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'Verie sweete and artificiall': Lorenzo Costa and the earliest viols

The importance of the courts of Northern Italy as the birthplace of the viol consort in the closing years of the fifteenth century has been well established since the 1980s,¹ but until recently any performances of the repertory associated with the fledgling viol consort, such as the *frottole*, Franco-Flemish chansons and 'songs without words'² preserved in publications such as Petrucci's *Odhecaton* of 1501 and his series of *frottola* books from 1504, and contemporary manuscript collections, have been played on instruments (or rather copies of them) dating from considerably later than the 1490s and early 1500s. Most frequently, reproductions of Venetian viols from the second half of the 16th century have been utilised, but the appearance and construction of these instruments is markedly different from those shown in iconographical sources from the period actually contemporary with this repertory.³

One such early model, identified by Ian Woodfield in his 1984, *The Early History of the Viol*,⁴ is Lorenzo Costa's *Madonna and Child enthroned with SS. Augustine, Posidonius, John and Francis*, the altarpiece commissioned by Francesco di Giacomo Ghedini for his family Cappella di S. Agostino in the church of San Giovanni in Monte, Bologna (illus. 1). This painting, securely dated 1497 on the lintel below the Madonna's feet, is by an artist trained in Ferrara and directly associated later in his career with the court of Isabella d'Este (1474–1539), marchioness of Mantua from 1490, whose patronage of the early viol was a considerable force in its early development. The purpose of this presentation is to highlight the significance of the viols depicted in

Costa's altarpiece to our understanding of the early viol consort by assessing the painting's relevance as a source of information, to investigate its relationship to other documentary evidence concerning the earliest development of the viol consort, and to evaluate the results of performing on a set of instruments constructed on the basis of this painting.

Any hypothetical construction of instruments from an iconographical source must tread very cautiously, addressing questions of the relevance and reliability of the artwork concerned. How 'good' a source is Costa's Ghedini altarpiece in providing information about a putative early viol consort? What were Costa's connections with professional musicians and their amateur patrons? How closely would he have been aware of the development of 'new' instruments such as the viols played at the Northern Italian courts like those of the d'Este in Ferrara and the Gonzaga in Mantua?

A summary of Lorenzo Costa's career gives clear evidence that he did indeed operate in just the same artistic circles as those patrons who were instigating the development of the viol consort.⁵ Born in Bologna around 1460,⁶ Costa trained in Ferrara with Francesco Cossa and Ercole de Roberti (who worked both at the d'Este court and also for the Gonzaga family at Mantua following Isabella d'Este's marriage to Francesco Gonzaga in 1490). During the 1480s and 1490s Costa received a series of commissions from the ruling Bentivoglio family of Bologna. The younger members of the Bentivoglio family were assiduous amateurs of music,⁷ and it is possible that Costa's well-known *Concert* in the National Gallery, London (illus. 2),⁸ with its acutely observed depiction of a trio of singers with lute, may show some of these in performance.

The connections between the Bentivoglio family and those of the d'Este of Ferrara and the Gonzagas of Mantua had many strands: from 1474 Giovanni Bentivoglio was an ally and confidant of Isabella's father Duke Ercole d'Este; in 1487 Lucrezia d'Este married Giovanni Bentivoglio's eldest son Annibale;

while in 1494 Giovanni Gonzaga married Laura, the sixth daughter of Giovanni Bentivoglio. In 1504 when Isabella d'Este was seeking a painting for her *studiolo* by a leading Bolognese artist, it was to Antongaleazzo Bentivoglio, a discriminating patron of the arts and scholarship, that she turned for advice, and who helped to provide Lorenzo Costa to fulfil the commission that resulted in the *Coronation of a Lady*⁹ (illus. 3).

On 16 November 1506 Costa joined the Gonzagas at Mantua as court painter in place of Andrea Mantegna who had died in September. Costa became a citizen of Mantua in 1509, and by 1512 had completed his second painting for Isabella's *studiolo*, the *Kingdom of Comus*.¹⁰ As we shall, music played almost as great a part in Isabella's cultural life as did her dedication to the decorative schemes for her private chambers in the ducal palace at Mantua. The two elements come together in the marquetry intarsias that she installed in her *camerini*, since one panel is incised with Ockeghem's three-part canon: *Prenez sur moy votre exemple*, representing the 'learned' Flemish style so admired by Italian patrons of music.

Example 1: Ockeghem: *Prenez sur moy votre exemple*.

