

# Gamba NEWS

Volume 13, Number 5

January 2001

## Monteverdi by Sex Chordae

*The inside story of the making of the compact disc*

With *Claudio Monteverdi: Third Book of Madrigals for Viol Consort*, the Sex Chordae Consort of Viols has produced

*For a  
CD review,  
see Page 5*

the first recording made up entirely of madrigals played by viols.

This undertaking will incite comment,

since modern music listeners expect to hear madrigals sung. With this CD, Sex Chordae has chosen to demonstrate a common practice in Elizabethan and Jacobean England – to play vocal compositions on viols or other instruments. Besides works by English composers of the day, madrigals by Monteverdi, Marenzio, Vecchi, and others also appear in early English instrumental manuscripts, without texts, or with text underlay only in the lowest part. The theorist and composer Michael Praetorius confirmed that performing vocal music on instruments was customary.

### PACIFICA PLAY DAY SCHEDULE

All play days except those at Stanford are held at Zion Lutheran Church, 5201 Park Blvd., Oakland.

The church is just west of the Park Blvd. exit off Highway 13. We meet at 9:30 a.m. for the coached session. Lunch break is at 12:30; players can go to nearby restaurants or bring lunch from home. Uncoached afternoon playing goes on till 4:00 p.m.

Sheet music, coffee and tea will be supplied. Please bring a music stand and any music of your own you'd like to play. Consorts are formed based on the information you provide on the enclosed postcard. **Please mail it in immediately!** Or e-mail your data to **John Mark**, mark\_bach8@hotmail.com.

Newcomers and rank beginners are welcome. If you're coming for the first time, please phone ahead: (510) 531-1471.

Date	Coach
January 13, 2001	LYNN TETENBAUM
February 17, 2001	JOHN DORNENBURG AT STANFORD
March 10, 2001	DAVID MORRIS
April 27-29, 2001	FRESNO WORKSHOP WEEKEND
May 12, 2001	JULIE JEFFREY
June 9, 2001	UNCOACHED PLAYING



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Notes accompanying the CD by historical musicologist Richard Charteris describe Monteverdi's concern not only for faithfully illustrating the words of Tasso but for reproducing their spirit in the texture of his pieces. On this recording the viols must express the poet's intent without the benefit of words: the declamation of a text by a solo voice on a single tone, rapid changes of texture, varying combinations of voices, and emotionally expressive chromaticism.

### The research

When Sex Chordae members were pondering ideas for their next recording, they wanted to steer clear of the standard consort repertoire and venture into underexplored territory. No present-day consort has done much with the once-common practice of playing madrigals on viols. Director **John Dornenburg** was intrigued by the presence of Italian music in English viol manuscripts from around 1600, and especially interested in Monteverdi's madrigals. **Julie Jeffrey** studied inventories of these manuscripts and found that a popular source for the English compilers was the *Third Book of Madrigals*. John decided it would make a good recording project.

John and Julie then came up against one of the reasons people don't play madrigals on viols much anymore: There was no performing edition – i.e., no parts. Julie turned to publisher **Peter Ballinger** (PRB Productions, Albany) to undertake the monumental task of making viol parts for an entire book of madrigals. Peter agreed to do this, thinking that eventually he could publish a complete playing edition of the *Third Book*. But perhaps he did not realize what this favor would entail: weeks of labor punctuated by a series of daunting requests and deadlines from the consort. "Love those parts, Peter! Now, could you transpose half of them down a fourth? By 5 p.m. today? All you have to do is push a button, right?" Peter complied with all this with unfailing good cheer.

Indeed, quite a few of the madrigals would not sound good on viols at their written pitches. Although they sat in a fine range for voices, the pieces were generally too high to take advantage of the sonority of the lower instruments. Some went only as low as one octave below middle C in the lowest bass part. Peter explains, "In Mantua and Ferrara there existed a *concerto di donne*, a group of women singers with high voices, and some of the madrigals in the *Third Book* reflect Monteverdi's use of these groups." In these cases, John decided to lower the pitches by a fourth.

"This would have been a common practice at the time," says John, "and actually puts the madrigals in a more typical Renaissance consort range." The PRB edition maintains Monteverdi's original pitch in the score, but lowers the parts of 10 of the madrigals.

In Monteverdi's day the parts were printed without bar lines, presenting the least interference between the notes and the players' eyes; but modern musicians are used to relying on bar lines to find their places. Peter recognized that a notation of 4/2, rather than the usual 4/4, would improve legibility for viol players. In those madrigals with many long notes, there would be half the number of bar lines, and only half the number



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of confusing ties. The shape of the musical phrases is also easier for the eye to appreciate.

