

## British viol consort Fretwork to play old and new music at CMA October 12

by Daniel Hathaway



You could say with some accuracy that Fretwork, the British viol consort, was an idea formed in Hell. Its early members Richard Boothby, Bill Hunt, and Richard Campbell first played together in the

underworld scene in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, a production semi-staged in Barcelona in 1985 by Andrew Parrott's Taverner Players. Those three minutes led to further performances, and now Fretwork is considered among the premier viol ensembles in the world.

Most viol consorts stick to old music composed before the viola da gamba became extinct in England in the latter part of the 17th century. Fretwork is unusual in its equal embrace of contemporary music: on its website the group lists two dozen composers who have written works for them.

Fretwork's current five members, Asako Morikawa, Reiko Ichise, Sam Stadien, Emily Ashton, and Boothby (far right in the photo) will appear on the Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts series in Gartner Auditorium on Wednesday, October 12 at 7:30 pm. The program includes 16th and 17th century English consort music by John Taverner and Orlando Gibbons, works by contemporary composers Nico Muhly and Gavin Bryars, and a special performance of Norwegian composer Maja Ratkje's *River Mouth Echoes*.

Cleveland is one of ten cities Fretwork will visit on an American Tour that begins on October 6 in Montréal and ends on October 24 in Victoria, BC, with stops in Boston, Milwaukee, Wake Forest in North Carolina, Jackson in Mississippi, Austin and Lubbock in Texas, and Vancouver BC. They're also taking a side trip to Bogota, Colombia, making this tour truly American — North and South.

We reached Richard Boothby at his home in Gloucestershire to talk about the consort and its program in Cleveland. Our first question was how he became involved with the viola da gamba in the first place.

Richard Boothby: Everybody's journey is slightly different, but I was at University and studying with David Fallows. That was his first year at Manchester, and he went out and got a set of viols from the early music shop. He knew that I played the cello, so he said, 'Look, have a go at that', and just handed me a viol. That was it, really. After a few weeks or months I felt that this was really what I wanted to do.

*DH: What grabbed you about the viol?*

RB: I think it was the music, really, that did it. Consort music is relatively straightforward to play technically, so we formed a consort and played 6-part Jenkins pieces — we were playing some of the great music fairly quickly. That was just wonderful, and it was a completely different type of music than I had played or listened to at that point. By the end of the year I was hardly playing the cello any more.

*DH: Your initial foray into contemporary music was suggested by the composer George Benjamin.*

RB: He heard our first album and was intrigued by the sound of it. He asked me to come along and demonstrate the instrument to him. He said it was if he had just discovered a whole new set of string instruments. He was barely aware of the viol beforehand. George went away and wrote us this amazing piece, a genius piece, really. It was like being hit with a freight train. We had no intention of playing contemporary music to start with, and the demands it makes on the instruments are quite different. It took us a long time to develop the skills to play it — but we got it in the end.

*DH: In a big way. There are works by 23 composers listed on your website.*

RB: Those are just the prominent ones. We've got about 50 pieces that have been written for us over the years. There's plenty for us to choose from.

*DH: Your Cleveland program is titled "In Nomine" after numerous works that bear that title.*

RB: John Taverner wrote the original 'In Nomine', which is part of his mass *Gloria tibi Trinitas*, so we'll start the program with that extraordinarily beautiful bit of counterpoint. Normally the program proceeds through many examples of In Nomine-like pieces from the 16th and 17th centuries, but in Cleveland at the request of Tom Welsh, we've altered

the program to play Maja Ratkje's *River Mouth Echoes* — which was written for a Danish viol consort. Maja wanted us to learn it so we recorded it with her. It's very different from anything else on the program — and anything else in our repertoire.

*DH: Any theories about why so many composers of Taverner's era were drawn to write pieces based on 'In Nomine'?*

RB: It's a real conundrum. Nobody knows why that particular section of that particular mass caught on so violently — in a way. It goes right through from Taverner's Mass in the 1530s to Purcell in 1680. So that's 150 years of 'In Nomines.' The original is a wonderful, almost perfect bit of counterpoint. It was only realized that Taverner's was the original in the early 1960s. Musicologists recognized the plainchant, but they couldn't understand why it was called 'In Nomine.' I think it was Denis Stevens who actually found that it was from the Benedictus section of Taverner's Mass, where it appears with the words 'in nomine Domini.'

*DH: How long did consorts of viols persist in England after the Royal Court developed a taste for violins — in imitation of the French 'Violons du Roi'?*

RB: Not long. The bass viol carried on for another century or so, but the taste for consort music had already gone by the time Purcell wrote his *Fantasias* in 1680 — which were never performed in his lifetime. The only examples that remain are his own manuscripts. Locke's consorts of four parts in the 1660s and early 60s were really the last pieces of consort music. People were already lamenting the viol's demise in the 1680s.

*DH: Who was responsible for their revival early in the 20th century?*

RB: Arnold Dolmetsch. He discovered manuscripts of viol consort music in the library of the Royal College of Music and became curious about what instruments played them. He gathered together his family and friends, who learned to play the viol and started playing viol consorts. On the continent, the revival was more concentrated on Bach and virtuosic solo music, driven mainly by cellists who were looking to add to their repertoire.

*DH: Returning to your Cleveland program, tell us about the modern works.*

RB: We commissioned a Nico Muhly work for a 2012 Wigmore Hall concert with the Hilliard Ensemble, a terrific piece called *My Days*. We thought the next thing to do was to commission him to write an instrumental piece. We premiered that in Feb of 2015 in London. It's an 'In Nomine' but with a very different texture and feeling than the old pieces.

Gavin's Bryars' piece was written as part of a series of commissions we had from the South Bank in 1995 for the Tercentenary of Purcell's death. We asked twelve composers to write pieces that were analogous to the Purcell Fantasias. Gavin chose to link up with the Purcell 6-part In Nomine. He quotes from the original but uses completely different textures that are also different from Nico's take on the pieces. It was an obvious choice to include them on this program — to bring the 'In Nomine' story up to date, as it were.

*DH: Have composers asked you to use some odd, extended techniques?*

RB: Oh yes — everything you could imagine, and probably many things you can't, as well. Anything goes in contemporary music. There's a piece by Barry Guy called *Buzz* that uses the technique Charlie Mingus used to use of pulling the string around the side of the fingerboard and making it buzz.

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