Although *The Concert* is the only surviving painting by Costa in which a musical performance is obviously the subject,¹¹ music or musical instruments are included in a significant number of his allegorical works, portraits and altarpieces. Angelic musicians were a common decorative feature in Renaissance religious painting: Costa includes them in a number of his works.

Bowed string instruments painted by Costa include the straight-sided four-stringed, flat-bridged kit on the parapet in front of the singers in *The Concert* with its precisely delineated bow, its hair tied at one end and looped at the other. Depicted in rather less detail is a series of *lire da braccio* beginning with the 1490 *Triumph of Death* fresco in the Bentivoglio chapel in San Giacomo, Bologna, showing the back of a figure-of-eight shaped *lira*.¹² Both Costa's

allegories for Isabella's *studiolo* in Mantua show *lire da braccio*. In *The Coronation of a Lady Apollo/Orpheus* symbolically represents the combined rhetorical power of poetry and music: his instrument has one of the shapes most commonly shown in Italian paintings from the first third of the sixteenth century,¹³ characterised by only one set of corners on the lower bouts, and concave ribs. The association of this particular body shape with the Mantuan court (several commentators have seen this painting as a depiction of Isabella herself, surrounded by musicians and poets)¹⁴ is a significant element in the search for the early viol, since it is identical to that of the viols shown in Costa's Ghedini altarpiece.

The inclusion of angelic musicians in images of the Madonna enthroned was already well established by the late 15th century, with the *lira da braccio* and lute the most regularly depicted instruments. A particular feature of altarpieces by Ferrarese artists towards the end of the century was the elevation of Mary's throne, creating a space below it that gains prominence and therefore significance from its proximity to the viewer, on whose eye-level it is situated.¹⁵ This space was often filled by Costa and his contemporaries with the beautifully detailed distant landscapes for which they were particularly renowned. In the 1497 Ghedini altarpiece just such a graceful landscape is placed behind the conventional image of two angelic musicians. However the nature of the instruments they play is unique in paintings in this genre.

Costa has here placed a pair of viols in a position of particular importance and high status in which they become a secondary focal point of attention very different from the marginal musicians in several of his other paintings. Costa's inclusion of viols in such a prestigious position certainly suggests that he was fully aware that these novel instruments were beginning to join the lute and *lira* as participants in the sophisticated music of the courts of the patrons for whom he worked, and was consciously drawing the viewer's attention towards them.

The area of the painting containing the two angelic-looking youngsters with their viols measures approximately 56 x 43 cm (illus. 4). Especially in such a relatively small image, it must be accepted that there are significant dangers in building too detailed a hypothesis from iconographic detail created at a time when the art of natural perspective was still in its early development, and when one might easily question the accuracy of the instruments depicted.¹⁶ Measurements are particularly difficult to pin down, as we have here no absolute standard from which to work. However, it is clear that Costa has set out to show two viols of different sizes: the body of the larger viol is approximately 10 per cent longer than that of the smaller, but this masks the true difference in size. The larger viol has a comparatively longer neck in comparison to its body size, accounting for a nut-tail measurement exceeding that of the smaller viol by approximately 17 per cent, and when its lower bridge position is taken into account, it has a string length some 22 per cent longer than its smaller partner.¹⁷ This would make it capable of sounding a fourth or fifth lower and it would thus be reasonable to consider these as a tenor and bass (or possibly treble and tenor) pair of viols, confirming their function as instruments designed to play polyphonic strands of different ranges. In contrast, the *lira da braccio* is usually shown in iconography as a solo instrument, commonly with a flatter bridge and bourdon strings, which is unsurprising in view of its most frequent function, that of providing a largely chordal accompaniment to a solo vocal improvised recitation.

The fronts of Costa's viols are clearly curved, and thus most likely carved. They have large 'C' holes, and show the distinctive *lira*-like outline with two lower corners only. The backs of the viols are not visible, but the narrow ribs have a noticeably concave profile, with fronts and backs overlapping them. All these features link Costa's viols closely to the most commonly depicted forms of the *lira da braccio* from this period, and mark them out from the figure-of-eight pattern, flat fronts and flush-fitted straight-profiled ribs

associated with the Valencian *vihuela d'arco*. The instruments shown in the Ghedini altarpiece are clearly not *lire da braccio*: they are too large to be played on the arm, and have much longer necks than contemporary *lire*. Thus it seems likely that Costa's viols may depict a rival model to those that were being introduced into the Northern Italian courts by Spanish musicians associated with the Borgia family.¹⁸