For *Sex Chordae*'s first read-through, Peter barely had enough time to produce some parts and no time to put in the text. The consort needed to have all the words in all the parts in order to work on nuances of phrasing and interpretation. To help Peter get the work done in time, Julie learned Peter's cantankerous computer program for underlaying text, and, she says, spent hours at the computer at PRB Productions, "keying, muttering and cursing." In the end, she wrote text by hand into everyone's parts for more than a third of the madrigals. "I have vivid memories of sitting in the laundromat," says Julie, "fighting writer's cramp, carefully inscribing tiny syllables under tiny notes, surrounded by pages of score and parts and piles of spare pens and liquid paper."

John then studied the 20 madrigals to determine which bow strokes would best bring out the text inflections and emotions of the music. Adjustments would be made as needed through rehearsals.

The parts were now ready for *Sex Chordae*, but Peter's work on a published edition had only begun.

One of Peter's editors in England examined the Monteverdi collection at Christ Church, Oxford, and found seven reprints of the *Third Book* that had appeared within only 30 years of its first publication in 1592. Since this unusual number of reprints would have greatly complicated the editing process, it was fortunate that Richard Charteris was able to get permission from the Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale in Bologna to use its first edition as principal source. For the cover of the new edition, Peter restored graphic elements from the original part books cover.

Peter entered the music into a computer as notation, then checked it repeatedly by converting the notation to actual sounds. He then "proofread" the score and parts by playing each part on a viol while the other four parts were played through the computer's speakers. Since Charteris lives in Sydney, Australia, mailing the final corrections was out of the question. (One copy of the corrected score took two weeks to arrive, and another copy never arrived at all!) Peter had to "clip" from the computer screen each corrected piece of score or part, assemble the clips on a page, 20 or 30 per page, then convert the collage of corrected bits to portable document files and send each one (about 20 files in all) as e-mail attachments to Richard for final approval. This had to be done quickly, since Richard was about to leave for an eight-month tour of libraries in Europe and the U.S., during which he would be inaccessible.

### **The recording**

The recording sessions were held during an overcast and rainy January of 1998 at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley. The temperature in the chapel registered 55 to 60 degrees, since the heating system, complete with operational noise, took several hours to actually heat up the room and could not be on while *Sex Chordae*



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was recording.

"I wore every piece of polar fleece I own – except for the ones with noisy hardware that could spoil a take – and sat on a heating pad," says Julie. "The heating pad worked so well that by the end of the week there were burn marks in the shape of heating coils branded onto my derriere."

Because rain could be heard on the roof and in the downspouts, recording had to be suspended during showers. And the number one contributor of wasted time and spoiled takes, as in any recording session, was airplane noise. To avoid this, Sex Chordae recorded after 11 p.m. most nights. But Pacific Lutheran was the choice despite these drawbacks for its resonant acoustics, which contributed to the rich sound on a previous Sex Chordae recording, Schein's *Banchetto Musicale*.

"To get five viols in tune (30 strings), and then to play perfectly together – without background noise – in a freezing church – late at night – is no slight accomplishment," says John. Back in the days of LPs, which contained about 40 minutes of music, classical recordings were made in a standard three-day stretch. But now that CDs offer 60 minutes or more, most people schedule four or even five days. Since a group is not usually granted unlimited access to a recording venue, some days are only partially useful.

In the first part of the editing process, John and Julie selected the takes to be used on the recording. In such densely polyphonic music there is almost no opportunity to do the "magic" note-by-note edits of modern studio recording. Sex Chordae's recording engineer, Peter Nothnagle, used only a single pair of microphones, which were suspended on a pole above the viol consort, sitting in a circle. That meant there could be no artificial re-balancing of the sound after the session, since the viols were not separately miked. Thus, what one hears on Sex Chordae's recordings is a faithful reproduction of Sex Chordae performing, without post-production enhancements.

Centaur Records did the second phase of editing of the session tapes, then sent a disc back for the players' approval. As is usual, it took several tries to get things right. The CD is now in stores, three years after the project began.

Responding to the warmth and passion of Monteverdi's songs on this recording, the average listener would never guess the arduous nature of the process.

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## A new e-mail address

Please note that *Gamba News*' editor has a new e-mail address:  
[lyleyork@earthlink.net](mailto:lyleyork@earthlink.net)



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COMPACT DISC REVIEW

**Sex Chordae of Viols:**  
***Claudio Monteverdi:***  
***Third Book of Madrigals for Viol Consort***

*By Oliver Iberien*

For anyone who heard Sex Chordae perform selections from this album live at the time it was actually recorded (in early 1998), the release of this CD has been long anticipated. It comes as both a pleasure and a disappointment: a pleasure, because the

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playing is so refined and the music intrinsically so lovely; but a disappointment in that these songs of love are played with a refinement that impinges on their passion.

