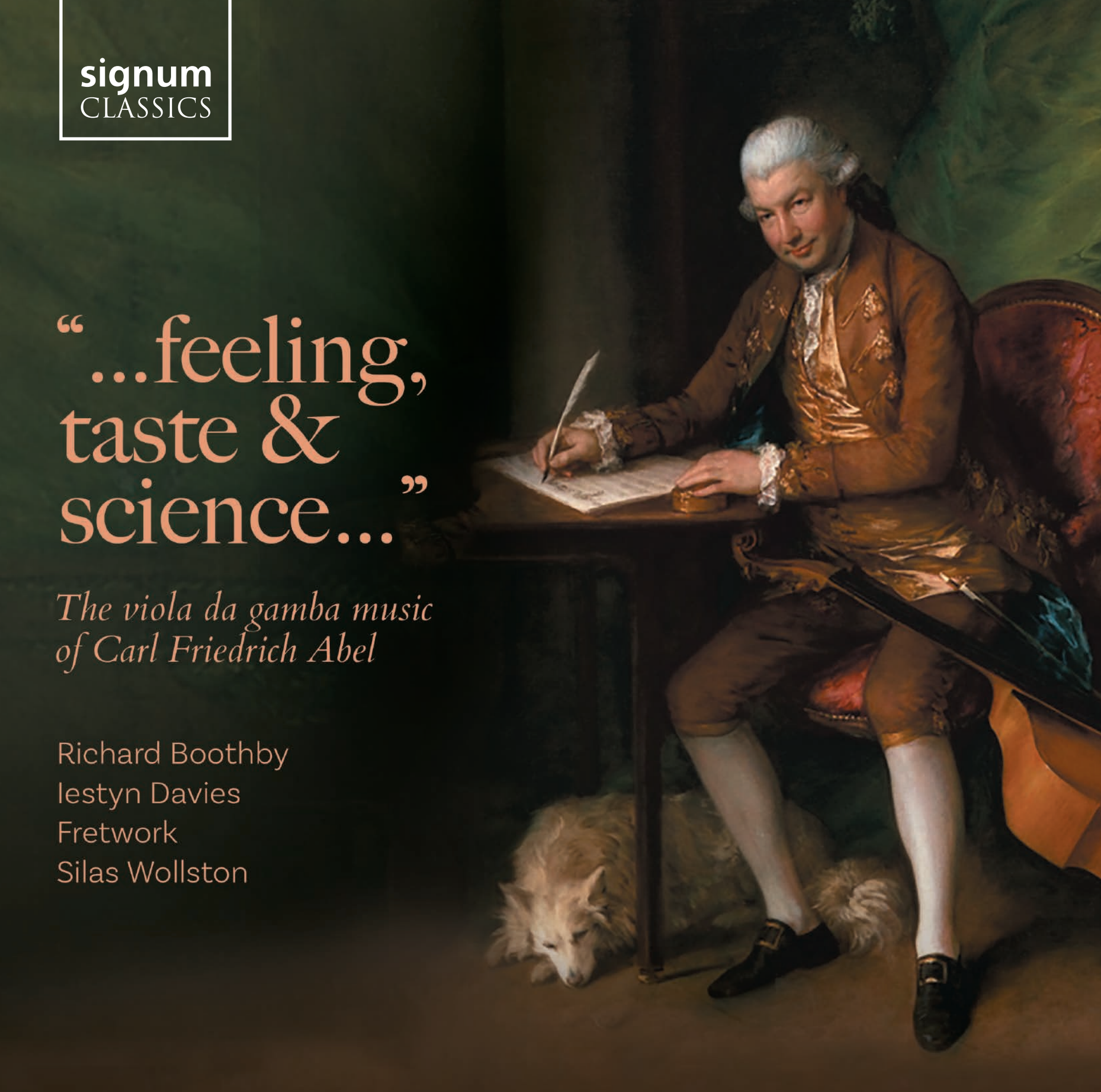
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“...feeling, taste & science...”

