

## Miller Theatre Program Notes

### Early Music - Travels in Europe: Charles Tessier

Sunday, March 30, 3:00PM

#### The Fabulous Travels of Charles Tessier

Most of what we hear tonight comes from a musician who, apart from these songs, left almost no trace on history. We do not know precisely when he was born, or precisely where. We have no idea when and where he died. He evidently traveled from France to England in the latter part of the sixteenth century, and went back some years later; he may also have visited Germany; but the several other countries represented in his songs—Italy, Spain, Turkey, Switzerland—he probably visited only in his imagination. He is almost a wraith. And yet the music is so vital and immediate.

Charles Tessier was almost certainly the son of Guillaume Tessier, a Breton song composer of whom equally little is known—only that in 1580 he petitioned the English ambassador in Paris, Sir Henry Cobham, for permission to travel to England with his two sons and his daughter, in order to escape sickness and lack of opportunity, and that two years later he published a book of songs. Cobham's response was not encouraging; conditions would be no better in England. But the elder Tessier persisted, for he dedicated his song book to the English queen, Elizabeth I.

The Cobham connection is tantalizing, in that the ambassador had in his retinue the young John Dowland, probably seventeen at the time. Possibly the Tessiers got to know Dowland at this early stage and taught him a thing or two about the French art of courtly song. He may also have passed on to his senior French colleagues some of his emerging skills.

After this, for almost two decades, we cannot even make guesses about Charles Tessier's existence; he disappears. Then he pops up again in 1597, when he was in England, publishing a book of songs dedicated to Lady Penelope Rich, *Premier Livre de chansons et airs de court tant en françois qu'en italien et en gascon*, and writing to Anthony Bacon, who had lived in France, to ask for help in finding a patron. These facts, again, invite surmise. Penelope Rich was the younger sister of the Earl of Essex, at this time the most powerful man in the land, and the Bacons—Anthony and his brother Francis, the philosopher-statesman—were working on the earl's behalf. Perhaps Tessier was associated with this august and gifted circle, if on the fringes. Or perhaps his old friend Dowland—currently in London on a break from traveling, publishing there his highly popular *First Book of Songs* the same year, and himself known to Essex—suggested he try his luck. He also evidently had contact with another English patron, George Brooke, for whom he wrote out several of the songs contained in his *Premier Livre*.

Dowland around this time also visited the court of the Landgrave Moritz of Hesse-Kassel, and a little later, in 1602 or 1603, Tessier met this same nobleman in Poitiers, in western France. Once more, it is tempting to see Dowland's intervention. Then, for a little while, the trail becomes easier to follow. In 1604 Tessier dedicated to Moritz a volume of *Airs et villanelles franc, espag, suice et turc*, though the same year he also wrote to Moritz's cousin and rival Landgrave Ludwig V of Hesse-Darmstadt requesting support. He last appears a few years later: in 1609, playing in Nancy for Henri II de Lorraine, Duke of Mayenne, and the following year, dedicating a second edition of his *Airs et villanelles* to King Matthias of Hungary. On the title page, as on that of his *Premier Livre*, he described himself as a chamber musician to the king of France, Henri IV, so perhaps he lived and worked in Paris in between his travels to England, Germany, and the French provinces.

These sporadic sightings, often associated with begging letters or dedications that did not lead anywhere, cannot but give us an unequal view of Charles Tessier's career. After all, he survived. He must have had success somewhere. Since musicians had an excuse to be traveling, they were often involved in espionage, and perhaps the very lack of information about Tessier's movements is evidence he had some such clandestine life, protected by the destruction of documents that would have pinned him down.

In setting songs from different countries, he followed his presumptive father, for Guillaume's book is of "airs tant françois, italien qu'espagnol." For both Tessiers, the new kind of song, consisting essentially of vocal melody with accompaniment, not of polyphony for several more or less equal voices, brought composed music close again to folk traditions, as it may have been at the time of the troubadours, and would be again when Haydn and Beethoven made folksong settings, or when Bartók and Berio did so.

As was usual for the period, the songs in Charles Tessier's two books are printed to show how the parts, four or five, could all be taken by singers, but with the expectation that the lower parts could also be played on several instruments or all on the lute, by a self-accompanied singer. The collection he wrote out for George Brooke sets out some of the published pieces as lute songs. Le Poème Harmonique, whose 2005 recording *Charles Tessier: Carnets de voyage* (Alpha 100) includes almost everything on tonight's program, work with all the music's various possibilities.

