

## Fretwork viol consort at CMA: “Music from the Age of Michelangelo”

by Nicholas Stevens



Spare a thought for Fretwork: a recent tour of North America hit a snag when [an airline](#) cracked one of their violas da gamba. Instruments of this family constitute the entire toolbox of the group, a viol consort that presents the fraternal twin to the violin as though it had never lost its cachet. For many Northeast Ohioans, warm feelings for the group remain fresh after a late-October concert, part of a tour that pitted them against all too modern perils. In a careless, rushing world, their meticulous musicianship and willingness to let music unfold feel less like dusty artifacts than like emblems of a future worth fighting for.

The Cleveland Museum of Art presented Fretwork in Gartner Auditorium on Wednesday, October 23. Titled “Music from the Age of Michelangelo” in acknowledgement of the Museum’s “Michelangelo: Mind of the Master” exhibition, which runs through January, the concert played to a bafflingly modest number of attendees. Almost all of the music came from the *Harmonice Musices Odhecaton* of 1501, the landmark volume of music printed from movable type that heralded a sea change in music production methods over Michelangelo’s lifetime.

With the exception of the final selection, each piece on the program called for four of the ensemble’s five members, and appeared as part of a set of two to five short compositions. Where Marbriano de Orto’s *Ave Maria* drifted along serenely, the anonymously authored *Numquam fue peña major* opened with a rending clash. In the latter, tenor violist Joanna Levine and bass Sam Stadlen held down supporting parts as tenor Amily Ashton and bass Richard Boothby harmonized beautifully.

Treble player Asako Morikawa unfurled a tune above hopping rhythms in an unattributed *Fortuna Desperata*, while Johannes de Piñarol’s setting of the same text offered syncopations that the group handled with grace. Electric surges of energy and unmoored melodies coexisted in *La Spagna*.

Stadlen tore through fast runs in Alexander Agricola’s *Tandernaken* with no apparent effort. In a second setting of the same text by Erasmus Lapidica, a dance rhythm emerges from the sort of timeless fog that Renaissance composers, masters of meters alien to the modern ear, conjured often.

The first half of the program ended with a suite of pieces by Josquin. Thanks to the pleading quality in Morikawa’s melody, the composer’s *Mille Regretz* had a sweet mournfulness appropriate to the original lyrics. *La Bernadina* passed a fast figuration between players, *Baises Moy* offered a brief burst of sunlight, and an *Ave Maria* sounded so vocal in the players’ hands that one could almost hear the vowel sounds.

A set of pieces on the text “De tous bien playne” opened the second half. Hayne van Ghizeghem’s version had a restless feeling, while Agricola’s prompted Levine to hover calmly above Stadlen’s and Ashton’s constant pizzicato basslines. Agile strokes lent energy to Josquin’s take on the poem.

Agricola’s *Fors seulement* gave the group comparatively little to work with, but Obrecht’s setting had an organ-like weight and unity in performance. Johannes Ghiselin’s, ever collapsing into grief, seemed in perpetual descent.

The highlight of the evening came at the end, with several *tours de force* by Heinrich Isaac. Harmonies and textures shifted in the Flemish master's *J'ay pris amours*, giving the impression of tossing and turning at night. Sweetness and acidity diffused out from a single initial tone in *Tartara*, and *La mi la sol* offered an accessible demonstration of Isaac's compositional ingenuity. *La Morra* swayed gently, but grew more muscular at the end.

All five gambists played together in *O decus ecclesiae*, which encodes a subtle mathematical conceit into one of its basslines. Had Boothby not mentioned this, the audience might have walked away no less impressed. Beautiful, rustling rhythms and glowing harmonies made this piece the culmination of an evening-length spell.

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