The viola da gamba music of Carl Friedrich Abel



Richard Boothby
Iestyn Davies
Fretwork
Silas Wollston

"...FEELING, TASTE & SCIENCE..."

		WK	AbelWV	
1	**[Prelude]**	204	A25	[0.40]
2	**[Prelude]**	205	A26	[1.41]
3	**Adagio**	187	A6	[3.02]
4	**Allegro**	198	A18	[3.21]
	Sonata in C minor, AbelWVB91		B91	
5	I. Moderato			[6.15]
6	II. Adagio			[2.53]
7	III. Vivace *with Silas Wollston, harpsichord*			[3.52]
8	**Frena le belle lagrime** *with Iestyn Davies - countertenor, Silas Wollston - harpsichord & Fretwork*		G1	[11.51]
9	**Fuga**	196	A16	[2.28]
	Sonata in F major, AbelWVB101		B101	
10	I. Allegro moderato			[5.12]
11	II. Adagio			[2.31]
12	III. Vivace *with Silas Wollston, harpsichord*			[2.39]
13	**[Allegro]**	208	A29	[4.28]
14	**Adagio**	209	A30	[3.14]
15	**Allegro**	207	A28	[3.29]
	Sonata in G minor, AbelWVB92		B92	
16	I. Allegro			[4.35]
17	II. Adagio			[2.33]
18	III. Tempo di Minuet *with Silas Wollston, harpsichord*			[2.44]
19	**Allegro**	186	A5	[2.16]
20	**Adagio**	189	A8	[2.04]
21	**Allegretto (A major)**	211	A32	[3.56]
22	**Allegro (A major)**	212	A33	[1.22]
	Total timings:			[1.17.00]

RICHARD BOOTHBY · IESTYN DAVIES · SILAS WOLLSTON · FRETWORK

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Carl Friedrich Abel was once considered the last great viol player, and that the instrument died with him. It was even suggested he was buried with his viol in St Pancras Old Church in London. But we now know that there were a handful of viol virtuosos still playing at the end of the 18th Century, and that a few players carried the tradition into the nineteenth century.

Abel, however, was the last great composer for his instrument, and his music shows a beguiling mixture of styles, from the high baroque reminiscent of J.S.Bach, through to the elegant classical style of Mozart and Haydn.

Recently, over twenty virtuosic sonatas by Abel have been discovered in a castle in Poland that once belonged to the Prussian Ambassador to London. Two of these are recorded here for the first time.

PROGRAMME NOTES

By 1650, English viol players were regarded as the best in the world, and many were employed in the courts and chapels of Europe: Christopher Simpson, Charles Butler, Alfonso Ferrabosco, Daniel Norcombe, Walter Rowe and William Young were just some of the English virtuosi both at home and abroad. But a century later, few people played the instrument, no-one wrote for it, and it was regarded as an antique curiosity at best.

But the viol wasn't dead, and one great player and composer came to London and re-ignited a passion and taste for the instrument. Carl Friedrich Abel's first appearance in London was on 5th April 1759 (a few days before Handel's death) in the Great Room in Dean Street.

He came from a large family of German musicians, mostly viol players and violinists, and his father, Christian Ferdinand, was a close friend of J.S.Bach in Cöthen, where our Abel was born in the same year that Bach left for Leipzig. When his father died in 1737, he went to Leipzig and studied with Bach, and then followed Bach's eldest son to Dresden until the destruction of that city in 1757. Then he moved to London, where he was to spend the rest of his life.

In that first concert, he played the harpsichord, the newly-invented pentachord and the viola da gamba. He was an immediate success. He was given a royal privilege to publish his music in 1760, which established him as a significant composer of symphonies, concerti, quartets and sonatas. His output was almost entirely instrumental, though in 1767 he contributed an aria to the pasticcio *Sifari*, for the castrato Guarducci. *Frena le belle lagrime* has a viol obligato, originally played by Abel himself; I have transposed it down to accommodate a counter-tenor voice and given the orchestral parts to my colleagues in Fretwork.