These pieces from Monteverdi's *Third Book of Madrigals*, many of which were found mixed among the fantasias, In Nomines and so on of the old English consort pieces, are played here in a style that could be considered representative of the mainstream of the modern interpretation of English viol music, and that at its best. The playing is stately, measured, delicately

thought out and delicately wrought. The voices of the instruments blend insensibly into a little symphony of perfect viol sound.

But one may ask oneself: Should this music be played as the English played it, meaning, as we nowadays understand or perhaps intuitively feel that they played it, a pleasing kind of humdrum raised to the level of an art form? Or should the players have tried to go back to the music's Italian roots to re-create this music's mood, just as they have gone back to the original Italian texts to guide their articulations and inflections?

We know that the Italians did perform madrigals on viols; Gesualdo's madrigals on viols were considered apt for sad interludes in theatrical productions, for instance. Exactly how Italians played madrigals on viols is a matter for scholars to discuss. How best to present this music's qualities for a modern audience is the question at hand. It seems obvious on the face of it that the excesses of Tasso's texts be expressed in a manner that mirrors their desperate, mannered idea of love, and that steps should be taken

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to find that new way, rather than tracing again the path laid out by modern conventions of English viol consort playing.

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In performing 15<sup>th</sup>-century Italian music, some performers have erred to excess in pursuit of its sensuality or its complexity; for example, Paolo Pandolfo's over-the-top recording of Italian vocal music on viols (including a strangely abrasive rendition of da Rore's madrigal *Io canterai d'amore*) of a year or two ago. Erring in the opposite direction are any number of chilly, uninviting recordings of recorders playing instrumental *ricercare* or arrangements of organ music. Despite the lushness and demonstrativeness of Sex Chordae's live performance of this music, in which the music seemed to speak for itself, their solution to performance on disc – to steer away from all excess – is equally

unsatisfactory and the result ultimately static.

Director Dornenburg, as the accompanying article mentions, leaves not a single bow stroke or articulation to chance. One wishes that Sex Chordae had taken more chances: had perhaps let the individual voices be heard more clearly at the expense of evenness of timbre, had been a bit more expressive at the risk of losing a little of the sense of perfect control which was not evident during Sex Chordae's live performance but which pervades and stifles this recording. They might have fallen on their faces had they done so, but they also might have produced a great record instead of just a very good one.



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## Random Notes

**Contributors wanted:** Send *Gamba News* your concert listings and reviews, opinions, workshop experiences, CD reviews, drawings, photos, poems or out-of-body episodes. Send all contributions to **Lyle York**, Editor, 1932 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Berkeley, CA 94707, or via e-mail: [lleyork@earthlink.net](mailto:lleyork@earthlink.net). Phone (510) 559-9273. Short classified advertisements in plain text to be placed in *Gamba News* are free to VdGS/Pacifica members. For non-members, ads are \$5 per issue. Please mail your check for \$5 to **Lyle York** (address above), made out to VdGS/Pacifica. Deadline for calendar submissions, classified ads and all editorial contributions for a given month's newsletter is the 15<sup>th</sup> of the preceding month (e.g., the deadline for the April issue is March 15).

**Newsletters by e-mail:** If you'd like to receive your monthly *Gamba News* on-line, please e-mail **Lyle York** at [lleyork@earthlink.net](mailto:lleyork@earthlink.net). Your reply postcard will take e-mail form as well.

**Join VdGS/Pacifica!** The annual membership rates are: Playing Members, \$25 (can attend regular coached consort meetings free, receive *Gamba News*, and get a discount on special consort-coaching sessions); Two-Person Memberships, \$35 (two playing members in the same household); Newsletter-Only Members, \$10. For a membership form, contact **Annette Barnett**, 2502 Hearst Avenue, Oakland, CA 94602; (510) 482-8649; [annette.barnett@esis.com](mailto:annette.barnett@esis.com).

### **Pacifica chapter officers are:**

President, **Julie Jeffrey**; Vice-President, **Lyle York**; Secretary, **Annette Barnett**; Treasurer, **Helen Tyrrell**; Members at Large: **Cindy Share**, Coaching Liaison; **John Mark**, Rental Program Coordinator; **John Dornenburg**, **Alvin Roper**, and **Lee McRae**, VdGSA Chapter Representative.

**Information, please:** Our VdGS/Pacifica chapter Web site, [home.pacbell.net/hesuome](http://home.pacbell.net/hesuome), is regularly updated by the able **Helen Tyrrell**. The VdGSA (national) Web site is [www.vdgsa.org](http://www.vdgsa.org). Need a list of local teachers? Sources for sheet music,

supplies, inexpensive viols, repairs? Travel tips? We have extra copies of a back issue full of information. We also welcome contributions and corrections to our store of knowledge. Contact **Lyle York**, Editor, *Gamba News*, 1932 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Berkeley, CA 94707, (510) 559-9273; or via e-mail: [lleyork@earthlink.net](mailto:lleyork@earthlink.net).

