

## **Lutes & More – 2**

presented by Early Music  
Vancouver

Friday, August 10, 8:00pm

UBC Recital Hall

by Colin MacDonald

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century our information technology allows us not only to plot our future with accuracy, but also to look more clearly into our past. In the final concert of the Vancouver Early Music Festival 2001, Nigel North and Stephen Stubbs revived the lute music of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, revealing the depth of their scholarship, and playing on instruments that were modern reproductions of historical models.

“Alas my love you do me wrong/to cast me off discourteously.” Both Nigel North and the performers of the Elizabethan age were counting on the familiarity of those words, conjured up by the tune of *Greensleeves*. Renaissance lutenist North explained in his pre-concert introduction that it was a common practice in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century for musicians to play sets of instrumental variations on popular songs, much in the way modern jazz soloists improvise on simple show tunes. Of course North performed music that was written down, but it was a wonder to consider that music that may have been played by a renaissance Pat Metheny had survived to the present.

North played sets of these variations on tunes by John Johnson, John Dowland, and William Byrd, with the cliché melody of *Greensleeves*, and other less-familiar songs, transformed into virtuosic abstractions. The 8-course renaissance lute did not have the same depth to its sound as the later 13-course baroque instrument with its extended bass

register, but its lighter tone had an appropriate brightness for melodic playing. North played with precision and clarity through the busiest variations, and he showed a remarkable facility for balancing the many crossing melodies.

Soprano Ellen Hargis joined North on a set of songs from *The First Booke of Ayres*, by Thomas Morley. The lute took a more traditional accompanying role, subtly active but never distracting from the vocal part. Hargis' reputation as an interpreter of early music preceded her, and the audience was noticeably moved by her performance. The purity of her voice resonated brilliantly in the hall, the crystal clarity of her intonation perfectly matching the transparency of the simple melodic writing.

The music of Johann Sebastian Bach filled the second half of the program, with Stephen Stubbs playing the *Suite in G minor* on a 13-course baroque lute. This music is better known as Bach's fifth suite for unaccompanied cello, but since the composer had many lutenist colleagues he himself arranged the work to be played on the lute. Unfortunately, Stubbs' performance was plagued with the dead notes and string buzzes that are the bane of fretted instruments. His interpretation seemed overly romantic, with too much rubato blurring the rhythmic structure that is so important to baroque music. The only consolation was that the beauty of the composition could still be perceived behind his playing.

Hargis also joined Stubbs for songs from the *Anna Magdalena Notebook*, a collection of music that Bach wrote for his wife and children to perform at home. Once again Hargis won the audience over, whose members audibly sighed each time she sang.