In 1763, J.S. Bach's youngest son, Johann Christian came to London, and he and Abel quickly renewed the friendship between the two families. They moved in together that same year, sharing rooms in Mead Street, Soho, and gave their first concert together 29th February 1764. The Bach-Abel concert series was to run for 17 years, from 1765 to 1781. There was roughly one concert per month, and they started in Carlisle House in Soho Square, but moved to King St in St James's. Such was the success of the concerts, that they built their own concert room in Hannover Square in 1775.

Abel was also a visitor to that other great cultural centre in England at the time, and made his Bath debut on 4th February 1760 at Wiltshire's Assembly Rooms, in which, among many other things, he played two solos on the viola da gamba. Also in Bath at the same time was the great English portraitist, Thomas Gainsborough. The two became close friends, and Gainsborough became an accomplished viol player.

In June of 1760 he painted this celebrated portrait of the young and controversial Ann Ford:



This remarkable work shows this no-less remarkable woman holding an English guitar, but with a 7-string viol hanging on the wall in the background, alluding to her performances on the viol. It wasn't a commission, but a calling card, so to speak: Gainsborough displayed it in one of his rooms, while he painted portraits in the other. Prospective clients were able to assess his talent and book an appointment. It was a deliberately provocative, voluptuous painting, intended to shock and attract. It seems to have worked:

Mary Delany commented:

'This morning went with Lady Westmoreland to see Mr. Gainsborough's pictures, and they may well be called what Mr. Webb unjustly says of Rubens, 'They are splendid impositions.' There I saw Miss Ford's picture, a whole length with her guitar, a most extraordinary figure, handsome and bold; but I should be very sorry to have any one I loved set forth in that manner.'

Gainsborough was a diligent pupil and highly musical. He painted two wonderful portraits of his friend, one on the cover of this CD and an earlier one in the National Portrait Gallery in London:



You'll see the similarity of the viol in this portrait to the instrument hanging on the wall in the Ann Ford portrait; but we have a sketch of this painting, showing Abel with a quite different instrument:



It could be that the acquisitive Gainsborough had bought the viol from Abel and used it in the Ford portrait, then preferred it to the viol Abel himself had brought to the NPG portrait - but we shall never know.

Gainsborough certainly had plenty of other viols, as this letter to William Jackson shows:

'I'm sick of Portraits and wish very much to take my Viol da Gam and walk off to some sweet Village where I can paint Landskips and enjoy the fag End of Life in quietness and ease'...'My Comfort is, I have 5 Viol's da Gamba, 3 Jayes and two Barak Normans'.

Abel published only a very small number of simple works for viol, but what has survived is an autograph manuscript of some 27 works for solo bass viol, now housed in the New York Public Library, known as the Drexel Manuscript. I have the feeling that this collection was written for Gainsborough - almost all the pieces are in the home key of D and are beautifully written for the instrument.

Abel himself was famous for his improvisations - as his obituary suggests:

'justly admired as he was at his publick Performances, it was a few only of his intimate friends in private who were witnesses of his most wonderful musical Powers, to come at which, a Bottle or two of good Burgundy before him, and his Viol di Gamba within his reach, were necessary. In that situation his Friends would introduce the subject of the human passions, and Abel not very capable of expressing in English his own sentiments, would catch up his Viol di Gamba, and tell the story of Lefevre thereon, till he brought tears into the eyes of his hearers, and not lay it down, till he had made his friends Gainsborough dance a Hornpipe on the Bottom of a Pewter Quart Pot.'

He would have had no need to write down such things. And Gainsborough was criticised, in an account after his death, by an estranged musical friend, the composer William Jackson:

… he frittered away his musical talents; and though possessed of ear, taste and genius, he never had application enough to learn his notes.'

This account was shortly to be flatly contradicted by a correspondent to a newspaper: 'Arbitrator' described Jackson's anecdotes as *'a series of improbable tales'* and went on:

'Your present correspondent has, more than once, seen Gainsborough playing from notes; but not content with his own oracular testimony, he has applied to several musicians of eminence, who had a personal knowledge of that artist, and they unite in opposing Mr Jackson's statement: nay, one of them assures me that Abel composed a fugue purposely for his friend Gainsborough to practise on the viol-di-gamba: - And could this be done without having learned his notes?'