Only the bridge of the smaller ('tenor') viol is clearly visible in any detail (and the bass end is obscured by the player's leg). It is made from a darker wood than the front (or possibly stained to match the dark fingerboard and tailpiece). Both bridges are clearly arched, designed to facilitate playing the single lines of a polyphonic composition rather than the chordal approach of the *lira*. Six strings pass over the tenor's bridge, though they are not equally spaced, and only five pegs are visible. It could be construed that the lines representing the fifth and sixth 'strings' are in fact Costa's attempt to depict the outside surfaces of a single fat bass string. Or it could just be a lack of interest in such fine detail. The bass viol definitely has six pegs, but its strings are not clearly decipherable as they are obscured by shadow. Both pegboxes are scrolled (curiously the tenor viol's follows the pattern that became conventional while its larger partner's curls in the reverse direction). This clearly distinguishes them from the flat inverted leaf- or heart-shaped pegbox with perpendicular pegs that is typical of the *lira da braccio*.

The bows held by the musicians have long and relatively thick sticks, tapering to elegant points, and black hair. While the tenor player does not yet have his instrument in playing position, the bass player checks his left hand position on the frets and bows the strings, holding the bow in a grip that is not dissimilar to that described by Ganassi in *Regula Rubertina* (Venice, 1542): the hand is just to the right of the frog and his fingers are not in contact with the hair at all.

In order to evaluate the usefulness of Costa's 1497 painting in understanding the early history of the development of the viol consort, it is important to place it in a chronological context. How does it relate to what we know from documentary evidence about the commissioning and playing of viols in consort in the courts of Northern Italian patrons around that time?

The court records of Ferrara show the employment of string players ('pulsatores lirae'), members of the della Viola clan, from as early as 1466.¹⁹ However it is important to treat instrument terminology with care, since the terms *viola* and *lira* were often used interchangeably, and might refer to plucked or bowed strings, while the latter might be *da braccio* or *da gamba*. By 1473 Johannes Martini (c. 1440–1497) had arrived in Ferrara to direct the court's music for Duke Ercole. Martini was later a significant musical influence on the young Isabella, teaching her to sing at Ferrara and attending her after her move to Mantua following her marriage in 1490. Martini's many surviving textless pieces such as *La Martinella* (ex. 2) are ideal candidates for the repertory enjoyed by the early viol consort.

Example 2: Martini: *La Martinella* (from Florence MS Banco Rari 229, c.1490)

In 1491 Isabella's singing lessons with Martini continued,²⁰ but she also began learning stringed instruments with her own musician ('nostro sonatore'), Giovanni Angelo Testagrossa (1470–1530).²¹ Isabella played *lira da braccio* and lute but does not yet appear to be playing viols. On 6 March 1493 Bernardo de' Prospero, Isabella's correspondent in Ferrara, wrote to her describing a performance given by Spanish musicians from Rome who were using 'viols almost as large as myself'.²² Two years later (and just two years before Costa's Ghedini altarpiece was painted), in March 1495, Isabella herself began her own viol consort by ordering three *viole* from an unknown maker that she had visited in Brescia.²³ At various times in her correspondence these instruments are referred to as *viola grande*, *violoni*, or *viola ovver lira*, indicating both that

their size was a significant feature, as was their relationship (perhaps the body shape) to the *lira*.

Testagrossa appears to have carried considerable authority and exerted some influence upon Isabella's viol playing. Documented as a member of her court from 1495 to 1501 it was he whom she despatched to assess, negotiate the price and collect the three new Brescian *viole* as noted in a letter of 19 June 1495.²⁴ Isabella's instructions to Testagrossa regarding the price of the viols show her business acumen: she only wants to pay 15 ducats, but would raise her offer to 18 ducats if he thinks they are worth the extra.²⁵

In 1497, the very year of Costa's Ghedini altarpiece, Agostino della Viola joined Andrea and Zampaulo della Viola as a chamber musician at Ferrara, perhaps suggesting the establishment of an enlarged string consort.²⁶ Meanwhile in Mantua Isabella received a gift of two *viole* from Hungary: if they were built as a pair of instruments, they are more likely to have been viols rather than *lire*.²⁷ The personal involvement of Ercole's music-loving children in viol playing reached a peak in 1499. On 19 March Lorenzo da Pavia informed Isabella that Alfonso, her younger brother, had requested him to make five viols (*viole da arco*) 'in all the possible sizes (*modi*) in the world' for him as 'His Lordship wants to learn [to play them] ... and that with the greatest insistence. It is no use if I say I cannot make them'.²⁸ Does this suggest that Lorenzo was simply too busy, or that he did not know how to make instruments in the required style? Three sizes of viol, tuned a fourth or fifth apart, and five or six instruments could now bring the fuller-scored chansons of Josquin and his contemporaries within the scope of the viol consort's repertory.

