

Two Lute Songs
by John Dowland



By

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This year I am performing a set of lute songs by John Dowland, “Can She Excuse my Wrongs” and “Flow my Tears” (Dowland , 1997) who was considered one of the pre-emanate lute players and composers during the “Golder Era” of lute song, 1580-1625. (Spring, 2001, pg.). The pieces I am performing are both from the first phase of the Golden Age, 1580 – 1603. In this documentation, I provide a brief introduction to Lute Song, a biography of John Dowland, how Lute Song would have been performed in period, and what performance decisions I made for this performance and why I made them.

History and performance of Lute Song

Interest in the genre of music that came to be known as lute song first began during the reign of Henry VIII and was primarily based on existing liturgical vocal music (Stevens, 1960 pg. 81) and later expanded by the arrival of Italian lutenists early in the reign of Elizabeth (Spring, 2001, pg. 63). Very few of the earliest examples of lute song still exist, although it is believed the many “poets as well as musicians practiced the lute and must often have set their songs to music.” (Stevens, 1960, pg. 81) and versions of lute song by Italian lutenists continued to be circulated into the Golden Period (Spring, 2001, pg. 64). The Italian school, represented by such composers as Ferrabosco, made deep impressions on his English contemporaries Byrd and Morley, both leading lights in the development of the English school of Madrigals (Spring, 2001, pg. 64). Lute song continued its development through the sixteenth century as a sub-genre of madrigal, which is still noticeable today in the regular reference to “madrigals and lute songs” to which lute songs are usually relegated. While there were other Continental schools of lutenists, i.e. French and German (Stevens, 1960, pg.94) the full flowering of the lute song into its own place was led by the English school, with the publication of Dowland’s *First Book of Songs or Aires*, in 1597 (Stevens, 1960, pg. 83).

John Dowland

John Dowland is thought to have been born in 1562, based on testimony in the introduction of *A Pilgrims Solace*, where he states that “I am now entered in to the fiftieth year of mine age” (Dowland, 1612, Introduction) although no official record of his birth has been found. Indeed, very little is known of him, until he shows up in the service of Sir Henry Cobham when he was resident in Paris from 1579 – 1583. In 1595, Dowland wrote to Sir Robert Cecil that he had become a Catholic during his years in France (Dowland (1595)). At some point after 1583 he returned to England and had enough support to study at Oxford, receiving his Bachelor of Music in 1588. While he is mentioned by several people during the period of 1588 to 1594, there is very little direct documentary evidence of what he was doing.

In 1594 he accepted an appointment to the court of Heinrich Julius, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg (Holman & O’Dette, 2001). During a trip to Rome he reached Florence, where he met a circle of English Catholics involved in “treasonable activities”. This “indiscretion” resulted in him retouring to the court of the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, cutting his trip short and never actually reaching Rome. Throughout this period, Dowland was trying to achieve a position in the court of Elizabeth and activities such as this did not help his cause, although he was honest about having and rejecting them in his letter to Sir Robert Cecil cited above. With a position at the English Court still eluding him (Grove Ency. of Music) he entered the service of Christian IV, King of Denmark. This is where he remained until 1606, when he left to return to England. (Holman & O’Dette, 2001)

Throughout his years serving in foreign courts, he maintained an establishment in Fetter Lane near Fleet Street in London. Although there is no record of her name, he was married and his wife and children lived at this address. His first son, Robert, was born in 1591, so the assumption is that he was married before that date. There is no mention of her in any extant papers after 1601. She remains a

mystery, along with the other children he had with her. We know they existed, but nothing about them, not even their names.

Although he had not achieved his desire of a place in the Royal Court of England, he was not without patrons when he returned to London. These include Theophilus, Lord Howard de Walden; William Cavendish, Earl of Devonshire; and the Honourable Society of Middle Temple, also known as The Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of the Court. (Encyclopedia.com). He finally achieved his court preferment in 1612, when Thomas Howard, Theophilus' father, was acting Lord Chamberlain and gave Dowland a specially created post as the fifth court lutenist. Until this time there had only been four. This preferment lasted until the time of his death in January 1626.

On Performing Lute Song

Knowing how lute song was performed in period is a challenge because of the variety of ways that the songs were published. Dowland's songs were published for both solo voice with lute and in four parts to be performed with or without accompaniment (Stevens, 1960, pg 84). The solo song prevailed with most performances now being accompanied by a lute. The tablature usually included the soprano or solo line above, with the lute tablature below that. If other parts were included, they were below the lute tablature. This shows that the standard performance of this music was either by lute and solo voice, or as a small group that may or may not be accompanied.

On Today's Performance

Today I am performing two lute songs by John Dowland, "Can She Excuse My Wrongs?" from *The First Books of Songs or Aires* (1597) and "Flow My Tears (Lachimae)" from *The Second Book of Songs or Aires* (1600). I am using the edition which was transcribed for Voice and Guitar by David Nadal (1997). While this transcription has changed some parts of the music, these changes were made with

consideration of the style of Dowland's lute songs with an eye to create a collection designed for the modern performer. The largest changes are that the lyrics have, for the most part, been updated to modern English, the key signatures have been modernized, and the barring of measures has been regularized between the two parts (Dowland, Nadal & Dowland 1997, pg. ix). None of these changes affects the meaning or interpretation of the music, while they do make the music much easier to understand and perform for the soloist, accompanist, and audience. I have chosen to perform these pieces as unaccompanied solo works as qualified lutenists are in somewhat short supply in the southern Outlands, or anywhere else in the known world, for that matter.

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