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Duet for One Lute

by Hiroyuki Minamino

The traditional Japanese art form *Rakugo* (meaning “farical story”) is a popular entertainment, the origins of which date back to several centuries. It is the art of story-telling. The stories can be either traditional or contemporary. The storyteller sits alone on a cushion on the stage. A fan is his only stage prop; he uses it as a substitute for many objects such as chopsticks, a sword, shovel, a hammer, etc., according to the situation. He wears the traditional kimono with the waist-length formal gown. Although the stories are usually comical and contain many jokes, each story has its own theme, characters, and moral messages. On rare occasions (such as the opening day of the season or new year’s day) slapstick versions of the *Rakugo* are performed for cheap laughs. One such tale is called “*ninin bari*,” or “a gown for two.” The master storyteller wears an oversized gown so that his assistant can hide in it behind the master. The master’s arms are hidden in the gown; instead, the assistant’s arms replace the master’s. Since the assistant hides in the gown, he cannot see what the master is doing, and the master cannot control how his assistant moves his arms. It is this calculated uncoordination between the master’s story and the assistant’s arm movements that creates comical gestures and invites laughter from the audience.

It is very unlikely that this traditional Japanese art form was known in Europe in the sixteenth century. Yet one wonders whether this kind of physical humor is universal. At the end of his *The First Booke of Songs or Ayres* of 1597 (a collection of 21 songs in four parts with lute accompaniments), John Dowland appended a duet, entitled “My Lord Chamberlaine, his Galliard.” Lute duets had been popular among lutenists before Dowland, and many were published during the sixteenth century. Publishing a lute duet was nothing extraordinary at the time, and one assumes that Dowland’s duet is an ordinary piece. But is it? This galliard has a curious indication in the table of contents: “A Galliard for two to play upon one lute.”

Lute duets are usually played on two lutes, presumably by two players. Dowland’s duet, however, requires two players and one lute. At first it appears to be impossible to follow the performance directions. Dowland’s compositional style, however, allows the players to play in such way. There are roughly two musical styles in the sixteenth-century lute duets: the predominant style in which the first lute provides the melodies and/or the fast moving running passages while the second lute provides chordal accompaniment, and duets in which both parts have equal musical significance, each containing the melody and accompaniment. Dowland’s duet

belongs to the first category. The first lute part mostly plays the melody, in the higher positions on the fingerboard (from the fifth to the tenth frets) and on the top two courses. The second lute part mostly plays the accompaniment on the lower frets (from the open string to the fourth fret) and on the lower courses. In this arrangement the two players’ right and left hands do not pluck the same courses and position the same frets simultaneously.

The posture of the two players is an interesting problem for the performance practice of this piece. One player presumably sits on a chair and holds a lute either on the knee or on a table, while the other player hovers behind the first player, standing bent over and extending his hands to the instrument from behind the first player. At one point in the duet there is an imitative passage, played by the first lute and then echoed on the second. When the melody is repeated, the second lute plays the melody, not on its normal low

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register, but on the high frets, while the first lute plays the accompaniment in the low register. The two players' left hands cross; when the passage is over, they re-cross to their initial position.

