



BAROQUE PRACTICE

Viola da Gamba for Children

by Julie Elhard

In February of 2007 I launched a viola da gamba program for children at the Saint Paul Conservatory of Music with the support and encouragement of director Clea Galhano, who is herself a professional recorder player. Six months prior to that I began teaching my son Bryan, at the age of 6, to play the viol, which required that I create a repertoire for him. Using pieces I used teaching at numerous workshops, I arranged a Suzuki-style book and began exploring how to teach children. Having done some training in the Suzuki cello method, I had an idea of a starting point.

In 2007 the Saint Paul Conservatory offered its first class for children to play the viol. We had a 5 1/2 year old and two 6-year-old students enrolled at that time. Since then we have grown to five students ranging from 6 to 13 years of age. Students play solo pieces and simple arrangements of early music tunes for 3 or 4 voices. The older and more experienced players learn a simple harmony part, which allows us to make consort music together.

All my students learn the tunes by ear first, listening to a CD (which I have recorded with lute accompaniment), and start note reading as a secondary skill. This summer I will record Book 2, also with lute, and am making plans for Books 3 and 4 using two viols or harpsichord as we move into the Baroque repertoire. Instruments have been purchased with generous donations and are available for a small rental fee.

This past July the Saint Paul Conservatory held a two-week summer day camp for children and I was delighted to offer a “try out the viol” class to four interested grade school age students. The

kids, ages 6 to 10, were able to explore how the viol worked and learn a couple simple tunes which they performed for the other camp participants, as well as their parents.

We are hopeful that this year brings more new players to the viol as we expand our early music program to include Suzuki recorder, as well as traditional recorder and Baroque ensembles, a Renaissance wind band and even Baroque dance. We’d also like to thank Gerrald Hoekstra from St. Olaf College for the generous donation of 3 viols to the Conservatory, and to Carleton College and the College of St. Catherine for the loan of their dormant instruments. It’s largely due to their support that we are able to offer these classes for learning the viol. If anyone would like to donate more viols to the school, students would be most appreciative. We don’t know how long the colleges will allow us the use of their viols.

In February of 2009 the Saint Paul Conservatory of Music will hold its second annual Early Music Day in conjunction with The Schubert Club featuring the Flanders Recorder Quartet and a mini Baroque Opera project. Let’s spread the word that the viol is not just an obscure, ancient instrument, but a viable and available option for making beautiful chamber music. Even the smallest voice may have the greatest impact.

Julie Elhard is a viola da gamba player from St. Paul who teaches at the Saint Paul Conservatory of Music. She performs nationwide, as well as locally with ensembles including the Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Bach Society and Rose Ensemble. †