

Parthenia In Conversation with Phong Bui

February 2006

After their usual Sunday afternoon practice, Rail Publisher Phong Bui visited the Carroll Garden studio of Rosamund Morley and Larry Lipnik, two members of Parthenia, a critically acclaimed New York-based viol consort whose ethereal, spirited and virtuoso performances of sixteenth to twenty-first century music has delighted audiences across the United States and Europe.

Phong Bui (Rail): I thought we could start with you telling *The Rail* how and when Parthenia came about as a group?

Rosamund Morley: Well, Parthenia started - before I became a member of it - with a group of musicians in Manhattan, which included Larry (Lipnik). And gradually, with people coming and going, it arrived at the quartet, with Beverly (Au) and Lisa (Terry) that we are now. We've been together in this configuration for about seven years - that's a long time for a group - yet we've been very compatible. We all do the work to get jobs, apply for grants, organize fundraising events, and so on. We're a real democracy, and we have to be because it is next to impossible for a quartet of viola da gambas to get a manager. We do it all for love of the instrument and the music, and we have to do it all if we want to play it and let other people know how great this music is!

Larry Lipnik: It's like if one wants to see Renaissance art, one can go to the Met, the Frick, or the Morgan Library. But if one wants to hear Renaissance music, it's a whole other thing. Similarly, all four of us got together as a group so that we can play the music that we love. To me, It's really a near perfect social interaction where every one participates in equal terms. We play very well together. It's an ideal teamwork.

Rail: At *The Rail* we think of ourselves in the same way. At any rate one of the interesting facts about the viol is that it has conflicting claims of origin. There are those who believe it is in the same family as the violin, because of the bowing and the fretless



Photo by: William Wegman

fifths, and there are those who think that because it's chromatically fretted though by means of movable, tied-on frets made of gut, fourth tuning and usually has six strings therefore it has all the structural characteristics of the guitar. What are your thoughts on the differences?

Morley: Well, the violin and the viola da gamba (which is also called the viol, – rhymes with smile!) families share a common ancestor, the vielle, or medieval fiddle, so they're cousins. You can see bowed instruments of all shapes and sizes in medieval paintings, manuscripts and sculptures. Sometimes they are held against the arm, upwards, and sometimes they are held downwards. But the violin family has nothing to do with the guitar, whereas the viol, like the guitar, has 6 strings, frets and its tuning in fourths is almost exactly like the guitar. In Spain in the 15th century, someone decided to put a bow to the guitar, known then as the vihuela, and so the bowed guitar, went through a dramatic transformation: the bridge got raised and curved and it was called the vihuela de arco, "arco" means bow, and eventually the viola da gamba, which means "viol of the leg". The violin was called the viola da braccio "viol of the arm". The repertoire for the violin then was mostly improvised, mostly dance music, but the viol was the bowed instrument for a huge "composed" repertoire. Of course viol players also improvised too and played for dancing. But the violin circa five hundred years ago was considered a folk instrument, whereas the viola da gamba was considered the instrument for the aristocrats and learning to play it was considered an essential part of a good education. Then in the eighteenth century, with the French Revolution, the viol basically fell out of favor because of its association with the aristocracy. Many viols have beautiful carved heads on their scrolls, and I imagine them being decapitated by the guillotine. That's partly how the violin got its ascendancy. But already a hundred years before that, the violin had claimed it's place as a louder, brighter instrument that professionals played, whereas the viola da gamba was played by both professionals and amateurs.

Rail: We know for certain that it was a favorite instrument in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which can evidently be seen in many Renaissance and Baroque paintings from Lorenzo Costa, Titian, Veronese, Rubens to Poussin, and countless others, but one of the reasons it fell out of popularity is because of its sonorous, subdued and incisive tone, which was ideal for contrapuntal music and perfect accompaniment to the voice. The other reason was, as the concert halls grew larger and less intimate, the violin with its rather loud and strident tone became the preferred instrument. I assume that you would want to retain the integrity of the acoustic, which means that Parthenia does depend a great deal on some given specifics though limited settings. Is that regarded as somewhat of a restriction to Parthenia's venues?

