

## **Jewish Musicians and the Viola da Gamba**

“In fourteen hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue”, but his was not the only departure from Spain that year. In fact 1492 was a turning-point for the Spanish, as they finally succeeded in forcibly removing the Moors from the Iberian peninsular and then, in a fit of religious intolerance or zeal (depending on how you view it), expelled the Jews. This last act was the more disastrous for Spain since, at a stroke, it removed the middle classes who were the intellectual, financial, legal, and commercial guts of the society.

However, what was bad for Spain turned out to be good for Western music: three Jewish musicians had developed a method of playing the Vihuela (a guitar-like instrument) not with the fingers – *vihuela da mano* – as was normal, but with a bow – *vihuela d’arco* – as was not. These players were expelled along with the rest of the Jews and went, reasonably enough, to Italy, part of which was governed by Spain. The same year, a nephew of the former Archbishop of Valencia and father of Lucretia Borgia (as well as at least three other children) began a lavish and immoral tenure as Pope Alexander VI.

Thus was born the viol. The very term itself is an Italianisation of the Portuguese *vihuela*. Isabella d’Este was an original patron of the viol, commissioning instruments of different sizes to form a rudimentary ‘consort’ (to accompany a voice in *frottole*?), and the instrument quickly spread across Europe. At the same time as the *viola da gamba* (viol of the leg) family was growing in popularity, the *viola da braccio* (viol of the arm,

that is, violin) family was also developing in Italy, though at this point its members were considered instruments for the lower classes: as Jambe de Fer wrote in 1556 "It (i.e. the violin) is commonly used for dancing...there are few persons who use it save those who make a living from it through their labour...".

Viol players arrived at the English court around 1520 from the Netherlands, in the form of the Van Wilder family, and there were at least three in Henry VIII's employment at this time; but in 1540 Henry felt the need for an enhancement of his musical establishment and sent to Italy for new players to re-invigorate the band. What he got were two families of musicians, one predominantly wind-players, the other a string band. The former were the Bassanos and the latter became known as the Lupos. We know now that, of these two families, the latter and (with less certainty) the former were Marranos, Jews who had publicly converted to Christianity in order to avoid the Inquisition, but who secretly remained of the Jewish faith. After 1540 it seems the majority of foreign musicians at Henry's court could have been Jews.

In fact, some Bassanos had arrived in England in the 1520s. We know that one of them, Jeronimo Bassano (1490 – 1545), had six sons. His third son, Alvise, was the father of Augustine (c.1538 – 1604, while Hieronimo (1559 – 1635) was the son of Anthony, Jeronimo's first son. Augustine and Hieronimo were therefore cousins. Incidentally, Anthony's daughter, Lucrece (believed by some to be Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" of the Sonnets), was to marry Nicholas Lanier, another immigrant musician at the court, whose descendant played principal flute in the Baltimore Symphony

Orchestra. (Another Bassano descendant, Peter, is a trombonist in the contemporary London scene).

There were good reasons why Marranos might want to come to England at this time for, although Jews were still officially banned from the country (and would remain so until “God’s Englishman” Oliver Cromwell, descendant of “Henry’s Fixer” Thomas, re-admitted them exactly 350 years ago this year), Henry’s split with Rome meant that the Inquisition was not present there. Perhaps Henry knew his new musicians were Jews but didn’t mind, or was even protecting them. In any case, the Bassanos and the Lupos (Lupo is Italian for wolf, and was probably a derogatory term for Jew, thus an ironical name for the family to choose) came, survived and prospered, becoming the backbone of the court musical establishment for over a century. Of the six viol-players who arrived in November 1540, one was ‘Ambrose of Milan’, who was the first of the family to use the name Lupo, and one of whose sons was the Joseph Lupo (born c. 1536), whose only surviving work we play tonight. Ambrose played at the funeral of Henry VIII and at the coronations of two of his children, Edward VI and Elizabeth I, while Joseph was one of four Lupos who played at Elizabeth’s funeral in 1603. By then the family had been granted a coat of arms. Joseph’s son was Thomas Lupo, who was clearly the genius of the family, and who wrote a huge quantity of music for viols. The dynasty concluded with Thomas’s son Theophilus, who wrote the attractive song (and dance-tune) ‘Shows and Nightly Revels’ for Lord Hay’s Masque in 1607.

Leonora Duarte was a Jew living in Antwerp in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century whose family were diamond merchants having frequent dealings with the English

crown. Indeed, the family harks back to the very beginnings of the viol since they were of Portuguese descent, Jewish, and probably Marrano; some members of the family emigrated to the Dutch Republic, where they reconverted to Judaism. Seven ‘Symphonies’ survive of her work and they are clearly in the English consort ‘fantasy’ tradition. As a viol-player herself, and a remarkably competent amateur composer, she is to be treasured for, while there are few enough pre-twentieth century female composers, she may be the only Jewish one.

It is impossible to say that there is anything stylistically ‘Jewish’ about these Tudor composers’ music (though we may note, in passing, that no examples by Thomas Lupo survive of that quintessentially English genre, based mysteriously upon the “Gloria tibi, Trinitas” plainchant, the *In nomine*) – in fact, there are very good reasons why they should have gone to considerable lengths to make sure that their Jewish origins were not discernible in the music they wrote.

Salamone Rossi, on the other hand, had a stature and talent such that a ducal degree in Mantua relaxed, in his case, a rule requiring the wearing of the yellow badge by Jews. His name appears in the *Registrati de’ musici straordinarii* between 1570 and 1600, and there is a further note of his being paid for playing the viol in 1622. An intriguing transitional composer, between the renaissance and baroque styles of composition, his publications include *Hashirim asher lish’lomo* (‘The Songs of Solomon’), a collection of 33 polyphonic settings of Hebrew psalms, hymns and synagogal songs that represents the first attempt to print music to Hebrew texts. (The title of the collection is probably a pun on Rossi’s name, since none of the texts, though

largely taken from the Old Testament, actually comes from *The Song of Solomon*.)

In 2001, Fretwork commissioned Orlando Gough to write a piece for viols and two dancers for a Contemporary Music Network Tour that the group was undertaking. He wrote us 'Birds on Fire', basing it upon Aaron Appelfeld's novel 'Badenheim 1939' which tells of an imaginary holiday resort at Badenheim in Austria where (gradually) people are segregated into Jews and Gentiles by the town's 'sanitation department'. No-one seems to be aware of the impending tragedy; at least no-one wants to admit to it. However the resident band of reluctant musicians begin to take a pride in their shared Jewish identity and Klezmer tunes start to subvert the Viennese schmalz they are expected to play; the piece's title refers to twin brothers who recite poetry in the evening, their voices like 'birds on fire'. Eventually the trains arrive to take them east, and the ever-optimistic Dr. Pappenheim, the impresario, remarks that 'because the trains are so dirty, the journey can't be long'.