Only two months later, on 14 May 1499 Isabella wrote to her half-brother Giulio that she had begun to play *viola*, had been practising for two days and hoped to 'play tenor to Don Alfonso' when she next went to Ferrara.²⁹

Perhaps after further practice she would have been able to tackle Ghiselin's three-part fantasia possibly named for her brother, *La Alfonsina*.

Example 3: Ghiselin: *La Alfonsina* (from *Odhecaton*, 1501)

Acquisition of instruments and professional players at both the courts of Ferrara and Mantua went on apace: Giacomo della Viola was first recorded at Ferrara, further augmenting the della Viola consort, while on 22 August 1499 Isabella ordered another *viola grande* from her maker in Brescia to match her larger viols.³⁰ The order for a large viol not only confirms that the first three were of differing sizes, but that from early in the consort's development it was the larger sizes that predominated in the consort. It is significant that Isabella went back to her Brescian viol maker in 1499 when she ordered her extra *viola grande*. She probably realised that the same maker would best be able to construct an additional instrument that would blend well with her existing set. Brescia certainly gained a reputation only a little later in the 16th century as an important centre for the making of viols and violins: Zanetto da Montichiario (1489/90–1560/1) was noted in the city records as 'magister a violonis et violis'³¹ and his instruments were praised by Lanfranco in his *Scintille di musica* (published in Brescia in 1533).

The desire for larger sizes of viols and richer textures reached a climax at the celebrations for the wedding of Alfonso d'Este to Lucrezia Borgia in Ferrara in 1502. The Venetian diarist Marin Sanuto noted six viols being played, one by Alfonso himself during the third act of the festive *intermedi* following the wedding.³² The viol consort was in regular use by now, and continued to expand in scope: on 5 February 1506 viols, possibly *lira*-shaped, were reported by Prospero when he wrote from Ferrara to Isabella concerning *intermedi* in which 'lire grande' had been played 'da octo persone'.³³ Isabella continued to sing and play after this, particularly encouraging her Mantuan court composers such as Tromboncino in setting vernacular *frottola* texts in a more homophonic style than that of Flemish polyphony.

Example 4: Bartolomeo Tombonino: *Su su leva*

However, by around 1505 the focus of her artistic endeavours had turned more toward the visual decoration of her *studiolo*, overseen now by Costa who had been appointed court painter at Mantua. From this chronological survey it is clear to see that his 1497 Ghedini altarpiece sits fairly and squarely at the beginning of the very period during which the germination of the Italian viol consort was so well documented at the Northern Italian courts.

What instrumental properties might have been demanded by the patrons of the early viol consort? Such instruments would have to be capable of playing the repertory for which they appear to have been designed, which, judging by the manuscript collections of North Italian provenance, and Petrucci's early prints, included chansons in the Burgundian tradition, the newer *frottole* and the various genres of instrumental 'songs without words' which led to the development of the fantasia. This implies a range of sizes appropriate to the tessituras of the polyphonic parts (treble, two more-or-less equally ranged tenors, and bass) with a total notated range of F to f"/g". The different voices of a composition suitable for the incipient viol consort suggest different functions: the cantus is often the most 'vocal' in style, tending to move with moderate pace and within a relatively narrow pitch range; the bassus strongly delineates the harmonic framework with more frequent leaps; altus and tenor parts, often working in the same range as each other, tend to be more fluid and decorative, sometimes with syncopations and running passagework. While the tenor requires a good lower register, since it quite frequently supplies the final note at structural cadences while the bassus rests, or leaps over it to the upper fifth, the altus is often a more quixotic voice, and can often be omitted from the texture (as it was in many lute intabulations of *frottole*) without causing significant damage to the music. Additional *si placet* parts, most frequently occupy the altus territory as well. This might imply two viols of similar pitch but with slightly different tonal qualities: the one with

stronger fundamentals in the lower register, the other a more flexible, 'airy' tone.³⁴ Such tonal variety can be achieved by moving the bridge to affect string length, or by bowing nearer or further from the bridge, as recommended by Ganassi. On the other hand, if viols did indeed play Ockeghem's three-voiced canon *Prenez sur moy votre example*, then a true blend of sound at three separate pitch levels from three different sizes of viol might be the desired aim.

