

BLESSED ECHOES: GENESIS

Blessed Echoes was conceived in 2018 during work on the *Près de votre oreille* ensemble's first CD, *Come Sorrow*, centred around the tradition of viola da gamba accompaniment for the voice in Elizabethan songs, and more specifically in a collection of *Songs* with lute and lyra-viol by Robert Jones. It was during my research into these works that I discovered the existence of numerous editions with tablatures for lute accompanying the voice. Before *Come Sorrow* had even been recorded, I was already dreaming of a great fresco of Elizabethan songs, bringing together some of the most beautiful works published during that period, to pay homage to the great 17th century English musical tradition which is Lute Song.

Once I had collected and deciphered more than 100 pieces, the lengthy task of choosing from them to build this new programme was fascinating. Sometimes I came upon a new song by word of mouth as I talked to people around me about this new project: this was the case of *When Laura Smiles*, which my cousin Eric Senabre told me about, or *Like Hermit Poore*, which Miguel Henry introduced me to when we were working together in Athens. As I worked on this programme, I immersed myself in the contemporary posterity of some of these songs, embarking upon a journey in time to the golden age of Elizabethan theatre and music, where the Lute Song seemed to have acquired great fame.

Between 1597 and 1615 countless collections of Lute Songs appeared. The texts of these works are incredibly rich. Although it is often spiritual and 'existentialist' in style, Elizabethan poetry can also be bawdy. The texts set to music are often written by the composers themselves, but they can also come from poems written by such famous playwrights as Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare, or from collections such as *The Old & The New Arcadia*, written by Sir Philip Sydney. For this programme, I was fortunate enough to have access to a large number of contemporary editions of Lute Songs, which facilitated the search for scores, since the works already published are often more accessible than the manuscripts. It is obvious that the quantity of collections available, published from the end of the 16th century onwards, indicates the popular character of this repertoire, which goes far beyond the framework of the court, the masques and the church. The fact that these songs were certainly performed in the context of the great plays of this period favoured the marketing of the scores of these works to the music-loving public. Although the composition of these songs is sometimes very complex, the scope it gives for the musicians to depict the world in a secular setting, with their own poetry, as in traditional song, gives this repertoire a popular and intimate quality which probably contributed to its success. Some of these works are powerfully influenced by the art of the Italian madrigal, where the techniques of counterpoint reign, but the Elizabethan song has its own identity, often alternating between horizontal treatment of the voices and the vertical composition which is closer to our idea of a song. Officially, the first collection presenting this type of work was composed by John Dowland and published in London in 1597, at the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who died in 1603 and was succeeded by James I. In reality, the art of singing to a lute accompaniment had existed for much longer. The *First booke of Songes or Ayres* composed by John Dowland nevertheless marks the beginning of an important era for English song. In the shadow of John Dowland's masterpieces lie other treasures of Elizabethan and Jacobean song for one, two, three or four voices, still unknown or little-known. It is this repertoire that the *Près de votre oreille* ensemble wishes to present today, with the typical scoring of the period: including of course the Renaissance lute and the viola da gamba, but also the virginal, a keyboard with plucked strings similar to the harpsichord, played by Queen Elizabeth I; and the cittern (a metal-stringed instrument of the lute family).

