



Lute Duets from England's Golden Age

Ronn McFarlane & William Simms

1. Greensleeves - Anonymous — 1:17
2. La Rossignol - Anonymous — 3:07
3. Drewries accordes - Anonymous — 1:37
4. Trenchmore - John Johnson (1540 - 1594) — 3:26
5. The Delight Pavan - John Johnson — 4:36
6. A Dump #1 - John Johnson — 1:37
7. Eccho or Allmane for two lutes - John Marchant (fl.1588-1611)/Francis Pilkington (c.1570-1638) — 2:06
8. Robin is to the Greenwood Gone - Anonymous — 2:47
9. Rogero - John Johnson — 1:49
10. Callinoe - Anonymous — 2:44
11. The Flatt Pavan - John Johnson — 2:12
12. The Flatt Galliard - John Johnson — 1:34
13. The Nuts be Brown - John Johnson — 2:49
14. The Queen's Treble - John Johnson — 2:10
15. A Fancy - John Danyel (1564 - after 1625) — 2:13
16. Passememo Galliard - John Danyel — 4:01
17. My Lord Chamberlaine's Galliard - John Dowland (1563-1626) — 2:04
18. My Lord Willoughby's Welcome Home - John Dowland — 1:39
19. Chi Passa - John Johnson — 3:21
20. Wakefield on a Green - John Johnson — 3:05
21. A Fantasie - Thomas Robinson (c.1560-1610) — 2:21
22. The Queen's Goodnight - Thomas Robinson — 1:16
23. Passememo Galliard - Thomas Robinson — 1:09
24. A Plaine Song - Thomas Robinson — 1:08
25. Twenty Ways Upon the Bells - Thomas Robinson — 1:29
26. A Toye - Thomas Robinson — 1:30
27. An Almayne - Anonymous — 1:17

Total Time — 60:10

TWO LUTES

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&
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**We think of the lute either
as a solo instrument, or
one serving to accompany
someone else doing
something important,
like singing a love song.**

There is every good reason for this. Most paintings of lute players show them alone (either pensively, or after tipping a few). Even the hapless suitor "Lute" in the comic *Hagar the Horrible* simply wanders and holds the instrument. When we see lutenists en masse, they are invariably groups of angels, and still apparently accompanying some other event of rather more importance than the sheer joy of instrumental music.

In film (or in the increasingly popular sword-and-sorcery television recreations), lutes are for the odd minstrel at the county fair, or there to be a solo counterpoint to the mood of whichever main character's mind, the depths therein we are supposed to plumb.

Well. For our current project, no one can argue the joyous vogue for this wonderfully adaptable instrument, and the Mozart of its zenith in the Elizabethan Era, namely John Dowland, was matched (as in Mozart's own time) by a lively group of respected and very fine companion composers. We surely know the inarguable and happy perfection achieved in the lute song, and the blending of lute and sung poetry needs no defense.

Yet then, as now, wouldn't fellow performers want to get together? There were indeed larger groups, like the famed broken consort of mixed instruments, so popular from the 1580s on. We have works set for two voices from the earliest vocal repertoire, and the famous Morley 1595 book of Canzonets for Two Voices inspired imitators for decades to come. But two lutes?



"Lute Player" by Bernardo Strossi, ca. 1635

Happily, one of the great heroes of the modern lute, Lyle Nordstrom (remember “The Musicians of Swanne Alley”?) did a body of work reminding us of the two-lute repertoire, so we most gratefully steal from his efforts. As it turns out, in the high English renaissance (roughly 1570 to 1620 or so) we have more than eighty works that qualify, and these make up the body of this recording.