Any one part in this repertory rarely covers more than a twelfth, extending occasionally to two octaves, so a viol with five strings, tuned in fourths with one third, can easily cope with the overall range.³⁵ The placing of the third might be best determined by the mode of the individual piece performed, in order to maximise the use of open strings. This gives the clearest resonance both in the individual instrument and sympathetically between instruments in the consort.

In terms of its tonal qualities, the early viol consort had to be capable of projecting its sound into relatively large spaces to a sizeable audience on occasions such as the *intermedi* performed at the wedding of Alfonso d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia in Ferrara in 1502. The theatrical entertainments took place in the upper hall of the Palazzo della Ragione, a room 60 metres long and 19 wide with tiers of seats on three sides said to be capable of holding 3000. While the ceiling and walls were lined with cloth, the stage on the fourth side of the room had an acoustically reflective wooden wall. The sound of the viols during the *intermedi* would have been given further focus by the two halves of a wooden sphere that split apart to reveal the musicians.³⁶

Although musical performances in North Italian courts sometimes occurred in specially designated spaces,³⁷ chamber music was essentially private, and was performed as an exquisite and privileged experience for a select audience in small rooms, such as Isabella's *grotta* and her *studiolo* ('*nostro camerino*')

above it on the *piano nobile* of Castello di San Giorgio.³⁸ Work began on decorating and furnishing these apartments in 1491, one year after her marriage. In 1494 she had a tiled floor installed, since rats were destroying the existing wooden one, and by 1497, the year of Costa's Ghedini altarpiece, she had the walls decorated with fabric from Venice, as well as two allegorical paintings by Andrea Mantegna, *Mars and Venus* and *Minerva*. This preoccupation with setting up her private chambers coincides exactly with the period in which Isabella was developing her interest in the viol consort in the late 1490s. She must surely have heard them playing *musica da camera* in these intimate, exquisitely decorated rooms, none of which is more than a few square metres in floor size. Here the requirements would be for clarity of the individual parts in polyphonic textures, an ability to match the subtle gestures of the human voice when accompanying singers, and above all the sweetness of timbre so prized by contemporary Italian commentators.

One such commentator is Baldassare Castiglione, whose credentials as an expert witness are excellent: born in Mantua in 1478, he spent some of his early years at the Gonzaga court before serving at the Urbino court of Duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro and his successor Francesco Maria delle Rovere (who in 1509 married Francesco and Isabella's daughter Eleonora Gonzaga). It was in Urbino from 1504 to 1516 that Castiglione planned and drafted *Il libro del cortegiano* (first published in Venice in 1528). Testagrossa, Isabella d'Este's viol tutor, was also in Urbino in July 1510.³⁹ *Il libro del cortegiano* contains a number of telling references to music, including one to the early viol consort.⁴⁰ Castiglione's knowledge of viols was moreover not simply that of a passive observer: he owned viols and was fond of playing them.

Castiglione's most extensive passage on music contrasts the singing style of the northerner Bidone with that of the Italian Cara. Bidone (Antoine Collebault) sang in the Ferrarese chapel from 1502, and was loaned to Francesco Gonzaga's newly formed Mantua cappella in 1511. Castiglione

(here in Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of 1561) draws attention to the extrovert passion and virtuosity of Bidone's style:

so artificiall, counninge, vehement, stirred, and [with] suche sundrye melodies, that the spirites of the hearers move al and are enflamed, and so listening, a man would wene they were lifte up in to heaven.⁴¹

In contrast, it is the more inward, melancholic approach of Cara that Castiglione commends:

And no lesse doeth our Marchetto Cara move in his singinge, but with a more softte harmonye, that by a delectable waye and full of mourninge sweetnesse maketh tender and perceth the mind, and sweetly imprinteth in it a passion full of great delite.⁴²