Morley: : Sure. It does limit where we can ideally perform. The viola da gamba has a much more intimate sound than that of the violin. It's a real chamber music instrument; it's best in a smaller resonant room, in which the music sort of plays with its own echo rather than in a big concert hall where the viol's voice can get lost and you lose the subtleties of the music. That's why so many early music concerts today are played in churches. It's more satisfying to sing in the shower than in the kitchen! The viol doesn't sound good in a black box theatre. The historical rooms had walls and ceilings made of

stone, marble, or wood and plaster so the music would bounce off them and come back to the players. And since in the music for viols everyone shares equally in the musical material, it's like a conversation, and it is important to use the resonance of a good room to have that conversation. In our music the point is not to project like a soprano on an opera stage and let everyone else accompany you. Instead we need to blend, to hear each other and respond. The violin had much more projection than the viol. It was the leader of the orchestra (which was mostly conductor-less back then) and everyone else was subservient to it.

Rail: The violin was popular especially for dance music during that turning point.

Morley: Right. Early on people would dance to just the violin by itself, not a whole ensemble. And all the French dancing masters would go about all over Europe to all the different courts and noble families to teach French dances with their little traveling violins. So, right, when the viola da gamba was for art music, the violin was for dance music.

Lipnik This was where music making went from being intimate to something that's participatory to a spectacle. With the development of concert halls and public performances, it then loses the notion of people playing together. That's what eventually gave rise to the superstar opera singers in the 17th and 18th century. So people, instead of playing with one another in their home, go out to the theatre to be entertained.

Rail: So how did it the Viola da Gamba become a central instrument of your choice?

Morley: Because it was an instrument that could only play my favorite music. I took piano lessons when I was growing up, but all the piano music that I liked to play was before 1800--even before 1750. Then once by chance as a teenager, I went to music camp in Quebec where there was someone teaching the viol - it wasn't a conscious choice, really. It was just so much fun to play... it was like using an instrument to sing along with, and I always loved to sing. And its repertoire was only renaissance and baroque music! That's one of the great attributes of the instrument, obviously.

Lipnik: Likewise I began to play both the piano and the cello from an early age, and I always knew that I wanted to be a musician. But when I turned 12 and first heard Renaissance music, I immediately fell in love with it. I identify with the music to the extent that I wish to explore every possible way of singing, playing or performing it whenever I can.

Rail: I came to appreciate the instrument through my brief and early training in classical guitar and one of my favorite composers was John Dowland, whose composition for the five viols and Lute *Lacrimae*, which Julian Bream played so brilliantly in his recording.

Morley: Exquisite.

Rail: How about Purcell's complete *Fantasias*—perfect for contrapuntal writing in the

old style, yet chromatically inventive and bold in harmony—which Parthenia had performed at St. John the Divine and was featured in a profile on PBS. It was a brilliant event.

Lipnik: Yeah, It was the year of Purcell’s death. I’m glad you were there.

Rail: I occasionally get invited to some of those wonderful events and I had always relished my time there. In addition I like many others have great admiration for Dean Morton’s broad and generous spirit, which unfailingly got expressed by way of his deep love for art and music. I also am in debt to him for having baptized my godson, Theo, three years ago.

Morley: What a great man. It’s sad that he’s not there anymore.

Rail: At any rate when did the viol re-emerge again?

Lipnik: It was in the 1960’s and 70’s which corresponds with the early music revival on LP, in particular with British and European rock groups such as Span and Malicorne, that incorporated and popularized traditional music elements in Rock and Roll as well as Pop, music such as eventually New Age (think Gregorian chant with a Techno beat!). The 60s could be looked at like a mini Renaissance, where experimentation in musical instruments and compositions was prized.