There are two types of duets as the form evolves—here is one of our principals, Ronn McFarlane, to explain:

Elizabethan lute duets yield the most companionable and friendly kind of music-making for the players. In equal duets each lutenist plays nearly the same music, alternating playing the melody and the harmonic accompaniment. It feels like a conversation, with each lutenist posing musical questions and answers throughout. Each player is free to improvise upon the written part, so the conversation can be very individual and spontaneous! On the other hand, in the treble-ground style of lute duet, one lutenist plays a single line melodic part (usually including some virtuosic passages) while the second lutenist plays a chordal accompaniment. Sometimes the chordal accompaniment is very simple and repetitive, and it is likely that a skilled player would vary his part to make a more musically satisfying accompaniment. In this recording, the continuo background and improvising skills of William Simms come to the fore, as two- and three-chord accompaniments become highly imaginative counterparts to the single-line melody.

Ronn and William go back a long way with this repertoire and the Dorian/Sono Luminus label, solo and together, making merry with The Baltimore Consort over the years, or mixing solo lute (Ronn) and theorbo accompaniment (William) for *The Art of Vivaldi's Lute* (DSL-92132).

The primary early lute duet work was done by John Johnson, and it is music of a very high order—so good, one may ask just how could this be?

For an answer, let us turn to Matthew Spring's superb study *The Lute in Britain: A Study of the Instrument and Its Music*:

“As professionals evolved from illiterate minstrels to trained musicians, so improvisation gave way to studied compositions preserved on paper.”



He also gives us a sunlit picture window into the era by quoting another of our composers, Thomas Robinson, in 1603's *The Schoole of Musicke*. Timotheus, the lute teacher, tells us exactly what he thinks of that old generation of players:

For in older times they strove (onelie) to have a quick hand upon the Lute, to runne hurrie hurrie, keeping a Catt in the gutter upon the ground, now true then false, now up now downe, with such painfull play, mocking, mowing, gripeing, grinning, sighing, supping, heaving, shouldring, labouring, and sweating, like cart lades, without any skill in the world, or rule, or reason to play a lesson, or finger the Lute, or guide the bodie, or know any thing, that belongeth, either to skill or reason.

So--did you ever hear your own father curse your music once when you played it too loud in roughly those words? Or were ever tempted (think!) to do the same to your own son or daughter? Ah, well—what is old is new, and vice-versa.

We know little of John Johnson's life—he was born in the 1540s and became the “Royal Lewter” after the death of Anthony de Countie, who had served with Elizabeth for the first years of her reign. Johnson served the Queen from 1579 until his death in 1594, leaving behind a body of fresh and ebullient works still loved (especially by lutenists) today.



Thomas Robinson was born around 1560 into a family who served the Cecils, powerful political figures moving in the shadowy conspiracy-filled late years of Elizabeth's reign and into the time of King James. He, like Dowland, served in the Danish court, publishing three books of instrumental settings (although the first book seems to be lost), and vanishes from the books of time after 1609.

We are on a little firmer ground with John Danyel, who was the poet Samuel Daniel's younger brother—and since in that day we valued poets over musicians (ah, the reversals of fortune!), we can better keep track of John's story: Born in Somerset in 1564, he studied in Oxford, remaining there for some years apparently. Brother Samuel eventually advanced at court (he became Poet Laureate after the death of Spenser, but resigned soon after in favor of Ben Jonson), but was well-enough positioned to see John become a musician in the Royal Household in 1612. King James died in March, 1624, and John Danyel was listed as a musician for the funeral on May 7th; he died the following year.

As to John Dowland, there is much to say, a lot of life marred by unfulfilled quests and quixotic actions. From England, to France, to Italy, to Germany, to that great court in Denmark, Dowland lived the life of a cosmopolitan composer, cultivating at first and then perhaps growing into a self-styled melancholic temperament. After John Johnson died the Queen rebuffed Dowland when he applied for that great job as court lutenist (Edward Collard got the work). When he was finally let in the Royal Household, it was in the same 1612 class as John Danyel, when his music, once so fresh, was considered by some of his peers old-fashioned.