Castiglione's emphasis on the importance of sweetness in a good voice is supported by other documents associated with Isabella d'Este herself. In 1492 Martini wrote to her that he had found her a good singer who could sing soprano 'sotto voce'.⁴³ Prizer regards this as a reference to singing falsetto, but might it not be more likely to suggest the subtlety and delicacy required of a chamber singer, well suited to performing the refined expressions of *frottola* texts in an intimate space? It was specifically the qualities of sweetness and suavity ('quanta dolcezza et suavita') that the poet Pietro Bembo praised in Isabella's own singing.⁴⁴ And it is sweetness again that Castiglione associates with the consort of four viols, at least in part because their frets allow the tuning and temperament to be delicately refined:

Also all instrumentes with freates are ful of harmony, because the tunes of them are very perfect, and with ease a manne may doe many thinges upon them that fil the minde with sweetnesse of musicke. And the musicke of a sette of Violes doth no lesse delite a man; for it is verie sweete and artificiall.⁴⁵

Such references to 'artifice' might be an acknowledgement of the skill that the viols demonstrated in the interplay between the separate imitative parts of an 'artful' polyphonic composition, or could perhaps be a suggestion of the employment of idiomatic ornamentation.

Isabella d'Este's insistence on the highest quality of the poets, artists and musicians working for her are well attested: that she could call on the talents of Bembo, Ariosto, Bellini, Mantegna, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci suggest that she would have expected a high level of sophistication and craftsmanship in her musical instruments too. This is borne out in the detailed transactions between Isabella and Lorenzo da Pavia, who acted as her Venetian agent in the acquisition of antique art works as well as those by contemporary artists, and who supplied her with keyboard instruments, lutes and 'violas' between 1465 and 1515.⁴⁶

As even a cursory glance at images of viols from c. 1500 shows, there was a multiplicity of shapes, sizes and therefore methods of construction undergoing trial. But the evidence of Lorenzo Costa's 1497 Ghedini altarpiece, together with Isabella d'Este's consistent purchase of viols from a Brescian maker, might suggest a native Northern Italian response to the imported vihuela-derived Spanish instruments that reflects a longer local tradition of *lira* making. The *lira* body shape with just two corners, and the carved front and back would provide the versatility to perform both 'sweetly' in the intimate chamber, and to project a fuller sound in more public performances, that patrons such as Alfonso and Isabella d'Este required.⁴⁷

Having played reconstructions of mid-sixteenth century Venetian viols since the late 1970s, we wanted to perform the music originating from the early Renaissance Northern Italian courts on more appropriate instruments. Selecting Lorenzo Costa's 1497 Ghedini altarpiece as the most suitable model for the reasons outlined in this presentation, we commissioned Roger Rose and students of West Dean College, Sussex, UK, to construct a set of viols

based on this image. It was decided that four instruments in three sizes of five-stringed viol would cover the total range of the intended repertory (treble, two tenors and bass), designed with the top strings tuned to c", g' and c', and capable of playing at A=440 or A=466 in order to accord with the group's wind instruments. Rose developed designs on the hypothesis that the instruments in Costa's painting would have had carved spruce fronts and maple backs glued to a simple maple block from which the ribs were cut. The viols were stained rather than varnished (to obtain the light colour of the Costa models), with neither soundpost nor bass-bar, and set up with plain and high twist gut strings.⁴⁸

Our experience of playing these viols has been extremely rewarding. After an initial rehearsal period in which we came to terms with the instruments' individual characteristics and laid aside previously formed concepts of 'viol consort sound', we were fascinated to discover how easily the Costa viols can 'sing': their tone is capable of a silvery sweetness when bowed lightly *sul tasto*, but they can also exhibit a forthright gutsiness when pushed a little harder using relatively stiff bows. Despite their slim proportions they have successfully projected their sound in spaces as large as the capacious Chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, and they can give ample support to a solo chamber voice while also having a transparency of harmonic texture that allows easy collaboration with the lute. Even in relatively lively acoustic spaces these viols can produce a wide variety of timbral colours, and a translucent and articulate clarity between the individual parts in even quite florid contrapuntal pieces. Reviewers have commented on the viols' 'wonderfully reedy timbre', 'the absence of a dominating, booming bass', and the matched set's 'perfect internal balance and its delicate sound – lighter and more pellucid than the later viol consort'.⁴⁹ Such comments certainly appear to accord with the characteristics of early viol consorts praised by writers from the circle of Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo Costa such as Castiglione. Whether or not this hypothetical consort of Costa viols has produced sounds that early Renaissance Italian viol devotees would have recognized, it has

certainly given us fresh insights into the music they collected, and perhaps brought us a little closer to understanding it.

