Farewell, Unkind: Songs and Dances of John Dowland (1563–1626)

Notes

John Dowland: the most eminent lutenist of his age, and a composer of unforgettable melodies. He was eulogized by English contemporaries and "widely admired on the European continent", where he was arguably the most famous English musician of the day. His music was widely reprinted and copied, and several of his songs were genuine "hits", known and loved by people of all social classes and callings. But the honor he coveted most, an appointment as lutenist to Queen Elizabth I, eluded him. Only late in his life, in 1612, his composing days behind him, and in the hard-drinking court of Denmark, was Dowland appointed as one of its King's Lutes.

His salary was twenty pence a day.

Was the age unfair to Dowland, as he almost paranoically complains in the preface to his fourth, and last, songbook? The age most certainly was unfair, but Dowland himself was a problematic person. He most likely hurt his career through erratic behavoir. Early in life he converted to Catholicism, and, while in Italy, even managed to get involved with some shady English conspirators against the Queen. Sumptuously installed at the Danish court as lutenist to the King, he ran up large debts before finally being dismissed. Given the extraordinary contrasts of dark and light in Dowland's music, and the many texts dealing with tears, sorrow, and loss, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he had a melancholy and perhaps even depressive side to his character. This program will not neglect the intimate Dowland of lamentation and unfulfilled yearning – to do so would give an incomplete picture of a great composer's musical personality. Yet we have another, primary aim: to repair, in imagination, an injustice of history, and to present Dowland as the Elizabethan cour composer he yeared to be, but never was. Thus, we have chosed to perform a significant number of his more outgoing, "popular" works, often in versions for fuller vocal ensemble.

Our principal collaborator in this mission is John Dowland himself. For most of Dowland's "Songs to the lute", known mainly in our time as vehicles for solo voice with lute accompaniment, were published by their author in simultaneous versions for four voices, "Musicall Harmonie of 3, 4, and 5 parts, to be sung and plaid with Lute". One can argue that the polyphonic versions of the songs, with their beautifully written inner voices, demanding skilled and sensitive consort singers, are capable of giving, at times, even more pleasure than the solo versions.

How did Dowland acquire his taste for elegant partsongs? The main influence and model for the English air was not the Italian madrigal (though you will find plenty of Italianisms in the later Dowland). But the French air de cour…Dowland went to Paris in 1580, at the age of 17, and remained in France for four formative, impressionable years. The French court, too, liked its air to be performed with larger consorts of voices and instruments. The young Dowland must have heard a lot of French airs, which were the *dernier cri* of Parisian society at the time. It takes nothing away from Dowland's unique genius to poitn out a marked French influence in his music, more important than has generally been acknowledged heretofore.

One trait Dowland's airs share with their French counterparts is a close relation to dance forms. There are even, for a number of Dowland's pieces, multiple versions: "Now, oh now" is also "The Frog Galliard"; "Farewell Unkind" is like an "Almain"; and so forth. These songs, and their dance-music incarnations, call us out of the shadows into a world of gaiety and spring light. A difficult, tempermental man he may well have been; but he also knew, superbly well, and like few other Englishmen before or since, how to sing of good company, youthful passion, and earthly pleasures.

Joel Cohen (1996)

John Dowland's *Heavenly touch.*

Keeping in mind that only about 10 pieces which have survived come from reliable sources while the remaining 80 or so exist in versions written out by others, what can we know and feel about Dowland as a lutenist? One clue to Dowland's playing may be found in a famous poem, "If music and sweet poetry agree" by Richard Barnfield, published in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1598. Of Dowland's lute playing, he writes:

> *Dowland to thee is dear, whose heavenly touch*
> *Upon the lute doth ravish human sense;*

No comments on speed, or the quality of his counterpoint. What seemed important to Dowland's contemporaries was the fact that his playing was so heavenly due to the way he "touched" the lute, that all humans lost their senses (except that of hearing). This was a typical rhetorical effect of music throughout the Renaissance.

What a modern lutenist finds when trying to play Dowland's music is a blend of strict counterpoint, an idiomatic use of the instrument, creative ornamentation, and a free spirit. We only need to recall *My Lady Hunsdon's Puffe* to feel his humor and lightness. His excellent counterpoint and creativity are exemplified in his 7 Fantasies, the first of which has not one bar of melancholy!

When the name "John Dowland" is uttered today, we think of *melancholy*! But this was only one of many emotions in which he composed or played. If we look at his two main canons of work, songs and lute music, the bright, tuneful, optimistic side of his imagination far outweighs the darker side. In today's (15 February 2026) program, when we hear his famous Pavan which circulated throughout Europe, *Lachrimae*, and his less well known Pavan, *Dowland's Adieu*, it is easy to understand the bias towards the dark side. His many Galliards, however, (including *Earl of Essex's Galliard* and *The Frog Galliard*) present a bright and virtuosic side of his musical character. Songs expressing melancholy may be appreciated in *Come Heavy Sleep* and *If that a sinner's sighs.*

Dowland was a moving and expressive performer, a consummate musician who knew all the rules and could write beautiful music for his instrument and set all manner of texts in songs to the lute.

Nigel North (2026)

English music has a prominent place in the early history of The Boston Camerata's programming. By 1963, we see a program of *Music Under the Tudors* performed at the ensemble's first home, the Museum of Fine Arts – Boston. In 1969, a young lutenist and composer, Joel Cohen, by then the Music Director of the Camerata, programs *Music of John Dowland and William Byrd*, accompanied by a certain lutenist named Hopkinson Smith. It is not until 1974 that Cohen's interest for this repertoire peaks again, but mainly for the music of the time just before Elizabeth I. The next forays in this lute song repertoire happen in 1979 with *An Elizabethan Entertainment* in Boston, and again in 1981 for the American Musicological Society. Then it's on the road in New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont for *An Elizabethan Valentine*, followed by an extensive tour in France and Spain in 1987 with *The Queen's Music*. Only after a close study and recording of Pierre Guédron's music for Erato was *Farewell Unkind* created and recorded in 1996, followed by an anthology of English songs, *What Then Is Love?* (recorded in 1998), with touring in the U.S. in the early 2000s.

A long silence, enduring two decades, then ensued for this repertoire. For the Camerata certainly, but perhaps not only (although an actual survey would need to be conducted). There are, perchance, many reasons for this silence, but one which might be relevant to share: Elizabethan music was an inherent part of the work of all pioners of the early music movement, from Dolmetsch to Noah Greenberg, through Alfred Deller and our own Joel Cohen. Perhaps because of the easy nature of some of the songs, often in the mother tongues of these re-creators, did we have a plethora of concerts and recordings (like the twelve recordings of the Dowland collection done by the Consort of Musicke in London in the late 70s and early 80s) — and many, many a workshop of young singers and lutenists, student concerts, and first singers' recitals all wrapped around that repertoire.

After these (re)discoveries, it seems that other repertoires came to the forefront of the consciousness of the next generation of early music musicians. And these were rife with new, exciting challenges to share with the world at large. For the Camerata, a deep interest in American music (with occasional bridges to these early English songs), and other, earlier repertoires took the forefront of our programming work.

An yet, here we are, returning today to these precious jewels, in their apparent accessibility, hopefully enriched by these musical excursions. We are eager to share with you Dowland's immense talent at creating, in just a few measures of notation and tablature, such small cameos containing emotional worlds without pair. The lute, our indissociable partner, will guide and sustain us in our travels to these marvelous mini cosmoses.

We hope you will enjoy discovering – or perhaps returning to – these precioyus works with us.

Anne Azéma (2025)