

Bright and Early

Italian and French Lute Music

From the Beginning of the 16th Century

The lute books of Francesco Spinacino (1507) and Zoan Ambrosio Dalza (1508) are milestones in the history of music. From the press of Petrucci in Venice, they contain not only the first lute music to be printed, but, apart from some tablature fragments, also the very first sources of music for the instrument that have come down to us. Both give testament to a true flourishing of lute culture in Italy at the dawn of the 16th century.

But Spinacino's tablatures are full of mistakes. There are passages of great coherence where one can clearly sense elements of a charismatic genius; and then there are absurd non-sequiturs, missing measures, and loose ends begging to be reconnected. (I have a theory as to how this might have occurred.) The narrative aspects of his Ricercare seem to evoke tales of soldiers and sailors in far-off lands or the pains of love and loss through an improvisatory style coming out of the polyphonic practice of the late 15th century. The challenge for the interpreter here is first of all to reconstruct a coherent text where the lacunae are filled out and disparate ideas are clarified and reconnected.

The music of Zoan Ambrosio Dalza is the perfect complement to the free-form Ricercare of Spinacino. Most of his pieces are directly inspired by popular dances arranged in suite-like groupings. His energy, invention and virtuoso flourishes are always present and aficionados of Country Music will find some passage-work here that has an occasional hint of Bluegrass. Dalza states that his printed pieces are often somewhat simplified versions and that he would publish more elaborate variants in a later book [no trace of this]. Taking the lead from Dalza, I have felt free to add diminutions and variations to most of his pieces.

Alternating with Spinacino and Dalza will be music from the first French lute tablatures. The two collections printed in 1529 and 1530 by Pierre Attaingnant contain improvisatory preludes, dance music—some requiring great lightness of touch, others with clear Celtic roots—as well as some of the most beautiful Chanson settings ever.

The program will be played on a six-course lute with octave stringing on the 3rd through 6th courses. This solution, with its ringing clarity and brighter resonance, comes out of a late 15th century tradition and is implied by the music itself.

Renaissance lute by Joel van Lennep, Boston, 1977.

Swiss-American lutenist, **Hopkinson Smith** graduated from Harvard with Honors in Music in 1972. The next year he came to Europe to study with Emilio Pujol in Catalonia and Eugen Dombois in Switzerland. He then became involved in numerous chamber music projects including the founding of the ensemble Hespèrion XX. Since the mid-80's, he has focused almost exclusively on the solo repertoires for early plucked instruments producing a series of prize-winning recordings for Naïve. These feature Spanish music for vihuela and baroque guitar, French lute music of the Renaissance and baroque, early 17th century Italian music and the German high baroque. Hopkinson Smith has performed and given master classes throughout eastern and western Europe, North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, Korea and Japan sometimes combining the life-style of a hermit with that of a gypsy. He has received many awards for his recordings as well as his live recitals. The most recent award was the Chitarra d'Oro award in 2021 from the Convegno Internazionale de la Chitarra in Milan. He teaches at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. Website: www.hopkinsonsmith.com.