Notes on the program
By Paul O'Dette

Portrait miniature of Elizabeth I playing the lute by Nicholas Hilliard

"The Queen came there too, recognised and summoned me. She spoke a long while with me, and invited me to leave my boat and take a seat in the Treasurer's Barge. She then had her boat laid alongside and played the lute." Baron Breuner (June 1559)

History has a habit of briefly placing a large number of extraordinarily talented artists from the same discipline in the same place at the same time, only to see this explosion of creativity dissipate or move to another location. Italian Renaissance architects and painters, 15th-century Flemish composers, Elizabethan poets, 17th-century Dutch painters and 17th-century Cremonese violin makers all come to mind.

The period between 1580 and 1620 is often referred to as the "Golden Age of English Lute Music," not only for the breathtaking scope of the repertoire (nearly 2,000 lute pieces survive from this era, more than double the combined repertoire of madrigals and keyboard music), but also for the incomparable quality of the music produced. In a sonnet published in Francis Pilkington's *Second Set of madrigals* (1624), William Webb characterized the stature of these English masters as follows: "...the Matchlesse Excellencies of Bird, Bull, Dowland, Morley and the rest of our rare Artists, (who now dim the lights of other lands)...."

Daniel Bacheler, from an engraving by Thomas Lant of the funeral procession of Sir Philip Sidney in 1586

Among the many brilliant musicians of the Golden Age, none shines brighter, yet is more neglected than **DANIEL BACHELER** *(baptized Aston Clinton, Buckinghamshire, March 16, 1572; buried Lee, Kent, January 29, 1619).* Some of Bacheler's music is familiar to lutenists and musicologists, but the lack of a modern edition of his works and their extraordinary technical demands have conspired to keep his genius from reaching a wider audience. More than 50 lute solos by Bacheler survive, mostly written between 1590 and 1619. His music is, for the most part, based on the standard Elizabethan dance forms, primarily the pavan, galliard and almaine, though he also composed preludes, courantes, variation sets and one fantasia.

Bacheler's style is harmonically conservative—there is no chromaticism or use of extraordinary dissonances—but his ornamentation is daring, and his use of the instrument is groundbreaking. Whereas Dowland's ornamentation consists primarily of lyrical stepwise passages, Bacheler pioneered a more flamboyant, arpeggiated style of embellishment that is related to the French *style brisé* but used in a more virtuosic manner. Another distinctive feature of Bacheler's music is his use of closely voiced chords in the upper register to contrast with rich sonorous chords in the lower strings. He punctuates this with unusual chord voicings involving numerous unisons and doubled thirds, creating unique colors and textures on the lute.

Bacheler's pavans were justly popular during his lifetime, each appearing in numerous manuscript copies. The beautifully wrought counterpoint of the unornamented strains contrasts sharply with the rhythmically active extravagance of Bacheler's ornamental outbursts, keeping the music more varied and unpredictable than the classically unified pavans of John Dowland. That his galliards appear with much less frequency in the original sources is surprising, since they combine the lyricism and rhythmic playfulness of Dowland with Bacheler's trademark virtuoso passagework. That Bacheler improvised his ornamentation is confirmed by the fact that his embellished strains occasionally contain more beats than the plain version. Whether these anomalies are to be "corrected" by modern performers or left in their asymmetrical glory is a question for each individual performer to decide.

Bacheler's most famous work is his outstanding set of variations on ***Mounsieur's Almaine*** *(composed in 1610; 6 minutes)*. This tune, which was set by many Elizabethan composers including Dowland, Morley and Byrd, is particularly well suited to a virtuoso treatment. The simple harmonic structure provides the perfect foil for dazzling runs, arpeggios, *groppi*, trills and other ornaments. Bacheler's trademark arpeggio technique is

trumped here by a scintillating tremolo variation culminating in a final cadential flourish of unbridled exuberance. Though many modern transcriptions of this piece delete some of the middle variations, it is the continuous, nervous energy of this setting that is its greatest strength.