Three pieces from Petrucci's *Odhecaton* (Venice, 1501):

Alexander Agricola: *Si dederò*

Ferminius Caron: *Helas que pourra devenir*

Heinrich Isaac: *La Morra*

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¹ Ian Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol* (Cambridge, 1984); Peter Holman, *Four and Twenty Fiddlers* (Oxford, 1993), Ch. 1.

² Warwick Edwards, 'Songs without words by Josquin and his contemporaries' in *Music in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. I. Fenlon (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 79–92; see also Jon Banks, *The Instrumental Consort Repertory of the late Fifteenth Century* (Aldershot, 2006).

³ See Martin Edmunds, 'Venetian Viols of the Sixteenth Century', *Galpin Society Journal*, 33 (1980), 74–91; Ian Harwood and Martin Edmunds, 'Reconstructing 16th-century Venetian Viols', *Early Music*, vol. 6/4 (October 1978), pp. 519–25. The authenticity of many surviving Venetian viols has been questioned by Karel Moens, for example in 'Problems of Authenticity in Sixteenth-Century Italian Viols and the Brussels Collection', *The Italian Viola da Gamba* ed. S. Orlando (Turin, 2002), pp. 97–113.

⁴ Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol*, pp. 87–8.

⁵ Maria Cristina Chiusa, 'Costa', *The Dictionary of Art* ed. J. Turner (London, 1996), viii, pp. 3–4; Edmund G. Gardner, *The Painters of the School of Ferrara* (London, 1911).

⁶ This date is derived from the register of his death 5.3.1535: 'de eta de anni 75'.

⁷ Susan Forscher Weiss, 'Musical Patronage of the Bentivoglio Signoria, c. 1465–1512', *International Musicological Society Congress Report IV: Bologna* (1987), pp. 703–15; Susan Forscher Weiss, 'Bologna MS Q 18; Some Reflections on Content and Context', *The Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 41 (1988), pp. 63–101.

⁸ National Gallery, London NG2486, dated c. 1485–95.

⁹ Musée du Louvre, Paris, Inv. 255; see Cecilia M. Ady, *The Bentivoglio of Bologna: a Study in Despotism* (London, 1937), p. 143.

¹⁰ Musée du Louvre, Paris, Inv. 256.

¹¹ This is however essentially a private performance rather than an audience-orientated 'concert', and so may therefore be rather conceived as an allegorical depiction of 'harmony'.

¹² Reproduced in Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Central Italian and North Italian Schools* (1907, rev. New York, 1968), Vol. 3, plate 1629.

¹³ Sterling S. Jones, *The Lira da braccio* (Bloomington, 1995); Laurence Witten, 'Apollo, Orpheus and David: a Study of the Crucial Century in the Development of Bowed Strings in North Italy, 1480–1580', *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 1 (1975), pp. 5–55.

¹⁴ Egon Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua* (New York, 1971); Anthony Rooley, 'The court of Isabella d'Este', *Early Music*, Vol. 4 (January 1976), pp. 42–3; Iain Fenlon, 'Music in Italian Renaissance Painting' in *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music*, ed. T. Knighton & D. Fallows (London, 1992), pp. 189–209.

¹⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Peter Humfrey (Oxford, 1988), p. 81.

¹⁶ However it should be noted that the 16th century painter and art critic Vasari drew attention to Costa's 'good draughtsmanship and power of imitation in drawing from nature' and held up the Ghedini altarpiece as one of Costa's best works: see Giorgio Vasari *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Gaston du. C. de Vere, ed. D. Ekserdjian, (London, 1996), Vol. 1, pp. 480-1.

¹⁷ The placing of the bridge very low down the body is common in early 16th century illustrations of viols. Not only is this a way of maximising the string length, but it can also help to eliminate the wolf notes that are common in viols made of light construction and without a sound post.

¹⁸ See Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol*, Ch. 4. Similar concave sides are clearly shown on the *lira* depicted in the marquetry panels of 1506-8 in Isabella d'Este's *grotta* in the Palazzo Ducale, Mantua (shown in William F. Prizer, 'North Italian Courts, 1460-1540' in ed. I. Fenlon, *Man & Music: The Renaissance* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 146. Such a constructional approach, in which front and back are glued to, and overlap, a rather solid form, is closer to violin-making than the later Venetian and Jacobean viols with their thinner, flat sides and flush fronts (often bent rather than carved) and flat backs. Violin-type viols did of course continue to be built: as late as 1665 the second edition of Christopher Simpson's *The Division-Viol* recommends this style with carved rather than bent fronts '(the Bellies being digged out of the Plank)' as having a 'quick and sprightly' sound.

