

PROGRAM NOTES

Known to his contemporaries as “The English Orpheus,” John Dowland was the most celebrated lutenist of his time and one of England’s greatest composers. His music was extraordinarily popular throughout Europe and was published in more cities than any other composer of the time. The celebrated *Lachrimae Pavin* alone survives in over 100 different versions. Nevertheless, Dowland’s career was filled with shattered dreams and frustrations, resulting in his adoption of the motto “Semper Dowland semper dolens” (Always Dowland, always sorrowing). The intense melancholy that pervades much of his music is a personal expression of the bitterness he felt due to the lack of a royal appointment and the dearth of respect shown him by younger players. At the same time, the modern preoccupation with Dowland’s melancholy creates a one-sided impression of a multi-faceted personality. Though his doleful works are justly famous, Dowland’s lively pieces, particularly his galliards and jigs, evoke a humor and wit unmatched by any of his contemporaries. Tonight's program includes some of his least frequently performed pieces alongside some of his most famous works.

Dowland’s life unfolded as a colorful series of restless moves and wanderings. He had converted to Catholicism during his late teens while serving the English ambassador in Paris, and he contended until the end of his life that this conversion was the cause of his exclusion from Queen Elizabeth’s court. But it seems possible that his volatile temperament and outspokenness may have played an equal role. After his six-year sojourn in France and his return to England in 1586, he studied and worked in his native country until 1595. Passed over in the appointment to a vacancy in the Queen’s court, he received a permit to travel abroad for the express purpose of meeting the famed Italian composer Luca Marenzio in Rome. However, he returned to England in 1596: before reaching his destination, he stumbled upon conspiracies against Elizabeth in Florence. In 1598, Dowland accepted a post at the court of King Christian IV of Denmark, a position he held for eight years. Finally, in 1612, in the decline of his career, he was granted a position at the court of Elizabeth’s successor, James. I, and he held this post until his death in 1626.

Dowland was one of the foremost composers of lute songs (his four books of ayres are unsurpassed) as well as of music for lute alone. His outstanding gift for writing both catchy and expressive melodies served him well in both genres, but ultimately it is the pervasive contrapuntal skill, the imaginative ornamentation, and the moody chromaticism of his music that make his works so fascinating and affecting. Many of Dowland’s lute solos are arrangements of his songs (or vice versa), including *The Earl of Essex Galliard (Can she excuse my wrongs)* and *Captain Piper’s Galliard (If my complaints)*. These works together reveal the freedom with which Elizabethan composers approached the popular dance forms of the time, since the cascading, rhapsodic *Captain Piper’s Galliard* and the virtuosic *The Earl of Essex Galliard*, so different in mood, are both galliards.

More than any of his lutenist contemporaries, Dowland made use of all of the instrumental forms current at the time, including fantasias, Pavins, Galliards, Almainses, jigs, toys, and variations on ballad tunes such as *Walsingham*. Dowland’s fantasias seem to have been inspired by the keyboard and viol fantasias of the time rather than by the continental lute fantasia which provided the model for most English lute fantasias. His use of proportions, the cantus firmus, chromaticism, and antiphonal effects allow the lute to sound like a miniature consort without requiring the outrageous left-hand contortions of much continental lute music. Indeed, it is Dowland’s ability to expand the scope of lute music while maintaining a natural, idiomatic approach to the instrument that makes his music so satisfying for player and listener alike. No other lutenist was able to get so much out of the instrument so efficiently.

Farewell is Dowland's contrapuntal masterpiece. The eerie ascending chromatic lines and gripping dissonances moved Thomas Weelkes to borrow the final section for his madrigal *Cease sorrows now*, set to the text, "I'll sing my faint farewell." For the lute, these words turned out to be all too prophetic. Just fifty years after Dowland’s death, the lute was considered a “neglected and abused instrument.” Thomas Mace’s words of encouragement to the lute in 1676 could not be any more appropriate today: “*Cheer up, Brave Soul! And know that some Yet Living, who for Thee will take such Care, (there are) That Thou shalt be Restor'd Thy former Glory, And be Eterniz'd to Eternal Story.*”

—Paul O’Dette