Morley: In the 60’s, composers were looking for new sounds – electronic music and so on – like Stockhausen’s new music studio in Cologne, or Cage using “found sound”. Some composers like Mauricio Kagel looked for new sounds by using early instruments like recorders, viols and harpsichords, which were being revived by people with an interest in historical music in order to play pieces that had been mostly unheard for hundreds of years. Aspects of some new music are similar to Medieval and early Renaissance music in that mathematical structures are being used as the basis for composing, like 14th century isorhythmic motets where a short repeating rhythm is applied to a melody regardless of the melody’s natural phrase structure—mathematical things like that. Or the idea of which intervals you could use and which you had to refrain from, like Schoenberg’s tone rows where pitches have to appear in a certain order. Maybe composers then began to look at some of the earlier music, and therefore they started to listen to some of the earlier instruments. And there was this kind of affinity between what was really new and what was really old, because both were pushed aside by the musical establishment.

Rail: Do the four of you alternate in your position between tenor, treble and bass?

Morley: Yes, all sizes, the treble viol, the tenor viol and the bass viol, roughly corresponding to violin, viola and cello in the violin family, are played downward, so the bow technique is more or less the same on all of them. It’s the bow that is your voice, not your fingering hand. It’s a bit like a violin player who will often play the viola too since the bow use is the same, its just the size that changes, but that same violinist would never

play the cello because the bow technique is completely different. So we tend to be in the same configuration – I'm on the treble, Larry's the tenor, Beverly and Lisa are the basses. But since the music calls for all different combinations, for example, some music calls for four bass viols, so we all play all sizes and choose according to the specific ranges of the pieces.

Rail: Is that where the idea of a democracy comes from? Not that we really are living in an age where democracy actually exists.

Morley: (Laughs). I guess so, I hadn't thought of it that way. We sometimes take turns playing the leader's spot so to speak, and we don't just play quartets. Sometimes we play duos and trios, as well. We mix things up in concerts.

Rail: I noticed that each of you play in other ensembles. Larry, for instance, is a founding member of the vocal ensemble LionHeart, Beverly, part of a duo, Spuyten Duyvil, and Lisa is a member of Artek while both of you are with Waverly Consort. Could you tell us more about that?

Lipnik: Similar to what we do as members of Parthenia, Lionheart consists of singers who all share this notion of working together in equilibrium. We all sing in unison like Gregorian chants, as well as complex polyphony, which means there's no hierarchy in our structure. I mean we've created this deep friendship over time through making music; a kind of socializing through musical communication. It's so disturbing to see the drastic reduction of music being taught in school today. The notion of hand-eye coordination being substituted by video games is just incomprehensible.

Rail: How about your collaboration with the artist William Wegman, Larry?

Lipnik: Well, for about 10 years now Bill (Wegman) and I have work together on numerous children's videos projects where I have done music supervising. He is a big fan of early music and would regularly come concerts when he can. We found that we both have similar sensibilities when it comes to blending sound and image. We have also been fascinated by the feel of music from diverse and electric sources including vintage, industrial films from the 1940s and 50s, and have incorporated them with new images which somehow it always managed to come together in a very serendipitous way. We've done some cool videos for Sesame Street and one, I'm particular found of, *The Little Jack Horner* from the Mother Goose nursery rhythm. Because of the small budget- it was commissioned by the Children's Television Workshop- I had to maximize all of my creative roles: I layered musical tracks of myself playing multiple recorders, viols and harpsichord. It was a lot of fun.

Morley: And we all play with as many groups as we do, because you have to make a living. But this is a group we do for love, because we sure aren't doing it for money! Yeah, we just love this repertoire, and if there aren't four viola da gamba players who want to do it, you don't ever hear this repertoire.

Rail: The guitar had been initially popularized by Segovia in the '20s and '30s long before the invention of the electric guitar, was there an equivalent player of the Viola da Gamba that you can think of since Saint Columbe?

