

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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Why Dowland? Why Now?

By Hideki Yamaya*

2013 is the 450th anniversary of English composer and lutenist John Dowland's birth (1563-1626). (Somehow, I feel that it would be more appropriate to celebrate the year of his death, seeing as how he seemed obsessed with *death*; we will get that opportunity in the year 2026.) This probably accounts for the fact that I am seeing his name more frequently in concert programs this year. This gives me satisfaction, as I feel that Dowland deserves more attention, respect, and affection from today's music lovers. Yes, I am biased as I am a lutenist myself, but I do believe that his name deserves to be listed among the greats throughout history, and that he would be better-known today had his instrument of choice been anything other than lute. Here are just four reasons, among many, why Dowland is awesome.

Dowland wrote one of the greatest hits of the 17th-century.

His air *Flow My Tears*, also known as *Lachrimae*, appears in over 100 sources throughout Europe. This is equivalent to a multi-platinum hit today... er, 20 years ago; equivalent to garnering a million hits on YouTube today. The piece was first published as a lute solo, and then as a lute song (Dowland himself the most likely author of the text). He



then published *Lachrimae, or Seven Teares*, a collection of viol consort music that includes seven pieces based on the famous motif from the song. *Lachrimae* became extremely famous (went 'viral', if you will), and many composers wrote pieces based on the tune or arranged it for their chosen instruments with appropriate divisions—Thomas Morley, Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, and Thomas Tomkins to name but a few.

Dowland is one of the most important composers for the lute as well as one of the greatest lutenists ever.

As with most such things, there is no clear consensus on this matter amongst lute scholars and players, but three names seem to stand out from the others: Francesco da Milano (1497-1543), Silvius Leopold Weiss (1687-1750), and Dowland. Much like Francesco (who is most often referred to by his first name much like *Michelangelo* or *Rafaello*) who came a generation before Dowland, and Weiss who came after him, Dowland was the most celebrated lutenist of his day. If contemporary accounts of his musical prowess are accurate, he must have been an astonishingly fine player. And while today the lute is seen as somewhat of a novelty, it was a highly popular and well-respected instrument in his day, cherished for its versatility and expressive capabilities. Even a casual listen to or a perusal of the score of Dowland's music shows his formidable abilities as a composer; here is a musician who is in complete mastery of his in-

strument, every musical form in which he composed, and the contrapuntal techniques and harmonic and rhythmic subtleties of the time.

Dowland was singing the blues way before Robert Johnson ever did.

And I am talking about the lutenist and English composer Robert Johnson (c.1583-c.1634), not the American pioneer of the blues Robert Johnson (1911-1938). In early 17th-century England, a curious cultural phenomenon known as 'Elizabethan Melancholy' arose amongst the noble and literate classes. Simply put, it was cool to be sad. Though many artists and musicians produced melancholic works during this time, in music, the name most strongly associated with this movement was Dowland. Whether this sadness was affected in order to cultivate a mystique around his image or whether he was actually bipolar, with pieces like *Semper dowland semper dolens* (always Dowland always sad), *Sorrow*, *Stay*, and *In Darkness Let Me Dwell*, he really was the king of melancholy. And if we can forget for a moment how ridiculous some of the text is from a modern perspective, we begin to see the dark beauty, the tragic eloquence of his poetry.

Dowland is culturally relevant today.

This is mainly due to the fact that Dowland's music has cross-genre appeal. Many of his songs don't have a huge vocal range and could be sung satisfactorily by non-trained voices, and have very catchy tunes that could be easily understood and appreciated by 21st-century ears. This has led not a few folk and pop artists to interpret Dowland songs. The most famous of these cross-cultural/historical adventures is by Sting, who released an album of Dowland songs a few years back where he sings and plays lute. I will refrain from detailed criticism of his interpretation here, but I can say that I do not hate it; some of Dowland's simpler melodies lend themselves to

his pop sensibilities and the end result was tolerable, if somewhat rough. The same could not be said of certain modern-day crooners' attempts at Puccini arias. Outside the realm of music, Dowland and his work are mentioned in novels by contemporary writers Philip K. Dick, Rose Tremain, and Haruki Murakami.

So If you are unfamiliar with the works of Dowland, I recommend that you give them a try. There are many wonderful recordings of Dowland out there, but my personal favorite vocal interpreters are Emma Kirkby (soprano) and Andreas Scholl (countertenor) and Paul O'Dette and Nigel North for lute solos. And if you are already a fan of Dowland, tell your friends about his works. His music deserves to be heard more widely. But remember, *I was into Dowland way before he was cool.*

* www.hyamaya.com & www.musicamaestrale.org

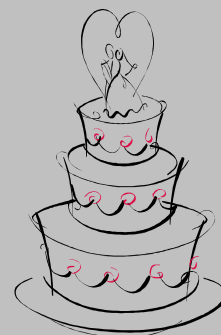
Join Us For Cake!

What is it about Weddings and Cake? Is there a better way to conclude the Bach Cantata Choir's Eighth season than enjoying J.S. Bach's Wedding Cantata and a piece of cake?

We hope you will stay following our June 2nd concert to join the Cake Walk. (Think raffle combined with musical chairs with the prizes being delicious cakes. Old fashioned? Sure, but cake walks are making a comeback.)

For just a \$5 donation, you may take a turn for a chance take home one of about a dozen donated cakes. Or, if you prefer, just enjoy a piece of cake and watch others compete. Either way, stay and visit with us for a few minutes after the concert.

All proceeds from the Cake Walk will be used to fund our July trip to the 2013 Abbey Bach Festival.



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Wrapping Up Our Season

With pieces by John Dowland (featuring lutenist Hideki Yamaya and soprano Mel Downie Robinson), the NW Premiere of a work by BCC tenor David Foley, J.S. Bach's *Wedding Cantata*, and more!

Sunday, June 2, 2013 at 2:00 p.m.
Rose City Park Presbyterian Church
Free concert (free-will offering accepted)