

# Violes Esgales--Sainte Colombe, Marais, Couperin, Les Voix Humaines. Duo de Violes de Gambe

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Otterstedt, Annette (1996) "Violes Esgales--Sainte Colombe, Marais, Couperin, Les Voix Humaines. Duo de Violes de Gambe," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 9. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199609.02.09  
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol9/iss2/9>

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## Record Review

*Violas Esgales*—Sainte Colombe, Marais, Couperin. Les Voix Humaines, Duo de Violas de Gambe, Susie Napper et Margaret Little. CBC Records MVCD 1082.

In the foreword to his *L'Art de Toucher le Dessus et la Basse de Violle* (1687) Danoville, a colleague of Marin Marais and student of Sainte Colombe,<sup>1</sup> emphasizes Sainte Colombe's variety of bowing styles and moods:

Cette maniere de tirer une harmonie tantost tendre, tantost brillante, qui surprend agreeablement l'oreille. . .

This manner of producing a sonority at one time tender, at another time brilliant, which surprises the ear agreeably . . .

Such variety, however, is lamentably absent from the present recording, and I have looked in vain for that characteristic "sweetness" so often attributed to the viol during the 17th and 18th centuries. Everything, to the contrary, is unremittingly loud. It is a pity that the 20th century has seen, and is still seeing, so much emphasis upon a powerful sound, which is not among the prime distinctions of the instrument, when pride should be taken instead in an alluringly expressive piano and in a brilliantly weightless bowing.

The fixed-frog bows used by Marais—as is revealed by iconographical sources—were of quite extraordinary length (about 80-90 cm.). This kind of bow is reflected in Sainte Colombe's style of composing. Long bows behave differently from short ones, as do fixed-frog bows and those with movable frogs. Furthermore, such bows were strung with no more than 50-60 horse hairs (cf. Loulié), which is roughly half of what anyone would dare nowadays. Early bows are often very thin near the tip, which has a direct influence on the development of the tone and its end. They make it virtually impossible to press down the bow energetically; their great length, indeed, gives them both more flexibility and softness. More than

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<sup>1</sup> There is certainly no conclusive evidence for the name Augustin Dautrecourt.

others at the time, French viol players were celebrated for their differentiated bowing and for their use of quasi-plucked notes that faded away as on a lute.

Concerning the recording, however, energetic bowing is a ubiquitous occurrence. Information about the bows employed is regrettably wanting, but the apparent use of non-17th-century bows and the excessive pressure used on them, especially towards the bow's end, preclude any of the "fading away" effect so important in the original playing technique. *Notes perdues*, set apart in the 17th century by their manner of notation, also imply a lighter execution, and other "small-print" ornaments (e.g. *coulement*, *accent*, *port de voix*), which relied on the viol's ability to ring on, are either given so much weight that they are no different from the main notes, or they disappear entirely (no. 16)—this might be a clue for the use of too-heavy strings.

The original bowing indications have been supplanted by modern mannerisms. To make this clear I should like to go a little back into history. The beginning of a note was the concern of musicians and musical writers since the 16th century (e.g. articulation syllables of wind instruments, right hand technique on the lute, etc.). Apparently people were content with the development of a note in its "natural" way (sustained as on the organ etc., or dying away as in harpsichords, lutes, and viols). But now the end of the note also came into focus. The French violists were probably not the first ones to think about this, but they were the first to analyze it and write it down. And they were looking for a special sign to express it. In his second volume Marais invented the sign "e" (*enfler*) to indicate an increase until the end. He is very careful about its placement: sometimes he sets it above the note, but very often on the following dot. If, however, the players stop the sound on the dot, where is the *enfler*? As Marais uses this sign very often indeed, it is one of the main characteristics of his music. To leave out its occurrences is like playing Bach's "48" without flats and sharps.