And the Drexel manuscript contains just such an excellent Fugue, recorded here.

But much music for viol by Abel, though not published, must have been lost over time; and recently a number of sonatas for viol and continuo have been discovered in a castle in what is now Poland.

The current town of Milicz in Poland was in the 18th century the Silesian town of Militsch, and the castle there was owned by the Maltzan family. Count Joachim Carl Maltzan, an amateur viol player, was a politician, first posted to Berlin, where he may have met that other great virtuoso of the instrument, Ludwig Christian Hesse at the court of Frederick Wilhelm II. He was then moved to London in 1766, where he became Prussian Minister Plenipotentiary, coinciding with the height of the Bach/Abel concerts. He returned home in 1782, but came back to London the very year that Abel died in 1787.

It seems likely that he acquired some manuscripts from Abel while in London and when Abel's effects were sold at auction after his death. Some of these are in the composer's own hand.

His collection of music contains 109 pieces, over 30 of them for viola da gamba. It was transferred to the University Library at Poznan, where they are now; and the significance was noticed by Sonia Wronkowska only in 2014 when researching her master's dissertation. Two of the three sonatas on this disc are recorded here for the first time.

The count didn't die until 1817, so his musical activities, heavily biased towards the viol, continued until then; and, indeed, his son, Count Joachim Alexander Kasimir continued to play the viol. So we have viol playing going on well into the 19th century in eastern Germany.

Mention of a couple of bottles of Burgundy in his obituary alludes to Abel's fondness for the demon drink, and it is clear he was something more than merely a *bon viveur*; he often spent time in Paris, not only to partake of the musical life there, but to buy himself the best claret. In 1782, after the death of his partner in concert promotion, Johann Christian Bach - who had left considerable unpaid debts - Abel left for Germany, to avoid his own creditors. He visited Berlin & Potsdam and met the viol-loving Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, and then to Ludwigslust, where he met his brother again for the first time since childhood.

His drinking had reached prodigious proportions, and we can see the effects in two portraits:



The first by Gainsborough, done in 1777: sympathetic, rich, sumptuous even. It shows the composer in the act of composing, his viol across his lap and a no doubt faithful dog resting under the table. This is held at the Huntingdon Library in San Marino, California, and was first shown in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1777, when Gainsborough came back to that institution after many years of absence:

The second is by Alexandre-Auguste Robineau, just three years later in 1780, now at Kew Palace. Not so sympathetic, but probably much more realistic:



On one occasion, at least, the drink did get the better of him:

'The same season (in 1782), on the occasion of the Musical Fund entertainment his particular friends dined with him in order to conduct him to the theatre in safety. In that they succeeded, but not in keeping him from indulging in his supposed

necessitous error. He was led on to the stage between two persons, and his instrument was given to him ready tuned. He played almost better than ever, and when his concerto was finished they dropped the curtain for he could not rise from his seat to bow.'

When Abel died on 20th June 1787, just over a year before Gainsborough's own death, he wrote this heartfelt letter to his friend Henry Bate-Dudley that same day:

'Poor Abel died about one o'clock to-day, without pain, after three days sleep. Your regret, I am sure, will follow this loss. We love a genius for what he leaves and we mourn him for what he takes away. If Abel was not so great a man as Handel it was because caprice had ruined music before he ever took up the pen. For my part I shall never cease looking up to heaven - the little while I have to stay behind - in hopes of getting one more glance of the man I loved from the moment I heard him touch the string. Poor Abel! - 'tis not a week since we were gay together, and that he wrote the sweetest air I have in my collection of his happiest thoughts. My heart is too full to say more.'

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TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

8 **Frena le belle lagrime**

Frena le belle lagrime,
Idolo del mio Cor
No, per vederti piangere,
Cara non o valor.

