

Baltimore Consort at Holy Trinity, Akron: 15 minutes with Mary Anne Ballard

by Daniel Hathaway



When the Baltimore Consort presents their program “Adew Dundee: Early and Traditional Music of Scotland” at Akron’s Holy Trinity Lutheran Church on Sunday, October 28 at 4:00 pm,

the ensemble will be revisiting its roots. As violist da gamba Mary Anne Ballard said in a telephone conversation, “Our first recording was of that repertoire. We’ve always been in love with the tunes of Scotland.”

Before that, the Consort was inaugurated by Roger Harmon, who taught guitar at the Peabody Conservatory. “He played a lot of lute music on guitar, and wanted to find ensemble music that involved the lute,” Ballard said. “He found Thomas Morley’s *Consort Lessons* of 1599, which was written for treble viol, flute or recorder, lute, cittern, pandora, and bass gamba, and formed a similar ensemble in 1979. It’s a wonderful sound to have a melody floating over plucked instruments that underpin the tune with rhythmic chords or running diminutions.”

Beyond the Morley collection, the written repertoire from the turn of the 17th century wasn’t huge. “There are only four main sources from around 1600,” Ballard said, “and we used those as a template for our own arrangements of popular songs and dances — the kind of tunes mentioned in Shakespeare’s plays that most people would have known.”

Thus the genesis of “Adew Dundee,” a group effort for which Ballard served as coordinator. “We started playing and arranging Scottish music, which was very popular among the English, who loved its pentatonic scales. At the time when James VI of Scotland became James I of England and the Scottish court moved with him,

Scottish aristocrats who were left behind were afraid for their heritage, so they began writing down Scottish tunes. One example is the Skene MS — written by John Skene of Hallyards, Lothian, or by his son William — which preserves the household music of those who stayed in Scotland.”

Those tunes form the backbone of the Baltimore Consort’s Scottish program, but there are some surprises as well. “The repertoire also shows a strong influence from the French court because of royal marriages and study visits to France. We include a very poetic reworking of the Lord’s Prayer as an example of French courtly music.”

The program also visits tunes that traveled to the New World — to Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia and with the Scots Irish to Tennessee and North Carolina. “Those have survived through the work of ballad collectors like Harvard’s Francis James Child and, during World War I, Cecil Sharp, who went into the ‘hollers’ and wrote down at least the words of ballads that people carried in their heads. The most authentic way to perform those was without instruments, a tradition that goes back to Homer.”

Ballard noted that oral transmission of ballads has resulted in different versions of related songs retrieved by different collectors. Sunday’s program includes *Gypsen Davy*, “also known as *The Ballad of Johnny Faa*, the tale of a lady who abandons her Scottish Lord to run away with a gypsy and wakes up not sleeping in fine bed linens but on the cold ground.”

That collecting frenzy dates back to 1900 when people began collecting any number of things, “which provided the foundation for our arboretums and our museums,” Ballard said. The ballad collecting was initiated by scholars who were primarily interested in poetry rather than music. “It wasn’t until William Chappell brought out *Popular Music of the Olden Time* that people realized they needed to collect the tunes as well, Ballard said.”

Other highlights Ballard mentioned include simple tunes that open the program. “‘The gowans are gay’ could be a children’s song. Baltimore Consort has discovered that you don’t need a drop-dead lyrical melody in order to have a compelling piece of music. This one uses only a few notes.”

On Sunday, Ballard will be joined by Baltimore Consort members Mark Cudek, cittern and bass viol, Larry Lipkis, bass viol, soprano recorder, and crumhorn, Ronn McFarlane, lute, Mindy Rosenfeld, flutes, whistle, recorder, and crumhorn, and Danielle Svonavec, soprano.

How did Mary Anne Ballard herself get hooked on the gamba? “My college owned instruments, and the gamba appealed to me for many reasons — the breadth of its repertoire, its sound, and the fact that most people play more than one size, which makes it a more versatile experience.”

She also said the gamba is an instrument that an adult can take up with some immediate gratification. Ballard proves that theory each summer at Oberlin’s Baroque Performance Institute with her beginning viola da gamba classes. “When you learn how to make a decent sound, you can very quickly and satisfyingly play easy consort music — and many Renaissance pieces are easy to play, although solo music like that of Marin Marais or Graun can be quite challenging.”

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