As I was collecting scores and choosing pieces for this programme, I felt an ever stronger desire to add lyra-viol parts to the lute and vocal lines. My research was primarily focused on Lute Songs composed for four voices and lute, but the programme also contains works composed for one or two voices and lute. Amongst others, I was interested in the compositions of Thomas Campion, Philip Rosseter, Robert Jones, Michael Cavendish, Alfonso Ferrabosco II and John Dowland. A collection of pieces composed by Thomas Ford entitled *Musicke of Sundrie Kindes*, published in 1607, particularly caught my attention. It is broken down into two parts. The first presents Lute Songs for four voices and lute and the second a series of pieces for two lyra-viol. In all the prefaces to the collections of *Lute Songs*, three instruments are designated for the accompaniment of the voice: the lute, the orpherion (an instrument of the lute family with metal strings) and the viola da gamba. It was also at this time that the lyra-viol appeared (an organological experiment practised on the viola da gamba consisting in particular of adding sympathetic strings to the instrument, or a type of playing which required changes from the standard tuning of the viols for some compositions). At the heart of our instrumental programme are pieces for two lyra-viol by Thomas Ford, of enormous inventiveness and intensity. Like the lute, the viola da gamba is a complete polyphonic instrument, capable of playing several parts at once (in France, the viola da gamba was often referred to as a "bowed lute"). There are also several testimonies to the intensive use of the viola da gamba in the Lute Song repertoire: *The First and The Second book of Songs and Ayres* composed by Robert Jones (1601), *Musicke of Sundrie Kindes* composed by Thomas Ford (1607) and two collections of pieces composed by Tobias Hume, *The First Part of Ayres* (1605) & *Captain Humes Poeticall Musicke* (1607).

From these collections, I developed a compositional work which consisted of adding to the voice and lute parts two further lines of accompaniment for lyra-viol. The written parts are true to Elizabethan composition methods and were written with rigorous reference to the various testimonies of compositions of this kind. My principal models were the collection of pieces composed for one or more lyra-viol by Alfonso Ferrabosco II, *Lessons for Lyra-Viols* (1609) and *The First and The Second Book of Songs and Ayres* composed by Robert Jones (1601). In all the transcriptions and throughout the programme, the two lyra-viol are tuned a tone above the lute and the virginal in the First Tune described by Alfonso Ferrabosco II in his collection, as follows (from highest to lowest): intervals of a fourth, a third, a fourth, a fifth and a fourth (E, B, G, D, G, D, or, without the transposition a tone higher: D, A, F, C, F, D).

The viol parts were based on a reduction of a four-voice counterpoint (which never doubles the sung cantus part) and not on the *basso continuo* system, which does not actually appear in the English vocal repertoire until the 1620s. These new Songs were then associated with a so-called "declamatory" style. This compositional style was a tool to put us "in the shoes" of an English Lute Song composer writing at the end of the 16th century. It also led to the creation of all the scores, specially designed for this disc, and the production of dozens of song transcriptions which can now be performed with two lyra-viol replacing the lute part. In Renaissance and Baroque Europe, there are many documents attesting to the accompaniment of the voice by one or more viola da gambas. The aim is to immerse both listener and musician in the magic of these stories and the secrets of forgotten practices and repertoires, through works of striking beauty that unfortunately remain unknown today.

This program borrows its title from a poem by Robert Jones, *If in This Flesh*, in which the narrator describes his soul attempting to make amends for his sins in paradise. The notion of echoes, comparable to that of memory, seemed to me to represent the distant resonance of an era that the musician specializing in the interpretation of early music on period instruments tries to capture. Like a journey through time, the music can echo the past, thanks to scores composed more than 400 years ago which we are lucky to still have

access to and which offer a contemporary existence to an ancient intangible heritage. It is also this relationship to time that my composition *Réversibilité* for four voices and guitar, on a poem by Charles Baudelaire, seeks to evoke by offering a cocontemporary version of the singing tradition inherited from ancient practices, as well as the cover of the disc, representing a grandmother in the company of her granddaughter – the musical performance itself being a sort of living symbol of intergenerational transmission, considered one of the most developed faculties of the human species. However, when it comes to music, particularly that which comes to us from remote times, this faculty proves to be as precious as it is fragile. The transmission depends in fact on the conservation of musical scores and written testimonies on modes of interpretation in libraries or universities that must be kept safe from flames and other accidents of history. It is still necessary to have preserved examples of musical instruments, the secrets of whose manufacture can thus be revealed to contemporary luthiers, mastering the art of recreating these Renaissance instruments that we still build today, and which allow our souls to find peace despite the tumult surrounding us.

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