### **Charles Tessier (fl. c. 1600)**

#### **Quand le flambeau du monde**

This majestic piece treats the topic of melancholia common in songs and poems of the period: loaded with cares, tormented by the troubles of the world, the protagonist is aware all through the day of the approach of night, the melancholic's proper domain. The poem—in fifteen strophes in the original, and set by several French composers besides Tessier—is by Jacques Davy du Perron (1556-1618), one of the foremost French poets in the generation after Ronsard and also, as churchman, a leading figure at the court of Henri IV.

#### **Je suis par trop longtemps pucelle**

Seemingly skipping in lively triple-time measures, the singer here is a lady of the court who has been protecting her virginity and does not intend doing so much beyond the double bar.

#### **Vita di voria dar cinquenta trene**

The villanella, explicitly mentioned in the title of Tessier's second book, was a kind of simple dance song that originated in Naples in the 1530s and 1540s, and from there spread widely. Exuberant flights beyond words ("fa la la") were typical of the genre.

#### **Mattone mie care**

Tessier's description of this as a "villanelle suissece" (Swiss villanella) may be a joke, on account of how it suggests that country's three language groups. The text, based on a popular villanella by one of the great masters of the preceding generation, Roland de Lassus, is in Italian and French, but adapted to suggest a German pronouncing the words. Maybe the humor is a touch crude, but there is a nice irony here, since Tessier's music was all about crossing language boundaries, putting songs in French, Italian, and Spanish into the mouths of singers in England and Germany.

#### **Me voilà hors du naufrage**

This song, with its gliding, haunting melody, is another of Tessier's more delicate numbers, set to the rhythm of a slow branle, one of the dances favored at the French court.

#### **Madonna di Coucagna**

Here the characteristic ululations of the villanella portray the gifts brought to "my lady of Cockaigne," the mythical land of plenty.

### **No ay en la tierra (air espagnol)**

Tessier's Spanish song offers a last glimpse of his fine touch in the courtly style, the extended suspensions giving an answer to the riddle in the text, about what it is that causes such trouble in human life.

### **Hel vel acqueur**

#### **Tellissiman**

Tessier's two "chansons turquesques" are nothing of the sort, though their syllables and their melodic patterns certainly convey a decent impression of the exotic.

### **Moritz, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel (1572-1632)**

#### **Pavana del Sgr. Guilhemo Keudelio**

Moritz, who inherited his principality at the age of twenty, was a cultivated ruler—a patron of Heinrich Schütz as well as of Tessier and Dowland. He also composed himself: songs, sacred settings (he converted from the Lutheran to the Calvinist faith), and instrumental pieces, including this fine pavan, dedicated, as dance pieces often were, in a gesture of homage or friendship. The pavan was a slow dance in duple time, often the basis for consort or keyboard versions that imply still listening.

### **Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612)**

#### **Junckfraw deine schöne Gestalt**

Born in Nuremberg and trained under Andrea Gabrieli in Venice, Hassler was another composer patronized by Moritz of Hesse-Kassel. This piece comes from his 1596 book of German songs done in the manner of the foreign madrigal.

### **John Dowland (1563-1626)**

#### **Burst forth my tears**

#### **Captain Digorie Piper's Galliard**

Dowland, like Tessier, was one of the period's musical travelers, though his journeys are a little better documented. Apart from Paris and Kassel, he also spent time in Copenhagen as royal lutenist, until finally gaining a similar position at the English court in 1612. In his songs, though, he remained monoglot. "Burst forth my tears," which comes from his 1597 book, is typical in its intimate magnificence and in its close attention to the words, probably the composer's own. Notable features include the halting opening and the plangent augmented triad in the fourth line, each time given a significant syllable: "care," "her," "hard(er)." This is just one example of the parallels in verbal rhythm, sound, and expression created among the strophes.

The galliard (a triple-time dance) for Captain Digorie Piper is one of the pieces Dowland published in his instrumental collection *Lachrimae* of 1604, though it may have been written earlier, as Digorie Piper, a Cornish pirate, died in 1590. Often the galliard is lively, but this one is not. Dowland made a song version: "If my complaints could passions move."

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*Miller Theatre has commissioned writer and music critic Paul Griffiths to write the program notes for the 2007-2008 season of events.*