Morley: Jordie Savall, definitely. He has done a huge service to the instrument in bringing it to a much wider audience than anybody else had. He loves the music, and he's made sure that it's going to exist.

Lipnik: Savall's mission in life is to present the music that he loves in a way that general audiences today can understand. So if he does something that seems a little bit bigger than life when he interprets Renaissance music, say he makes the choir bigger or he adds more musicians than might have originally been in a particular ensemble, it's his way of helping to bridge this chasm between the modern audience that has everything been so amplified and so overwhelming to imagining what it would have been. You have to make it a little bit bigger than life to show the wonder that people might have felt in hearing something for the very first time. When you experience something for the first time, it gets a little bit magnified in your mind. Furthermore, I think he's incredibly perceptive, very intuitive about the music. A side from being a great virtuoso, he's also a really good businessman. He started his own record company. So he's been able to have more artistic control. He said something once that I thought was so profound. We had gone out to a Mexican restaurant in Texas many years ago. There was a mariachi band and they came over. They were pretty virtuosic group and they played this really fast stuff. So after they played, they asked if we had a request and Jordi said, "Could you play something really slow?" They were taken aback. Don't you want something happy? He said no. So they said ok, and they started to play. Then, he looks over at me, and he smiles and says, "Now when they play something slow, they will make it so much more expressive. They'll put so much more of their artistry into it." It was the most beautiful thing. You could look at the expressions on their faces. They had so much more invested in it than the really fast, more virtuosic stuff. They were creating emotion.

Rail: That's the big difference: to express to some one rather than to entertain them. So the idea is to bring variety to the program without compromising the integrity of your repertoire: whether performing music of a contemporary composer, or playing music from the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth century.

Morley: Yes, because there's tons of music that is extremely beautiful and that not many people can or would play or dig out of libraries. There are a lot of people who are actually doing transcriptions of music from libraries around the world, but, admittedly, some of the music that we do was considered pretty conservative during its time. So many musicologists are examining the new trends of the past, not the conservative ones. That doesn't mean it still wasn't very beautiful music that can serve an emotional purpose today. For example, I think about how beautiful John Dowland's music was—I mean, he was writing at a time in England when there was a kind of cult of the melancholy and his melancholic music soothes me so much. We have lots of reasons to feel rather melancholy these days.

Rail: During the Elizabethan period.

Morley: Exactly. Dowland was a famous melancholic, but really part of his zeitgeist. Also the viola da gamba was kind of associated with that melancholy attitude, it was often called for in laments. I think that there's a place today for melancholy. I remember that wonderful essay that David Levy Strauss wrote about whether art is allopathic or homeopathic. I had never really thought of art that way, but in terms of viola da gamba consort music, I realized that for me, I need homeopathic therapy! If I'm feeling a little melancholic, I need melancholic music to sooth me. Vigorous and bright music doesn't pull me out of a funk, but music like Dowland's or Parthenia's consort music can.

Rail: when I was a child, my grandmother would bring me to the temple, where the shape of the gong always fixated me, especially the middle part where it protrudes. I said to her: "that looks like my mother's breast." and you know what she answered." That's because music nurtures the soul."

Morley: That's how we all feel about music. Absolutely.

Rail: So what's in Parthenia's calendar for this season?

Lipnik: This month, we're going to premiere a piece by Nick Patterson called Chorale Labyrinth He's taken an Easter chorale, which is a hymn tune, and he has set it in the midst of the texture of the viol's sound, and the chorale keeps on moving around all the parts. This a very busy spring for Parthenia. We've just returned from a week of performances in Chicago in collaboration with The Newbery Consort, a marvelous early music ensemble in residence at the Newbery Library, more performances in NY including our first time collaboration with the recorder ensemble, New Amsterdam Trio, including the premiere of a New York based on a early chorale tune by Nick Patterson, and in the spring we'll release our new CD featuring the music of Will Ayton, and the radiant voice of mezzo-soprano Alexandra Montano.

For more information and schedule of Parthenia, their website is: www.parthenia.org