

Oakland, California

Balthasar Fritsch: *Primitiae Musicales*,  
Frankfurt am Main, 1606

ed. Günther and Leonore von Zadow. Edition Güntersberg G313 and G314, 2017. Band I: 12 *Paduanen à 4*, ISMN 979-0-50174-313-1; Band II: 20 *Galliarden à 4*; *Intrada à 5* ISMN 979-0-50174-314-8. Score and parts for each volume, €19.80.

Shortly after returning from the VdGSA's 2019 Conclave, I hosted a trio of colleagues for an evening's reading of pavans and galliards, the entire known instrumental *oeuvre* of one Balthasar Fritsch (?1570/80-?1608), a composer with whom none of us was familiar. My colleagues' anonymity was a condition of their participation. I'd been peering at the scores to these pieces on my own in the days leading up to our gathering, and by the time the others arrived, I had begun to fear that these works might suffer by comparison to all those late-Renaissance dance sets that we have come to know and love. So, throughout our session I did my level best to keep my opinions to myself in order to allow my colleagues to judge the music for themselves. The results were not quite what I was expecting.

This collection was originally published in Frankfurt in 1606 in the form of four forty-page partbooks (*Canto*, *Alto*, *Tenor*, and *Basso*) full of pavans and galliards. This well-preserved quartet seems not to have traveled very far over the centuries, winding up in the library of Frankfurt's own Goethe University, where it only recently came to light.

It is unclear to me whether these dances were originally lumped together by type, rather than in the pavan-galliard pairs we have come to expect (Johann Hermann Schein's *Banchetto musicale* of 1617 being commonly considered the first collection of "cyclic" pavan-galliard sets—that is, pairs of complementary dances linked by shared thematic material). In this modern edition, the publishers have chosen to split them up into two volumes, the first containing all the pavans and the second containing all the galliards, plus a "bonus" five-part *intrada* (the extra voice, a second cantus part, can be found in the back of the cantus partbook).

The two volumes are clearly intended to be sold together: the score for the pavans contains the biographical and musicological notes (in both German and English), whereas the score to the galliards skips these and instead contains a facsimile of the original dedication (nearly four pages of Latin) and its translation (into German but, puzzlingly, not English). As is customary with this publisher, there is a little something for the eye to feast upon as well as the ear—in this case, a reproduction of some lovely, contemporary blue-and-white Portuguese tiles featuring a group of classical female figures and their cherubic retinue making music on a variety of late-Renaissance instruments.

The ranges and keys of these pieces (with never more than a single sharp or flat in the key signature and very little chromaticism) make them suitable for both viols and recorders. The part-writing is generally conservative and most of the voices tend to sit toward the low end of their ranges, although the altus sometimes has an extended upper range in a few places (all the way up to the F at the top of the treble clef in one piece) in order to allow it to become a momentary duet-partner to the cantus. The specific range for each of the parts is indicated at the beginning of each dance in the score, and the publishers have thoughtfully put the middle parts (altus and tenor) in both C- and G-clefs, so neither recorder-players nor gambists need worry about the unfamiliar.

Fritsch's decision to write for four voices, essentially SATB, is noteworthy, especially since so many of his contemporaries opted for a five-part texture for their dances. Accustomed as I was to the latter, I initially found myself missing those little moments when a pair of matched voices might twist playfully around one another, but after a while I was able to enjoy the merits of this texture for the clarity that comes from giving each voice its own little place in the overall structure. In Fritsch's world, nobody is ever in any danger of stepping on anyone else's toes.

The pavans employ a certain amount of textural playfulness: Fritsch often pairs the voices in ever-shifting combinations, and he takes particular delight in teasingly passing bits of material from one voice to another through the entire four-part texture so that each voice gets to have a "moment" now and again. Several of the pavans contain special flights of fancy in the form of little passing sixteenth-note divisions

or trumpet calls reminiscent of those found in Thomas Simpson's *Opus Newer Paduanen* (?1617) or perhaps the canzonas of Samuel Scheidt. Fritsch also shifts meter from time to time in these pavans, surprising us with a few measures in triple meter before returning to duple.

The galliards proved surprisingly tricky, using all kinds of rhythmic devices (syncopations, sudden bursts of dotted rhythms, *sesquialterae*, etc.) or odd and occasionally directionless shifts of modality and tonality. Sometimes these strange moves led to puzzlement; at other times they resulted in outright laughter. Even by the time we reached the end of the collection, we were still not sure whether the most entertaining aspects of Fritsch's style were matters of clever intention or whether they were just plain weird.

Hearing all of a composer's known instrumental works in a single session can be revealing, allowing us to take note of how often a particular device is employed, whether to good effect or otherwise. For example, Fritsch seems especially enamored of extended sequences, sometimes painfully extended, which reminded me of jokes told by a precocious and determined six-year-old that might be cute the first time around and then...well, thank goodness for welcome distractions.

Even Fritsch's little bursts of enthusiasm, those sudden exchanges of sixteenth-note figures between two voices, start to become predictable, especially when they fail to lead to any general increase in activity or variety. It is at times like these that we start to long for both the little surprises and satisfying large-scale planning of those other composers whose dances we know so well. Would Scheidt have just left us hanging like that? Would Holborne have had the altus sit around like a wallflower every time the cantus had her moment on the dance floor, and then subject her to the further indignity of *always* being the one to handle the decorative turn at the end of each cadence? I think not, but perhaps it's not fair to compare them this way.

In the end, my colleagues were less harsh in their judgement of the music than I was, pronouncing it fun and odd, by turns melancholy and cute. "Marvelously inconsistent!" cried one of them after finishing the last pavan of the set, while another spoke glowingly of its orthography, "It's fabulous! You can always tell where you are in a long measure." While none of us felt we would go out of our way to program any of this music at a concert, my colleagues were, overall, more charmed than suspicious. Most of us agreed that these pieces would serve a mixed group of strings and winds very well and would be particularly useful for our workshop classes, one of us observing that even in those moments of inertia—especially in the pavans, most notably in the inner parts—there were opportunities for divisions. In that spirit, I think these pieces would probably serve best as a kind introduction to four-part Renaissance dances, or as an opportunity for those looking to improve their impromptu decorating skills.

I am indebted to my erudite, patient, and trustworthy colleagues, "Skeeter," "Cletus," and "Waldo" for their time, consideration, and musical skill in playing through all these works in single session.

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