



THE NEW YORKER

OLDIES DEPT.
SONIC TRUTH



September 2, 2002 — Robert Sullivan

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Another good thing about New York is that an ancient-music musician looking for an ancient room in which to play his or her original ancient instrument might not have to leave town. An ancient-music musician can find a fairly ancient room—and, in this case, “ancient” is defined as “a lot older than the United States of America”—in the Turtle Bay section of Manhattan.

This news was a relief to Christine Matovich, the producer of *Parthenia*, the much-praised consort of viols, which was searching recently for an acoustically appropriate place to record a CD of seventeenth-century viol music. Matovich and her recording engineer, Mark Christensen, had looked everywhere: at St. Agnes Church, across from Grand Central Terminal, which seemed like a good candidate, until they were told that the priests there go to bed early and might not abide late-night viol-playing; and the at Grace Church, in the East Village, which is also very old-sounding, except for the sound of what runs beneath it—the not-so-old subway. But when they arrived at a reception for *Parthenia* at the East Forty-ninth Street home of the artist David Deutsch, they were immediately blown away: (1) by the room—it is twenty feet wide and fifty feet long, with two fireplaces, thick walls, and a stunning, high seventeenth-century wooden ceiling, which was imported, Latin inscriptions, stained glass, and all, from Italy—and (2) by the room’s acoustics.

“I love the sound of this room,” Matovich said, as *Parthenia* began setting up the other day.

“The room is fantastic,” Lawrence Lipnik said. Lipnik plays the tenor viol. The other members of *Parthenia* are Beverly Au, on bass viol; Rosamund Morley, on treble viol; and Lisa Terry, also on bass viol. The viol, by the way, is a six-stringed contraption that looks a little like a cross between a violin and a guitar.

Deutsch was away in the country while *Parthenia* occupied his town house, but he gave a tour of it over the phone. It was originally owned by Charlotte Hunnewell Martin, who, around 1920, bought all the houses on the block, renovated them, designed a communal garden, and sold the buildings to a group of neighbors that eventually included Maxwell Perkins, Learned Hand, Katharine Hepburn, Stephen Sondheim, Henry Luce, and E.B. White. Deutsch believes that Mrs. Martin found the wooden ceiling somewhere outside Florence.

Deutsch likes to have musicians over from time to time, and even sound engineers, who, when they hear the room, are in heaven. “Wood sort of absorbs and reflects sound in proportions that the human ear likes to hear,” Christensen said.

When the recording session was about to begin, all the windows were closed, to keep out typical modern New York sounds. This made the room very hot. The consort members sat sweating, in shorts and T-shirts, and strained to keep the gut strings of their viols in tune. Matovich fetched ice water and asked the two or three visitors who were there not to speak. The musicians rehearsed a short piece written in 1627 by Carlo Farina, who was said to be the son of a viol player from Mantua, Italy.

Gary Wedow, the chorus master of City Opera, arrived to serve as *Tonmeister*. He put on headphones and sat beside Christensen with a pencil and a Farina score. “I love the room,” Wedow said. “Farina, take one.”

A sound, a beautiful sound, filled the room like incense. At one point, Wedow stopped the musicians. “Uh, you want to do that again,” he said. They repeated three measures. “Uh, you want to do that again.”

Rosamund Morley said, “Should we wait? There’s an airplane.” When the phone rang, Matovich said, “It will ring five times.”

Finally, after two hours of playing and retuning and playing, they finished the Farina and looked over at Wedow, who gave them a thumbs-up.

“At the time this music was made, music was considered a science,” Lipnik said afterward. “And if you played the music in a room designed according to the same scientific and mathematical principles, then the building would—”

“The building would resonate appropriately,” Wedow interjected.

“There was music that was written with specific buildings in mind, like the *Duomo*. Dufay’s *Nuper*—”

“*Nuper Rosarum Flores*.”

“Yes, at least that’s the theory,” Lipnik said. He and Wedow looked up at the old Italian ceiling and smiled, and Lipnik said, “Maybe this same music was played under this very ceiling.”

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