It's now a commonplace for an advocate of any 16th century instrument to claim it was considered the closest to the human voice – the answer to the question: “which instrument is most like a voice?” depends on who you ask, and where you look for your answer. But there were certainly plenty who spoke up for the viola da gamba, that family of string instruments that were derived from the vihuela (an ancestor also of the guitar), and newly developed at the end of the 15th century.

The range of the consort of viols mirrored a vocal consort pretty exactly, and its earliest repertory was nothing much more than vocal motets played rather than sung, without words – words which were probably well known to the listeners in any case.

And so the idea of combining voices and viols was hardly going to be exactly revolutionary; yet it took several decades before William Byrd, master musician to Queen Elizabeth of England, invented and established the consort song – not his term – as a vehicle for a rather intense meditation on poetic text. It means the words will always be heard, something of importance in the Protestant religion and carried through to secular music, even by the Catholic Byrd. Most texts were in English and many serious and weighty; but there were exceptions, and the rather smug narrator in My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is comes across rather as one of those pub bores, endlessly telling you how wonderful their life is, and how everyone else is getting it all wrong – summed up by the last line: “Would all did so as well as I.”

Byrd was the younger partner in a publishing venture with his friend and mentor, the great Thomas Tallis. They managed to get a monopoly in printing music in England for 20 years which, together, led only to the Cantiones sacrae of 1575. However, shortly after Tallis’s death in 1585, Byrd published alone his Psalms, Sonnets, and Songs of Sadness and Pietie, much of which was reworked for five voices from earlier consort songs. The two composers must have been close, and Byrd’s lament on the death of Tallis (Ye Sacred Muses) is an intimate and heartfelt tribute.

Byrd was a master in all the forms of music then current, the madrigal excepted, and he must first have met Tallis when both were organists at the Chapel Royal. Byrd’s writing for consort of viols is felicitous and uninhibited. The virtuosity of this Fantasia (“Two parts in one the fourth above”) consists in writing a strict canon between the top two parts, while creating a work that morphs from church to tavern without missing a beat.

Another composer attracted to the music of Tallis was Raph Vaughan Williams; but he came to it several centuries later, while researching music for The English Hymnal in the first decade of the 20th century. His Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis is his first masterpiece and surprising evidence of the benefits of his study with Ravel. Perhaps more obvious of that relationship is The Sky Above the Roof, a setting of an English translation of a poem by Verlaine, written while he was in prison in England. More straightforwardly English is Silent Noon, an earlier setting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and a justly celebrated evocation of the English countryside. (Both these songs, originally written with piano accompaniment, are here performed in a transcription for voice and viols.)

English music saw its golden age come to a summit around the end of Elizabeth’s reign, and, apart from an aging Byrd, the leading light was Orlando Gibbons. He started his musical life as a chorister at Kings College, Cambridge, in Elizabeth’s reign and ended it as a musician in the Chapel Royal under Kings Charles I. He was a famed organist and harpsichord player, but composed extensively for the instrumentalists at the court, and that institution probably possessed an exceptionally large viol, capable of playing a fourth lower than other bass viols of the time. These fantasies, including
this afternoon’s **Fantasia in four parts**, are also exceptional in containing detailed performance instructions not otherwise found in consort music.

Johann Christoph Bach “was as good at inventing beautiful thoughts as he was at expressing words. He composed, to the extent that current taste permitted, in a galant and cantabile style, uncommonly full-textured … On the organ and the keyboard [he] never played with fewer than five independent parts.” So says the obituary notice of J. S. Bach in 1754, and it is clear that J. S. greatly admired his uncle’s music. While he was primarily, like his nephew, a keyboard player, it is his vocal music that has survived, and this “vocal concerto” (**Ach, daß ich Wassers gnug hätten**), is one of his most impressive achievements.