But let us go back 20 years, if we may, and give the last word to Ronn McFarlane from his early Dorian project, *Lute Music of John Dowland* (DOR-90148):

Whatever his personal trials and disappointments may have been, John Dowland composed music of transcendence and occasionally unearthly beauty. While Dowland's style is couched in the musical language of the sixteenth century, his heart and spirit sing to us with freshness and directness that transcend the 400 years since his music was conceived.

—Robert Aubry Davis, *Producer & Host, Millennium of Music*



Ronn McFarlane

GRAMMY®-nominated lutenist Ronn McFarlane strives to bring the lute – the most popular instrument of the Renaissance – into today’s musical mainstream and make it accessible to a wider audience.

Born in West Virginia, Ronn spent his early years in Maryland. At thirteen, upon hearing “Wipeout” by the Surfaris, he fell wildly in love with music and taught himself to play on a “cranky sixteen-dollar steel-string guitar.” Ronn kept at it, playing blues and rock music on the electric guitar while studying classical guitar.

He graduated with honors from Shenandoah Conservatory and continued guitar studies at Peabody Conservatory before turning his full attention and energy to the lute in 1978. The following year, Mr. McFarlane began to perform solo recitals on the lute and became a member of the Baltimore Consort. Since then, he has toured throughout the United States, Canada and Europe with The Baltimore Consort and as a soloist.

McFarlane was a faculty member of the Peabody Conservatory from 1984 to 1995, teaching lute and lute-related subjects. In 1996, Mr. McFarlane was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Music from Shenandoah Conservatory for his achievements in bringing the lute and its music to the world. He has over 30 recordings on the Dorian/Sono Luminus label, including solo albums, lute songs, recordings with The Baltimore Consort, the complete lute music of Vivaldi, and *Blame Not My Lute* (DSL-92105), a collection of Elizabethan lute music and poetry, with spoken word by Robert Aubry Davis.

Recently, Ronn has been engaged in composing new music for the lute, building on the tradition of the lutenist/composers of past centuries. His original compositions are the focus of his solo CD, *Indigo Road* (DSL-90701), which received a GRAMMY® Award Nomination for Best Classical Crossover Album in 2009. His CD release, *One Morning* (DSL-92111), features “Ayreheart,” a new ensemble brought together to perform Ronn’s new music.



William Simms

William Simms is a multifaceted performer of early music. Equally adept on lute, theorbo and baroque guitar, he appears regularly with Apollo's Fire, The Bach Sinfonia, Harmonious Blacksmith, The Vivaldi Project and The Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado. He has performed numerous operas, cantatas and oratorios with such ensembles as The Washington National Opera, The Cleveland Opera, Opera Lafayette and American Opera Theatre. Venues include The National Cathedral, The Museum of Fine Arts Boston, The Library of Congress, The Corcoran Gallery, The Kennedy Center and The Barns at Wolftrap. He has toured and recorded with The Baltimore Consort as well as with Apollo's Fire.

William and Ronn have collaborated on several projects. They are lute duet partners for "On the Heath", a 3-movement work composed by Mr. McFarlane for his CD *One Morning* (DSL-92111). William has teamed up with Ronn and The Baltimore Consort on their recordings, *Ladyes Delight* (DOR-90252) and *Gut, Wind and Wire* (DSL-90601). He also plays continuo, with Ronn as soloist, on a CD of the complete lute works of Antonio Vivaldi, *The Art of Vivaldi's Lute* (DSL-92105), recorded with the ensemble The Bach Sinfonia. On this recording, William and Ronn strive to make the solo lute and the theorbo interweave into one rich texture.

Mr. Simms received a Bachelor of Music from The College of Wooster, where he studied with Andrej Mentschukoff, and a Master of Music from Peabody Conservatory, where he studied with Julian Gray. In addition, he has studied with Ronn McFarlane, Mark Cudek and Pat O'Brien. He serves on the faculties of Mount St. Mary's University and Hood College, and is founder and director of the Hood College Early Music Ensemble.





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Photo of Ronn McFarlane (p. 10): Nate S. Rhodes

Photo of William Simms (p. 12): Strider Jordan

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TWO LUTES