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Henry VIII's Pastime with Good Company

by Hiroyuki Minamino

"He speaks French, English, Latin and a little Italian; plays well on the lute and harpsichord, sings from the book at sight, draws the bow with greater strength than any man in England, and jousts marvelously," thus the Venetian ambassador Piero Pasqualigo wrote in 1515 about the talents, accomplishments, and pastimes of Henry VIII.¹ The King was then twenty-four years of age. He was genuinely fond of music and was an accomplished musician himself. As early as 1511, the contemporary chronicler Edward Hall described that during a progress the King was "exercising himself dailie in shooting, singing, dancing, wrestling, casting of the barre, plaieing at the recorders, flute, virginals, in setting of songs and making of ballads."² Henry VIII was also acutely aware of the political necessity to display personal and state grandeur for which music was an effective tool. He made the "King's Musicke" into a large establishment of singers and instrumentalists. The King was ready to spend quite a substantial amount of money if necessary to recruit internationally renowned musicians and to accumulate both the domestic and continental music. Nicolo Sagudino, the secretary of a Venetian envoy for the English court Sebastian Giustinian, for instance, mentioned in his letter of 1515 to one Alvise Foscari in Venice that Henry VIII had in his service a Brescian virtuoso who received 300 ducates per year "per sonar de lauto."³ Sagudino, himself a self-acclaimed keyboard player, proudly boasted in his letter that this Brescian lutenist "took up his instrument and played a few things with me." Sagudino asked Foscari to send any available music by the celebrated musician Giovan Maria Hebreo. Foscari likely tried to find Giovan Maria's lute book, which was published in Venice in 1508 as the third of the Venetian publisher Ottaviano Petrucci's lute series.⁴ The Italian lutenist Zuan Pietro was less fortunate than the Brescian virtuoso. After having lost Henry VIII's favor (presumably because of his poor musicianship), Zuan Pietro was sent back to Ferrara for a diplomatic mission in 1517. Duke Alfonso d'Este made the gift of "a lyre of that type which in Italy call a lute" to the English King.⁵ Henry VIII succeeded in attracting the Flemish lutenist-composer Philip van Wilder as a permanent employee. Wilder became the King's "Chief Luther," was in charge of his private musical activities, and was the lute instructor to Edward and Mary. During his service between about 1520 and 1553, Wilder received an exceptionally large monthly salary, various privileges, occasional gifts, and large properties. He was elevated to a member of the Privy Chamber.⁶ The hiring of Wilder, however, did not deter Henry VIII from recruiting other virtuoso lutenists.

On 12 February 1529, Italian virtuoso Alberto da Ripa played before Henry VIII. Although Ripa was in the service of Ercole Gonzaga, Cardinal of Mantua, the English King immediately offered him a post with the sum of 33 pounds 6 shillings 8 pence. Three months later Alberto entered the service of the French King Francis I.⁷ According to the English envoy to Spain Sir Thomas Chaloner in his letter of 1564, Henry VIII had unsuccessfully tried to induce the Neapolitan lutenist-singer Luigi Dentice with a yearly pension of 1000 crowns.⁸

Two manuscripts from the time of Henry VIII (British Library Add. MS 5665 and MS 31922) contain versions of a song entitled "Pastime with Good Company."⁹ The scribes of the song made association to the King. One attached an inscription "The Kynges Balade," and another jotted down a name "The Kyng h. viij." This attribution was good enough for some scholars to speculate that Henry VIII was the composer of the song. As John M. Ward correctly asserts, however, it is more likely that "Pastime with Good Company" is a parody of the French chanson "De mon triste desplaisir," popular during the first quarter of the sixteenth century.¹⁰ In all probability, Henry VIII made an arrangement of a pre-existing polyphonic version. The English texts, on the other hand, may be his. They run as follows:

Pastime with good company,
I love and shall unto I die;
Grudge who will but none deny,
So God be pleas'd, so live will I
For my pastance,
 Hunt, sing and dance,
 My heart is set,
 To my comfort,
 All goodly sport:
 Who shall me let?