It’s easy to understand why Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, is as celebrated as much for his life as for his music. Indeed, they seem to fit together all too well: he murdered his wife Maria and her lover, Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria, when he discovered them “*in flagrante delicto di fragrante peccato*” on October 16, 1590; he immediately became notorious, and his victims, aristocratic martyrs. Gesualdo’s nobility saved him from any serious consequences, and his actions were seen as almost a form of self-defense. But he was already unusually interested, even obsessed, by music, especially as an aristocrat. This obsession led to a dilettante interest becoming a powerful skill, and by the end of his life in 1613 his madrigals, among them **Beltà poi che t’assenti. Dolcissima mia vita** and **Sparge la notte**, were some of the most celebrated in Europe. That fame for the exceptional nature of his harmony and counterpoint has continued up to the present day, with academic argument over the nature of his achievement on the one hand, and popular interest in his biography from the likes of Bernardo Bertolucci and Werner Herzog, and with books with titles such as **Music to Murder By** on the other.

In a similar, if slightly less sensational vein, William Lawes’s death while fighting in the English Civil War in 1645 has also colored our appreciation of his idiosyncratic and wholly exceptional music. He was a friend and servant to King Charles I, who also played the bass viol “exactly well,” and his devotion to his sovereign led him to rush in to the siege of Chester, when Charles had expressly forbidden him to take part in the battle. They were almost the same age, and Lawes had provided the court with some of its most engaging and exciting instrumental music in the 1630s. His music for five and six viols, demonstrated by this **Consort set in A minor**, is some of his most extravagant, employing a freedom in invention, harmony, and part-writing that were all of a piece with the disjointed times and circumstances in which he lived.

After the war was over, and after the monarchy had been restored in 1660, the last flourishing of that English golden age came in the form of the forever young Henry Purcell. When he was not yet 21, in the glorious summer of 1680, he composed a series of viol fantasies in emulation of the great composers of the past. He dates each of these nine four-part works – today’s **Fantazia No. 6**, for example, was composed on June 14 – and it is evident that some took him no longer than a day to write. The last was on August 31, just before his 21st birthday. What is perhaps more astonishing is that they were almost certainly not performed in his lifetime – only Purcell’s own score has survived and it seems that no parts were copied – and therefore the first performances might not have been until the Purcell Society edition was published in the mid-19th century.

But his songs were performed and celebrated in his lifetime. **O Solitude** is quintessential Purcell: an unchanging ground bass moves doggedly on, while a vocal line of extraordinary plasticity and freedom
expresses the wonderful poetry of Antoine Girard de Saint-Amant, translated by Katherine Philips, known as “The Matchless Orinda” in her “Society of Friendship” and a celebrated poet in her own right.

Purcell was only 36 when he died; John Jenkins, on the other hand, lived to the unusual age of 86, and could well have met a teenage Purcell in the music establishment at court in his later years. He had survived the turbulent years of the Civil War, the interregnum, and the Restoration largely by staying out of London and working for aristocratic families in the deep English countryside. He was a virtuoso viol player and wrote a large body of consort music for three to six viols. There is a deep well of melodic invention in Jenkins’ Fantasias, and a superb harmonic facility that gives his works a hugely satisfying completeness. He is buried in St. Peter’s Church, Kimberley in Norfolk, with this inscription:

Under this Stone Rare Jenkins lie
The Master of the Musick Art
Whom from the Earth the God on High
Called up to Him to bear his part.
Aged eighty six October twenty seven
In anno seventy eight he went to Heaven.

It could be argued that England’s golden age ended with the arrival of Handel 1712. His genius was such as to put all local talents in the shade. He came to London before the arrival of King George I, employed by the aging and disabled Queen Anne. Initially, opera wasn’t part of Handel’s plans in London, but by 1719 he was looking for singers on the continent and his first opera was written and performed in 1724. Giulio Cesare (Julius Caesar) was a great success and Piangerò one of its most celebrated arias. It is sung by Cleopatra, lamenting the apparent death of Caesar. Originally Cleopatra was sung by the famous soprano Francesca Cuzzoni and Caesar by the castrato Senesino.

Nearly ten years later, Handel composed and performed Orlando at the King’s Theatre in London, where Senesino again starred as Orlando. The story is a reworking of Ludovico Ariosto’s Renaissance epic Orlando Furioso, in which Orlando is driven mad by his love for Angelica, a pagan princess. He is made sane again by the magician Zoroastro, who has sprinkled magic potion on Orlando’s eyes. As he feels the effects of this, he sings Già l’ebro mio ciglio.

—Program notes by Richard Boothby

UChicago Presents dedicates this concert to the memory of Professor Emeritus and preeminent Shakespeare scholar David Bevington (1931-2019).