Ah! Non destarmi almeno,
Nuovi tumulti in Seno
Bastano i dolci palpiti
Che vi cagiona amor.

Hold back those beautiful tears, idol of my heart
I can't bear to see you cry,
my love.

Ah! At least do not wake more turmoil in my breast,
The sweet heartbeats
of love are enough.

RICHARD BOOTHBY

Richard Boothby has been playing the viol ever since David Fallows handed him a tenor viol in 1977. He was trying to help him with a thesis entitled 'Wagner's Ring and its tonality' at Manchester University. After further study with Nikolaus Harnoncourt in Salzburg, he helped to found The Purcell Quartet in 1984 and Fretwork in 1985.

With Fretwork, he has endeavoured to enrich the viol-consort repertory with new music from today's finest composers, from Elvis Costello to George Benjamin, from Alexander Goehr to Nico Muhly.

With the Purcell Quartet, he recorded nearly 50 albums for Hyperion and Chandos; and with Fretwork over 70 albums for Virgin Classics, Harmonia Mundi USA and most recently, Signum Classics.



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In 1998 he directed performances of *Monteverdi's L'Incoronazione di Poppea* with the Purcell Quartet; and in 2001 directed them in a fully-staged production of *L'Orfeo* with Mark Padmore in the title role. In 2016, he performed a programme of the fabulous French and English repertory for two bass viols with Christophe Coin. And his recording of the complete lyra viol music of William Lawes for Harmonia Mundi, USA, was released in the same year. The following year he recorded Telemann's recently-discovered *Fantasias* for Signum Records. He has now recorded Alfonso Ferrabosco's major lyra viol publication of 1609 in two volumes, the second released this year.

In 2024 he performed all the Telemann solo Fantasias in Germany and Slovenia, and in 2025 he taught a course for viol players in the beautiful Schloß Seehaus in Frankonia in Germany.

He is professor of Viola da Gamba at the Royal College in London.

FRETWORK

Emilia Benjamin, Jonathan Rees, Joanna Levine, Sam Stalden - *viols*

"Fretwork is the finest viol consort on the planet" - Stephen Pettitt, The London Evening Standard.

In 2026, Fretwork celebrates its 40th anniversary. In these last decades, they have explored the core repertory of great English consort music from Taverner to Purcell, made classic recordings against which others are judged, and commissioned an entirely new repertory of music for viols.

The list of composers they have encouraged to create new works is like the role call of the most prominent writers of our time: George Benjamin, Michael Nyman, Sir John Tavener, Gavin Bryars, Elvis Costello, Alexander Goehr, John Woolrich, Orlando Gough, Sally Beamish, Tan Dun, Barry Guy, Thea Musgrave, John Paul Jones, Nico Muhly, Sir James MacMillan and many others.

They have expanded their repertory to include music from over 500 years, from the first printed consort music in Venice in 1501 to music written this year. And, in between, everything that can be played on a consort of viols - Byrd & Schubert, Purcell & Shostakovitch, Gibbons & Britten, Dowland & Grieg.

Recently they have performed in the Lammermuir Festival, in Wigmore Hall with Tenebrae, and in the Malling Festival. They also visit North America again, including concerts at Carnegie Hall with Iestyn Davies. In 2025 they commemorate the sudden and untimely death of Orlando Gibbons, and celebrate the 90th year of Arvo Pärt with concerts and recordings.

While they used to fly all over the globe, they have now committed to reducing their carbon footprint by travelling in Europe only by train or electric cars - recently, they have toured Germany, France, Spain, Austria & Slovenia in their two Teslas.

The future sees many exciting projects based on the thrilling juxtaposition of old and new; making the experience of old music new and bringing the sensibilities of past ages to bear on contemporary music.



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IESTYN DAVIES

After reading Archaeology at St John's College, Cambridge, Iestyn Davies studied at the Royal Academy of Music, London.

