Julian Bream
The Golden Age of English Lute Music
Of the earliest English lute music we know nothing; it all perished long ago. We cannot pick up the story until the middle years of the 16th century, although we know the names of some of the lutenists whose music delighted the ears of Henry VIII and his children: Peter Carmelian, and Philip van Wilder, Anthony de Countie, Augustine Bassano. But it is not until the reign of Elizabeth I that the players and their music emerge from the shadows of history into the sun of a golden age, illuminating the rich tapestry of English lute music.

In sheer size this tapestry is breathtaking. There are some 2,000 pieces for solo lute to be found in English sources of the period 1540–1620, and this figure excludes hundreds of songs, duets, transcriptions of vocal music, pieces for similar but distinct instruments (the bandora, for instance, or the orpharion). Two thousand pieces: the whole repertory of the English school of virginal composers during the same period does not amount to more than 600 compositions, and there are only about the same number of madrigals.

The favorite forms were the pavan and the galliard, two dance forms whose history stretches back to the beginning of the 16th century. Each consisted of three sections, all repeated, and if the repeat was usually an eloquently ornamented version of the strain first heard in its simplest form. Next in popularity came the younger dances, the almaine and the corant, each consisting of two repeated strains, faster and more airy in texture than those of the pavan or galliard. Not all lute music was dance music, of course. Two favorite forms among English lutenists were the variations and the fantasia. It is not surprising to find variations written for lute, since the technique of variation—"division," as it was called by the Elizabethans—was already familiar in dances. In the fantasia, or fancy, the composer's imagination was bound by no formal rules; he could do as he pleased, now in a contrapuntal style, now a fugue, now some brilliant roulades and trills, now a snatch of tune or a rhythmic design. And since composer and player were so often one and the same, no two performances would ever have been the same.

Who were these composers? Some of them are well enough known—John Dowland, for instance, whose famous pavan called Lacrimae occurs in more than 20 different manuscripts. Others, while less international than Dowland, were nonetheless highly regarded by their English contemporaries, but their names mean little or nothing to us, more than three and a half centuries later. I have in mind such men as John Johnson, Robert Johnson, Daniel Batchelar, Francis (?) Cutting (of whose Christian name we cannot even be certain), Anthony Holborne, Philip Rosseter, Bulman—all represented on this disc by beautiful music, yet some untraceable even by those who have spent years looking for them in the archives of the time. The familiar English musicians—Byrd, Wilbye, Morley, Gibbons, Weelkes, for instance—seldom if ever composed for the lute, it seems. And even after intensive studies by recent scholars, nearly three-quarters of the repertory of English lute music still remains obstinately anonymous.

A few remarks about the music chosen by Julian Bream for this disc. Of the 16 pieces, four are to be found in Robert Dowland's "Varietie of Lute Lessons" (1610): Mounsiers Almaine, by Batchelar; Morley's exquisite Pavan (also known in a keyboard arrangement by his friend Ferdinando Heybourne); Holborne's Pavan, and Dowland's Batell Galliard (sometimes known as The King of Denmark's Galliard). All the other pieces are taken from various manuscript sources, most of them in public libraries but some still in private ownership.

Two Almaines are almost undoubtedly by Robert Johnson, who for many years was associated with the company of actors known as The King's Men, to which Shakespeare also belonged. The Fantasia that follows was probably composed by John Johnson, whose relationship to Robert has not yet been firmly established; he seems to have been highly admired as a player and a composer during the latter years of Elizabeth's reign. Cutting's variations on the tender folksong Walsingham are in the remote key of A-flat—a key usable only on the lute at this time, since on the virginal or organ it was unbearably discordant (by reason of the tuning system then in use). Dowland's galliard called Mignarda is also known as the song Shall I Strive (published in "A Pilgrim's Solace," 1612) and as Henry Noel's Galliard, in honor of Elizabeth's favorite, Sir Henry Nowell. Rosseter's Galliard, with its bittersweet flavor, recalls the many songs he composed to poems by his friend Thomas Campion. Cutting's piece based on Greensleeves needs no introduction—few tunes are more famous or more loved—save, perhaps, the remark that this exquisite set of variations has survived only in a single manuscript (British Museum Add. MS 31392).

To a galliard originally by Batchelar, Dowland added his own working-out of the repeated strains; it is rare in English lute music for one composer to so compliment another. Thomas Morley's Pavan conjures up the last years of Elizabeth's reign, with its doubts and questionings and its somber mood. By contrast, Robert Johnson chose for his variations a sprightly folksong (set also by William Byrd) in which are related the lively adventures of a carefree wagoner, whistling as he rides along the country lanes. Of Bulman nothing whatsoever is known; his Pavan, like Cutting's Walsingham, is set in an adventurous key (F minor), and its "dying fall" might well serve to refresh the heart of an Illyrian duke. In Mounsiers Almaine Batchelar chose to set a very popular Elizabethan tune, heard in all the playhouses. "Mounsier" was no less than the Duke of Alengon, who once (1581) proposed himself as a suitor to Queen Elizabeth; within a few months of his arrival half the theater comedians in London had started to mock him by calling themselves "Mounsier." Of Holborne's lute compositions more than 50 survive; he was a Gentleman Usher to the queen and an accomplished composer of songs and instrumental music. Dowland's Batell Galliard was another great favorite among music lovers of the golden age; six separate settings of it are known, all of them featuring the strange clashes of tonality between D and F heard in this version. The disc ends with one of the most tuneful of all galliards, once again by Holborne. Though the golden age extended well into the reign of James I, much of its luster came from the poets and musicians assembled around the great queen, Elizabeth; let her Gentleman Usher, therefore, close the scene and draw the curtains, "for our play is done."

—THURSTON DART

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The Golden Age of English Lute Music
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Morley
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Holborne

Holborne

Holborne

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