich' in Bavaria. Munich, or München, had a reputation in the sixteenth century for producing finest quality treble strings. The term 'tickle the minikin' was used, not always without allusion, for playing the viol much as 'tinkle the ivories' is used for the piano today.

This ambiguity in the identity of a word, spread across Europe, has a certain symbolism for the mysteries of MS. 249. Perhaps one day we can get to the bottom of where it came from and to whom it belonged.

Faith (wench) I cannot court thy sprightly eyes,
With the base Viall placed between my Thighes
I cannot lisp, nor to some Fiddle sing,
Nor run uppon a high strecht Minikin.

Sir John Davies (1569-1626)

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A more thorough examination and index of MS. 249 can be found in an article by Robert Smith published in Volume Seven of the *Viola da Gamba Society Journal* (2013) available online at: <http://www.vdgs.org.uk/journal.html>



Thanks

Thanks are due to Paolo Pandolfo for spending many hours with me and the manuscripts, and to Andrew Ashbee for tirelessly responding to my many requests for information. Thanks also to Rie Kimura for her astute advice while recording, to Guillermo Brachetta for his generous time in designing the cover artwork and to Adam Binks for doing a wonderful job.

Robert Smith

Robert Smith is an English viola da gambist and baroque cellist. In 2012 he won the Bach-Abel Viola da Gamba Competition in Köthen, taking the First Prize, Audience Prize and Special Prize. His performance of a heavy-metal transcription of a Metallica song was especially noted.

Robert's ensemble, Fantasticus, has received wide critical acclaim for its recent recordings of *stylus fantasticus* and French Baroque music. In 2013 his playing was described by *The Strad* as, 'Intensely expressive, highly dramatic.'

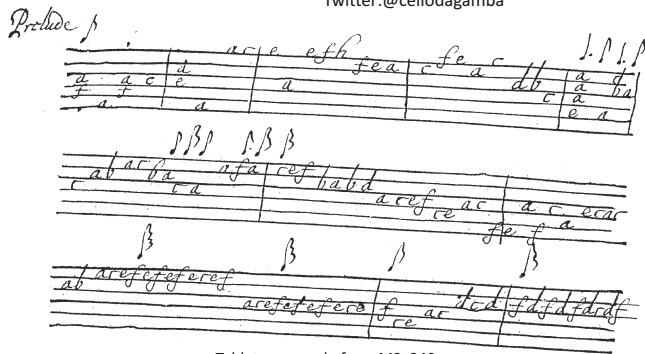
Robert studied Viola de Gamba with Mienie van der Velden (Amsterdam)

and Paolo Pandolfo (Basel). He also studied Baroque cello with Wouter Möller, Jaap ter Linden and Viola da Hoog. He was principal cellist with the European Union Baroque Orchestra in 2005/6.

Robert currently plays with the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and Fantasticus, amongst many other groups. In 2010 he won the second prize in the International Baroque Soloist competition in Brunnenthal, Austria. In ensembles he received several prizes in the Bruges Musica Antiqua Competition and the Van Wassenauer Competition (Amsterdam).

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Tablature sample from MS. 249

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Recorded in Zuidervermaning, Westzaan, The Netherlands on 18-20 August 2013

Producer, Engineer and Editor: Adam Binks

Recorded at 24-bit / 96kHz resolution

Cover design: Guillermo Brachetta

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info@resonusclassics.com

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