An esteemed Handelian, he has delighted audiences globally with his vocal agility in roles such as Bertarido, Oberon, Orlando, Rinaldo, Ottone/Agrippina, and David/Saul. Committed also to contemporary music, his intelligent and considered interpretations have led to fruitful collaborations with Thomas Adés, George Benjamin and Nico Muhly.

On the opera stage, he has appeared at the Metropolitan Opera, New York; the Lyric Opera of Chicago; Teatro alla Scala Milan; the Royal Ballet and Opera, Covent Garden; English National Opera; Glyndebourne Festival Opera; Welsh National Opera; Salzburg Festival and in Munich, Vienna and Zurich.

Concert engagements have included performances at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan with Dudamel, the Concertgebouw and Tonhalle with Koopman and at the Barbican, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Lincoln Centre and at the BBC Proms in the Royal Albert Hall with orchestras that include the New



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York Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic, English Concert, Britten Sinfonia, Concerto Köln, Concerto Copenhagen, Ensemble Matheus, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Academy of Ancient Music and Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

An outstanding recitalist, he has performed in Vienna, Tokyo, Paris and New York in repertoire ranging from Dowland to Clapton. He is a regular favourite at London's Wigmore Hall and Kings Place where he has curated residencies.

His recital discs have won three Gramophone Awards, and he performed on the Grammy-winning recording of Thomas Adès's The Tempest. He is the recipient of a Royal Philharmonic Society Award and was nominated for an Olivier Award for his singing role in Farinelli and the King opposite Mark Rylance (premiered at London's Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, transferring to Broadway). In 2017 he was awarded an MBE by Queen Elizabeth II for his services to music.

This recording would not have been possible without the generous support of Linda Hill, whose continued support is greatly valued.

Harpsichord provided by Oliver Sandig

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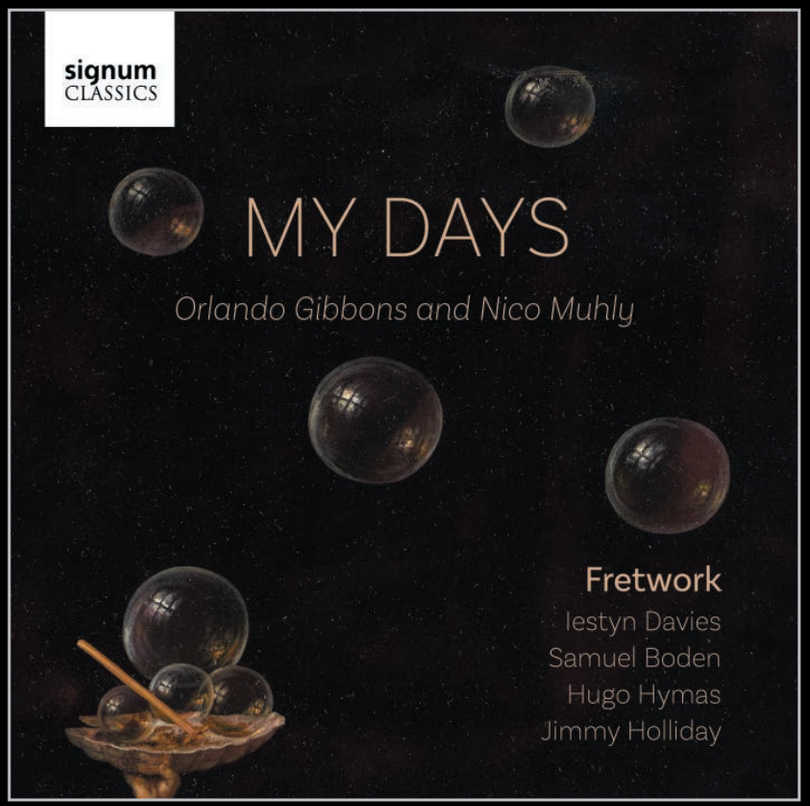
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SignumClassics, Signum Records Ltd., Suite 14, 21 Wadsworth Road, Perivale, Middlesex, UB6 7LQ, UK.
+44 (0) 20 8997 4000 E-mail: info@signumrecords.com
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