**Rent a viol:** Pacifica has trebles, tenors and basses to rent. Donations of viols and bows to our rental program are extremely welcome—we'll accept them in any condition. Rental fees range from \$10 to \$25 per month. In charge of rentals is **John Mark**, at 10 Holyrood Manor, Oakland, CA 94611; (510) 531-1471; [mark\\_bach8@hotmail.com](mailto:mark_bach8@hotmail.com).

The VdGSA, Pacifica's parent organization, also rents viols. For VdGSA members, rates are \$250 per year for trebles and tenors, \$300 for basses, and \$750 for a complete consort of viols. For more information, contact **Stephen Morris**, 2615 Tanglewood Road, Decatur, GA 30033-2729; (404) 325-2709; [smmorris@mindspring.com](mailto:smmorris@mindspring.com).

The VdGSA recently instituted a Rent-To-Own program. If interested, contact **John Mark**, address above.

**Classifieds: FOR SALE:** Boulder Early Music Shop Hungarian tenor viol. Good quality student instrument, less than one year old. Asking \$1600 with bow and hard case. Call **Michael** or **Vicki** at (408) 298-3255 or e-mail to: [harp@standingstones.com](mailto:harp@standingstones.com).

**FOR SALE:** Zuckerman Flemish harpsichord, single manual, one 8' and one 4' stop, natural wood finish. Asking \$3500. Also seeking to purchase a virginal or small spinet, or a Roland electronic harpsichord. **Eileen Hadidian**, (510) 524-5661 or [eilhad@aol.com](mailto:eilhad@aol.com).

**SEEKING A GAMBIST:** My wife and I and two friends play baroque flutes and recorder. We would like to find a gambist willing to play with us in Pacifica. **John Sayre**, (650) 355-8895.



# Mark your calendar

**JANUARY 6, 2001**

**MUSIC'S RE-CREATION:** Music by J.S. Bach, Telemann, Marais, Leclair, Couperin, C.P.E. Bach. Louise Carslake, baroque flute; Carla Moore, baroque violin; John Dornenburg, viola da gamba; Lorna Peters, harpsichord.

8:00 p.m., Occidental Community Church, 2<sup>nd</sup> and Church streets, Occidental. Tickets \$17/\$16/\$10. Information: (707) 874-1124.

**JANUARY 7, 2001**

**TWELFTH NIGHT THEME PARTY AND POTLUCK:** The East Bay Chapter of the American Recorder Society invites viol players to its playday and party, conducted by Shira Kammen. No RSVP necessary.

Playing 4:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.; festivities to follow. Zion Lutheran Church, 5201 Park Blvd., Oakland.

**JANUARY 9, 2001**

**MUSIC'S RE-CREATION:** Music by J.S. Bach, Telemann, Marais, Leclair. Louise Carslake, baroque flute; Carla Moore, baroque violin; John Dornenburg, viola da gamba; Lorna Peters, harpsichord.

A.P. Giannini Auditorium, Bank of America, San Francisco. Free. Information: Philharmonia Baroque office.

**FEBRUARY 9, 2001**

**JOHN DORNENBURG AND LYNN TETENBAUM, VIOLAS DA GAMBA:** Music by Sainte-Colombe, Tobias Hume, Matthew Locke, etc.

Memorial Chapel, Stanford University. \$8/\$4. Information: (650) 723-3811.

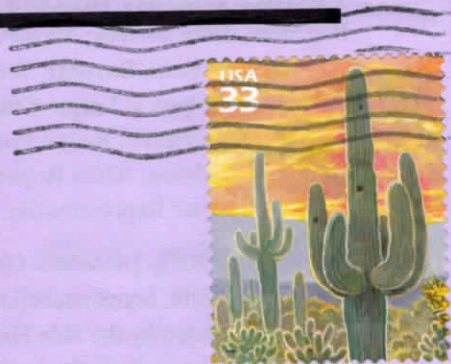
**AUGUST 12-18, 2001**

**THE SOOTHING VIOL:** Carol Herman, director; faculty includes Carol, Jack Ashworth, Tina Chancey, John Dornenburg, Julie Jeffrey, Larry Lipkis, Ann Marie Morgan, Rosamund Morley, David Morris, Laurie Rabut, and Brent Wissick.

For more information, e-mail Carol, [chgamba@aol.com](mailto:chgamba@aol.com), or Alice Renken, [arenken@sandwich.net](mailto:arenken@sandwich.net).

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