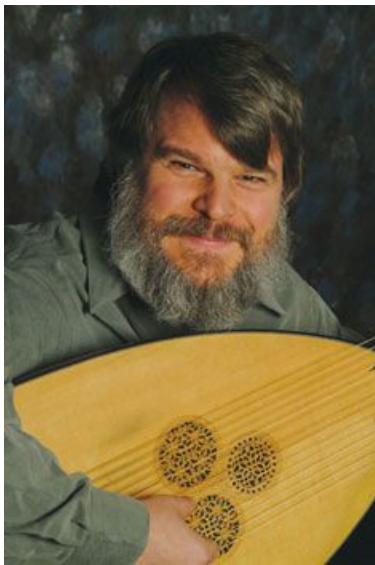


Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: A conversation with Paul O'Dette, the Dowland Yoda

by Christine Jay



We all have composers who rivet us by the sounds of their genius. Many swear by the usual playboys of the Western canon — Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven — but can hundreds of years of music history be encapsulated by the music of three men? Critically-acclaimed lutenist and scholar Paul O'Dette begs to differ. On January 30 at 7:30 pm, as part of the Cleveland Guitar Society's International Series at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights, O'Dette will perform a program exclusively of music by John Dowland, the Renaissance "English Orpheus."

"Dowland is as great as Bach, Beethoven or Mozart," O'Dette said during a recent telephone conversation. To him, Dowland's "breadth of personality," unconcealed and accessible after 450 years, remains paramount. His compositions span an extraordinary spectrum from the most profound and melancholy works to comic, catchy dance tunes.

O'Dette has much to offer within a musical life dedicated to performing Dowland's works. Before his appointment as Professor of Lute and Director of Early Music at the Eastman School of Music, before he became Artistic Director of the Boston Early Music Festival, and certainly before winning two Grammys, O'Dette played electric guitar and improvised with his band and high school jazz band. On the advice of a family friend, the young musician started studying classical guitar to improve his electric guitar skills. Drawn to 16th-century dances, O'Dette played guitar transcriptions of lute tablature, later tracking down a lute and teaching himself. "Dowland immediately stuck out," O'Dette recalled.

The passion for Dowland's music remains a constant in O'Dette's story. Half of his debut 1979 recording is of Dowland, a love he revisited during his 2014 recording, *My*

Favorite Dowland. Of the latter recording, he said, “I wanted to revisit Dowland and see if I had learned anything in the interim.”



Along with Peter Holman, an acclaimed English conductor and musicologist, O’Dette — a Dowland Yoda of sorts — was asked to co-author the biography of the composer in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, one of the largest and most extensive reference sources on Western Music. Not only has O’Dette performed Dowland on hundreds of recital programs and various albums, but he also helped shape our knowledge of Dowland’s identity through the *New Grove* article, an accomplishment he described as a great honor.

Honor and Dowland seem to be common compatriots for O’Dette. The upcoming Cleveland program was initially designed for the 2013, 450th anniversary of Dowland’s birth celebrated in various early music festivals across Europe. Structuring the program into “proto-suites,” instead of a stream of single Dowland pieces, O’Dette created a program beginning with catchy dance tunes, mournful ballads, and highly virtuosic variations and fantasias. As O’Dette writes of Dowland in his program notes, “His use of proportions, cantus firmus, chromaticism, and antiphonal effects allow the lute to sound like a miniature consort. No other lutenist was able to get so much out of the instrument so efficiently.”

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