Can it be right, as on the recording, to combine a six- and a seven-string viol and declare them to be "violes esgales,"<sup>2</sup> regardless of a

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<sup>2</sup> The Norman is an old instrument with 6 strings. The Colichon is a modern copy with 7 strings. the difference is twofold: instruments with different numbers of strings on one side, and old versus new on the other. Are these "violes esgales," considering that the sounds are totally different and don't blend well?

sound balance which is noticeably impaired? The choice of French pitch (398 Hz) is courageous and one of the few positive points of the record. Alas, this good aspect is spoilt by the heavy stringing and lack of transparency. Frequently in Couperin (nos. 14-21) the instruments lack clarity and certain notes are indiscernible, even with earphones. This and the absence of "ringing-on," is again due to the heavy stringing of the viols or to bowing too far from the bridge, which are often interdependent. Bowing three fingers' width from the bridge, as is recommended by Loulié, Marais, and Forqueray (*le fils*), calls for light strings and a low bridge position, familiar from French iconography. Most notably, the bass strings sound as if the wire overspinning is massive, because the difference in quality between the open strings and any fingered note higher up is as considerable as might be expected from a bad ratio of length to string mass. Moreover, the method of separating the notes in breaking chords is a tell-tale upshot of a bridge rounder than usual in the 17th and 18th centuries.

It is the essence of *agréments* that their execution should be swift. In the recording, however, they seem a little too "thoughtful," disclaiming their origins in lute technique. There are several instances, in fact, where individual *agréments* are left out, so that I suspect that an edited new edition was used instead of a facsimile. For the *tremblement avec appuy* (a shake with a long appoggiatura from above), the shake is supposed to begin after the beat, not on it (as in the recording). Many of Sainte Colombe's shakes are written out proportionally. On the recording they are played metrically reduced, speeding up gradually, which creates the impression of an overly-cautious avoidance of any risk. Sainte Colombe, to the contrary, seems to have loved totally un-French "descents to hell," rather risking such a fall to miscarry picturesquely now and then than standing back quite so safely from the precipice.

Most movements of the period, although no longer intended to be danced to, are derived from dance movements, whose distinctive affects have to be recognized and expressed. These changes of affect must be audible not merely as a change of time signature, but of tempo, articulation, and dynamics. Arbitrary rhythmic or uniform tempi—as on this recording—dissemble these affects, making them difficult to perceive for the listeners.

The tempi are very moderate throughout. This could be an advantage in view of today's customary hastiness, provided the notes are



not left shapeless, and a genuine distinction is made between slow and fast. The metric sign C, particularly as used by Sainte Colombe, demands a great deal of imagination and bow control, and metrically unstructured notes are as inconceivable for the period as unstructured surfaces. The subdivision of a stroke of the bow into its beginning, middle, and end (see e.g. Loulié) is to be taken quite literally. But here, specifically long notes which call for the greatest tension (e.g. during slow sections by Sainte Colombe, or in Marais's *Tombeau de M<sup>r</sup> Meliton*), which ought to be every viol-player's favorite challenge, are left rather flat and insipid. On the other hand, the fastest tempi, instead of acquiring airiness, display a heavy footfall with too many stresses, and they seem as a result to be violent rather than sprightly. The coarsely played *Badinage* (no. 19) fails singularly to charm me for its lack of light banter. In French music, as in jazz, *inégalité* is the rule. It should flow naturally from the playing technique and not sound like an afterthought. Such a naturalness, however, is not at all evident in those movements played *inégalement* in the recording. Further, the recording is pervaded by a tendency to slow down and pause at cadences and caesuras. French music is short-winded anyway (due to its short [dance]-passages). The regular slowing down makes it even *more* asthmatic.

In the leaflet accompanying the CD, Pascal Quignard is quoted from *Tous les matins du monde* (the film of 1991) as follows:

... Thus it was that [Sainte Colombe and Marais] played *Les Pleurs*. As the song of the two viols rose in the air, they looked at one another. They were weeping ... While their tears rolled slowly down their noses, their cheeks, their lips, they kept smiling at one another at the same time.

*Les Pleurs*, *Tombeau*, and *Le Retour* by Sainte Colombe are paradigmatic cases of the expression of affects. Moreover, *quarrillon* (metric sign 2) means "carillon"—in this case the traditional four-bell pattern—not some kind of "pompe funebre," as the recording might suggest. Such affects, however, are nowhere made as manifest as they should be in the present recording.

As for "their tears rolled slowly down" I very much doubt that it was the intention of the composer to move the players as well. The moment the player is "moved" during his playing he gets drowned. The truly musical attitude—and this is what makes performing so

difficult—is to know of the emotions and handle them with a cool and detached spirit.