It is impossible to avoid close physical contact when playing this piece. The two players must therefore be quite intimate to attempt it. One wonders for whom the duet was written. From the physical point of view, one player must be larger than the other, since one has to hover over the other and extends his hands to reach the lute. Is the duet intended for Dowland and his wife to play? Whether or not she played the lute is unknown. Is the duet an exercise for Dowland's son, Robert, as a part of his lute lessons? Robert was six or seven years old when the piece was published, and may not have had the technical skill to play such a highly sophisticated piece. He began his seven-year apprenticeship in the following year, although at an early age (the age of thirteen was norm in Elizabethan England to begin an apprenticeship.) Is it intended for Sir George Carey (to whom the piece is dedicated) and his wife Elizabeth? Dowland met George Carey (at the time the ambassador to the court of Moritz, Landgrave of Hessen) in Kassel in 1596. That was certainly the occasion in which Dowland dedicated a solo lute piece called "Lady Hunsdon's Almain" to Elizabeth Carey. Although George Carey was Lord Chamberlain who was responsible for the courtly entertainments and Elizabeth Carey was a patroness of literati, whether they played the lute is not known. Did Dowland have any particular players in mind when he composed the duet? Maybe not. But Dowland certainly expected whoever wanted to try the duet to have some fun. Nineteenth-century lovers enjoyed piano duets, many of which contain the technique of hand-crossings. Dowland, more than two centuries earlier, composed a duet that went far from the delicate touching of finger. Dowland's duet can be played in the ordinary way—two players on two lutes—but this way all the fun is lost. Dowland's ingenuity is the physical acrobatics demanded by the performance indication for a piece written in an ordinary duet style. It demonstrates Dowland's compositional wit and humor. No wonder he called the duet "an invention."

Editor's note: I have performed this duet on one lute. My partner was a very small woman (my girlfriend at the time: a guitarist with no experience on the lute, but nobody's perfect) who sat on my lap as I sat on a very low chair. It was a very pleasant way to perform.



REVIEWS

De Los Alamos de Sevilla, Juan Carlos Rivera, Vihuela. 1994, Almagora DSI 0106

This CD contains a large selection of the music for vihuela that was published in the city of Sevilla: *Los Tres Libros de musica en Cifra para Vihuela*, by Alonso Mudarra (1546) and *Libro de Musica de Vihuela intitulado Orphenica Lyra*, by Miguel de Fuenllana (1554). There appears to be no special order to the 28 pieces chosen for this recording; Mudarra and Fuenllana are intermingled so that the differences between them blurs. There is scholarly and informative historical background and program notes by Tess Knighton printed in Spanish and English. We are told nothing at all about Juan Carlos Rivera.

The programming is well thought out, and includes the familiar as well as the not-so-often heard. The playing is first rate with a warm tone and seemingly effortless technique. The difficulty with this recording arises with Rivera's sense of rhythm. I would not be so presumptuous as to label his liberties incorrect, but they are certainly not what one is used to hearing in vihuela music, or any other music from the 16th Century. The familiar piece, like Mudarra's *Fantasia #10* or Fuenllana's *Fantasia con Redobles Calanos*, become brand new experiences. This, and a predilection to roll almost every chord, makes this CD uneasy listening.

Joseph Mayes
Rowan University

Johannes Vogt: Spielt Originale Barocklauten, Kropffganss, Gebel, Baron, Falkenhagen. 1994, Conventus Musicus DDD CM 1081

The concept behind this CD is an excellent one: to demonstrate the differences between two authentic German baroque lutes. A sonata by Kropffganss and two separate pieces by Gebel are played on a Martin Hoffmann instrument made in the 1690s and a Suite by Baron and a Partita by Falkenhagen are played on a Leopold Widhalm lute made in 1755.

The playing and interpretation are first rate. There is enough variety to the program and enough excitement generated by the playing. The first movement of the Kropffganss which opens the disc is a fantasia, and sets the level for the whole production. There is majesty, humor, and plain good music all in a space of a minute and a half. Vogt plays with conviction and makes the rhythmic liberties that he takes seem both satisfying and natural.

The sound of this recording is quite good and unprocessed, so that the listener is hearing the genuine sound of the two different lutes. It would have been easier to appraise their qualities if one were able to hear identical music on the two instruments (try to sell that CD!), but it is still possible to make some distinctions. The Hoffmann is more resonant and seems to be louder, while the Widhalm is more strident and seems to have more projection. It would be interesting to know what went into the decision to play which music on which lute.

The CD comes with copious liner notes, which are of little use to the German-challenged among us as they are printed only in that language.

I would recommend this recording most highly.

Joseph Mayes
Rowan University