¹⁹ Lewis Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara, 1400-1505* (Oxford, 1984), p. 97.

²⁰ Isabella also studied singing with Charles de Lannoy, who later provides a musical link with the Bentivoglio family of Bologna, Costa's patrons in the 1480s and 1490s. Lannoy absented himself from Isabella's employment without her permission, and it was from the house of Bianca Rangoni, Giovanni Bentivoglio's daughter, in 1499 that he wrote in apologetic terms (Weiss, 'Bologna MS Q 18', p. 41, fn 37).

²¹ William F. Prizer, *Courtly pastimes: the Frottole of Marchetto Cara* (Ann Arbor, 1980), p. 9.

²² 'che suonano viole grande come me': Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, p. 144.

²³ William F. Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia, "Master Instrument Maker"', *Early Music History*, ii (1982), pp. 102-5.

²⁴ Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia', p. 102.

²⁵ Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia', p. 104.

²⁶ Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, p. 144.

²⁷ Clifford M. Brown, *Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia, Documents for the History of Art and Culture in Renaissance Mantua* (Geneva, 1982), pp. 199-200.

²⁸ Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia', p. 104.

²⁹ Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia', p. 104.

³⁰ Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, 325-6; Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia', p. 104.

³¹ Charles Beare/Ugo Ravasio, 'Zanetto', *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. S. Sadie (London, 2001), xxvii, p. 742.

³² 'una musica de sei viole, fraquale vi era il Signor don Alfonso': see Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol*, pp. 88-9.

³³ Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol*, p. 137.

³⁴ See further Prizer's description in *Courtly pastimes*, pp. 137-42, and Brown's in Howard M. Brown & Louise K. Stein, *Music in the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey, 1999), pp. 100-6

³⁵ Although it is difficult to determine accurately the number of strings on Costa's viols, five are clearly shown on the title page of Silvestro di Ganassi, *Regola Rubertina* (1542-3), and five was also the most common number on *lire da braccio*, not counting additional bourdon strings.

³⁶ Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo, *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 52-3 and pp. 304-5.

³⁷ By 1481 a dedicated music room in the palace at Ferrara was devoted to storing instruments, but it also had an organ installed and must have been used as a rehearsal space, if not for performance to a courtly audience: see Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara*, pp. 145–6.

³⁸ Egon Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua* (New York, 1971) p. 6 and p. 11; see also Clifford M. Brown, 'The Grotta of Isabella d'Este', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 6th ser., lxxxix (1977), pp. 155–71 and xci (1978), pp. 72–82

³⁹ Isabella somewhat grudgingly gave Testagrossa leave to join the Urbino court of Duke Francesco della Rovere rather than accompany her son Federico Gonzaga to Rome as his teacher: see Prizer, *Courtly pastimes*, p. 310.

⁴⁰ Haar, 'The Courtier as Musician', pp. 165–89.

⁴¹ Count Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. V. Cox (London, 1994) p. 70.p

⁴² Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, p. 70.

⁴³ Prizer, *Courtly pastimes*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Letter of 1 July 1505: see Prizer, *Courtly pastimes*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia'.

⁴⁷ Experiments with the design of modern small violas with only two corners by Helen Michetschläger have shown that the greater flexibility of the front and back resulting from this design allows an instrument whose internal volume is relatively small to resonate with a good warmth and rich bass response more usually associated with larger instruments. Similar qualities would presumably have been favoured in renaissance *liras* used for accompanying a reciting male voice, and in the new consort of viols whose prime function appears to have been the performance of the lower parts of *frottole* and the polyphonic chanson repertory. See www.helenviolinmaker.com

⁴⁸ Roger Rose, 'Artistic licence', *The Strad* (May 2002), pp. 496–501.

⁴⁹ Andrew O'Connor, *International Record Review* (July/August 2003), p. 68; Andrew Benson-Wilson, *Early Music Review* 109 (October 2005), p. 19; Kate Bolton, *BBC Music Magazine* (August 2003), p. 67. The Costa viols made by West Dean College can be heard on: *A Songbook for Isabella: music from the circle of Isabella d'Este*, Musica Antiqua of London, Signum SIGCD039 (2003) and *Madame d'Amours: songs, dances and consort music for the six wives of Henry VIII*, Musica Antiqua of London, Signum SIGCD044 (2004).