You must have some dalliance,
Of good or ill some pastance;
Company methinks then best,
All thoughts and fancies to digest,
 For idleness,
 Is chief mistress,
 Of vices all:
 Then who can say,

But mirth and play,
Is best of all?

Company with honesty
Is virtue, vices to flee;
Company is good and ill,
But every man hath his free will.
The best ensure,
The worst eschew,
My mind shall be;
Virtue to use,
Vice to refuse,
Thus shall I use me.

It is tempting to imagine Henry VIII singing "Pastime with Good Company," accompanying himself on a lute, perhaps to one of his wives (although I do not hazard a guess which one it might have been).

In my transcription of "Pastime with Good Company," the rhythmic signs without ciphers indicate rests, according to the method of notation recommended by Vincenzo Galilei and Adrian Le Roy in their intabulation treatises.¹¹ I used Frederick Noad's Speed Score for the tablature.

NOTES

¹. Quoted from Sebastian Giustinian, Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII, translated by Rawdon Brown ([New York: AMS Press, 1970]), 1:86.

². Quoted from J. J. Scarisbrick, Henry VIII (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 19.

³. Giustinian, Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII, 1:80. It has been suggested that this Brescian lutenist was Vincenzo Capirola whose compositions survive in a manuscript compiled by his student Vitale in Venice about 1517; Capirola's life is discussed and his compositions are edited in Otto Gombosi, Composizioni di Meser Vincenzo Capirola: Lute-Book (circa 1517) (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Societe de musique d'autrefois, 1955).

⁴. Giustinian, Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII, 1:81. Giovan Maria's book is listed and described in Howard Mayer Brown, Instrumental Music Printed before 1600: A Bibliography (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), item [1508]/1. Ferdinand Columbus purchased a copy of Giovan Maria's lute book in Rome in 1512; see Catherine Weeks Chapman, "Printed Collections of Polyphonic Music Owned by Ferdinand Columbus," Journal of the American Musicological Society 21 (1968):33-84.

⁵. See Ivy L. Mumford, "The Identity of 'Zuan Piero,'" Renaissance News 11 (1958):179-83. Is it conceivable that this "lyre" was the viola da mano (vihuela de mano), the instrument recently

imported from Spain and was called "liuto ala spagnola" in some of the Mantuan documents? I am preparing a study of the viola da mano in Italy.

⁶. For Wilder's life and works, see Jane A. Bernstein, "Philip Van Wilder and the Netherlandish Chanson in England," Musica disciplina 33 (1979):55-75; and John M. Ward, Music for Elizabethan Lutes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1:1-6.

⁷. On Ripa's life and works, see Robert W. Buggert, "Alberto da Ripa: Lutenist and Composer" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1956).

⁸. The letter is reproduced in John M. Ward, "A Dowlnid Miscelany," Journal of the Lute Society of America 10 (1977):96-7.

⁹. Edited in John Stevens, Music at the Court of Henry VIII, Musica Britannica, XVIII, 2nd ed. (London, 1969), 10-11.

¹⁰. John M. Ward, "The Lute Music of MS Royal Appendix 58," Journal of the American Musicological Society 13 (1960):123-4.

¹¹. On lute intabulation, see Hiroyuki Minamino, "Sixteenth-Century Lute Treatises with Emphasis on Process and Techniques of Intabulation" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Chicago, 1988).

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Pastime With Good Company

The first system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff contains a melody with notes and rests, including a dotted quarter note, eighth notes, and quarter notes. The middle and bottom staves provide accompaniment with chords and single notes. The system is divided into three measures.

The second system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff continues the melody with various note values and rests. The middle and bottom staves provide accompaniment. The system is divided into three measures.

The third system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff continues the melody. The middle and bottom staves provide accompaniment. The system is divided into three measures.

The fourth system of musical notation consists of three staves. The top staff continues the melody. The middle and bottom staves provide accompaniment. The system is divided into three measures and ends with a double bar line.