Bacheler's tragic death at the age of 46 robbed England of one or her finest lutenist/composers, a man John Dowland's son Robert, called "the right perfect Musition."

Known to his contemporaries as "The English Orpheus," **JOHN DOWLAND** *(born London (?), 1563; buried London, February 20, 1626)* was the most celebrated lutenist of the time and one of England's greatest composers. His music was extraordinarily popular throughout Europe and was published in more cities than the music of any other composer of the time. The famous *Lachrimae Pavin* survives in over 100 different versions and functioned as the theme for hundreds of pavans by other composers. Nevertheless, Dowland's career was filled with shattered dreams and ambitions, resulting in his adoption of the motto *Semper Dowland semper dolens* ("Always Dowland, always sorrowing"). The intense melancholy that pervades much of his music is a personal expression of the bitterness he felt due being passed over for a royal appointment and the lack of respect shown him by younger players.

At the same time, the modern preoccupation with the melancholy quality of Dowland's music creates a one-sided impression of a multi-faceted personality. Though his doleful works are justly famous, Dowland's lively pieces, particularly his galliards and almaines, evoke a humor and wit unmatched by any of his contemporaries. Tonight's program includes some of his least frequently performed pieces alongside some of his most famous works.

Dowland's life unfolded as a colorful series of restless moves and wanderings. He had converted to Catholicism during his late teens, while serving the English ambassador in Paris, and he contended to the end of his life that this conversion was the cause of his exclusion from Queen Elizabeth's court; but it seems possible that his volatile temperament and outspokenness may have played an equal role. After his six-year sojourn in France and his return to England in 1586, he studied and worked in his native country until 1595. Upon being passed over in the appointment to a vacancy in the Queen's court, he received a permit to travel abroad for the express purpose of meeting the famed Italian composer Luca Marenzio in Rome. However, he returned to England in 1596 before reaching his destination, after stumbling upon conspiracies against Elizabeth in Florence.

In 1598, Dowland accepted a post at the court of King Christian IV of Denmark, a position he held for eight years. A recently discovered letter indicates Dowland may have been operating as a spy during his years in Denmark, a fairly common sideline for musicians at this time! In 1612, in the decline of his career, he was granted a position at the court of Elizabeth's successor, James I, and he held this post until his death in 1626.

More than any of his lutenist contemporaries, Dowland made use of all of the current instrumental forms, including fantasias, pavins, galliards, almaines, jigs, toys and variations on ballad tunes. Dowland's fantasias seem to have been inspired by the keyboard and viol fantasias of the time rather than by the continental lute fantasia that provided the model of most other English lute fantasias. His use of proportions, cantus firmus, chromaticism and antiphonal effects allow the lute to sound like a miniature consort without requiring the outrageous left-hand contortions of much continental lute music. Indeed, it is Dowland's ability to expand the scope of lute music while maintaining a natural, idiomatic approach to the instrument that makes his music so satisfying for player and listener alike. No other lutenist was able to get so much out of the instrument so efficiently.

Farewell (6 minutes) is Dowland's contrapuntal masterpiece. The eerie ascending chromatic lines and gripping dissonances moved Thomas Weelkes to borrow the final section for his madrigal, *Cease sorrows now,* set to the text, "I'll sing my faint farewell."

For the lute, these words turned out to be all too prophetic. The efforts of Dowland and Bacheler to stretch the technical limits of lute playing may have precipitated the decline of their instrument. In the 17th century, amateurs complained about the extreme difficulty of playing the lute and increasingly, they turned their attention

to the guitar, which had fewer strings and was technically less demanding. Just 50 years after Dowland's death, the lute was considered a "neglected and abused instrument." Thomas Mace's words of encouragement to the lute in 1676 could not be any more appropriate today: "Chear up, Brave Soul! And know that some Yet Living, who for Thee will take such Care, (there are) That Thou shalt be Restor'd Thy former Glory, And be Eterniz'd to Eternal Story."