Baroque Practice

Renaissance Dance Music for String Ensembles

by Ginna Watson

School orchestra directors looking for Renaissance dance music face a shortage of appropriate material. This is unfortunate, because the genre is perfect for young string players: the music features sprightly melodies, catchy rhythms, symmetrical forms, and string-friendly tonalities with open strings. The dances are short and simple, originally composed as popular entertainment for the nobility in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. Despite these accessible qualities, very few of the hundreds of surviving Renaissance-era dances have been arranged and edited for beginning and intermediate string players.

This scarcity may be due to the fact that many of these dances have only recently been transcribed from manuscripts into modern notation. The advent of computer notation programs and digital formatting has greatly accelerated this process, but there is a time lag between the transcription of pieces and the creation of modern editions. In addition, only a fraction of extant dances have been arranged for string orchestras.

Many of these arrangements are not suitable for beginning and intermediate string players, which further contributes to the scarcity of music for school orchestras. In the performance practice of the Renaissance era, players used open strings to achieve a natural ring on their gut-strung instruments; the primary expression came from the bow. Because of this emphasis on the sound produced by the bow, the left-hand technique was often easier so the players could concentrate on a unified bowing style. The melodies rarely extended above first position, and moved primarily by scale degrees and arpeggios.

In modern performance practice, by contrast, the primary emphasis is on left-hand virtuosity. Contemporary music editors of Renaissance music often make the music challenging for left-hand technique by using keys with more sharps and flats and by adding ornaments to the melody. They also create accompaniments that are rhythmically complex and contrast with the melody. These adaptations can be difficult for young string players to play.

In addition to their technical difficulty, contemporary arrangements of Renaissance dances often obscure the melody and form of the dance tunes. Some arrangements include multiple statements of a tune, switching the melody between various parts and modulating to several different keys in the course of the piece. These multi-page versions of short AB-form dances can make it difficult for students to grasp the tunes; and slogging through such arrangements can be boring or frustrating to them.

In contrast to these contemporary arrangements, Renaissance dance tunes in their original form are much simpler: they state the AB form of the tune plainly, with the other parts layered in homorhythmic textures. These tunes were originally arranged for groups of similar instruments, such as the recorder or viola da gamba (a predecessor of the cello), so creating short arrangements where all parts supported and reinforced the tune created a unified sound.

That same unified sound can be created today in string ensembles by returning to the historical concept of Renaissance dance music: short, simple versions of a tune played in a key such as D or G major with plenty of open strings; the melody placed in a single part with no ornamentation; and homophonic rhythm in all parts with similar bow strokes.

Some orchestra directors may argue that simple arrangements like these are too easy for any but the most beginning players; ironically, though, a basic format allows room for students to challenge themselves by achieving a good tone, unified bowing style, and communicative playing.

Giving students pieces with open-string tonalities such as G, D, A, and C helps them develop a good tone: it allows them to concentrate on the sound they want by unifying their bow strokes—often straight-forward down and up detaché bows with few slurs. This emphasis on bowing is true to Renaissance period performance practice. The use of keys with open strings also provides plenty of opportunities for students to check their intonation by using ringing open strings as a reference.

With simple homorhythmic parts, all students play similar rhythms at the same time; this makes it much easier for them to watch and listen to each other. Orchestra directors can try having students play without a conductor, which is empowering and makes them feel as if it's "their" music. Taking ownership often makes students more conscientious about practicing and playing well.

Improvising and ornamenting notes is a characteristic feature of Renaissance music. However, when contemporary editors add their own complex notated ornaments such as trills, grace notes, or scale passages to the simple melodies of Renaissance dances, the ornaments often obscure the melody; and too often they are not idiomatic to string technique. Most importantly, these editorial additions leave no room for students to ornament the melodies themselves. Teaching students to improvise can provide them with a sense of accomplishment and encourage creativity. Renaissance-style ornaments are called divisions, in which melodic intervals are "divided" up into smaller filler notes. By showing students how to fill in an arpeggio with scale tones, teachers can subtly teach them about chord tones and harmonic progressions while the students are learning to come up with their own divisions.

A good string ensemble arrangement of Renaissance dance tunes should include the previously discussed features of simplicity, brevity, open-key tonalities, single-line melodies and homophonic rhythms. It should be set cleanly, with large notes and plenty of margin space for ease of reading. Since most tunes are quite short, all parts could be included in a score format. Although ini-

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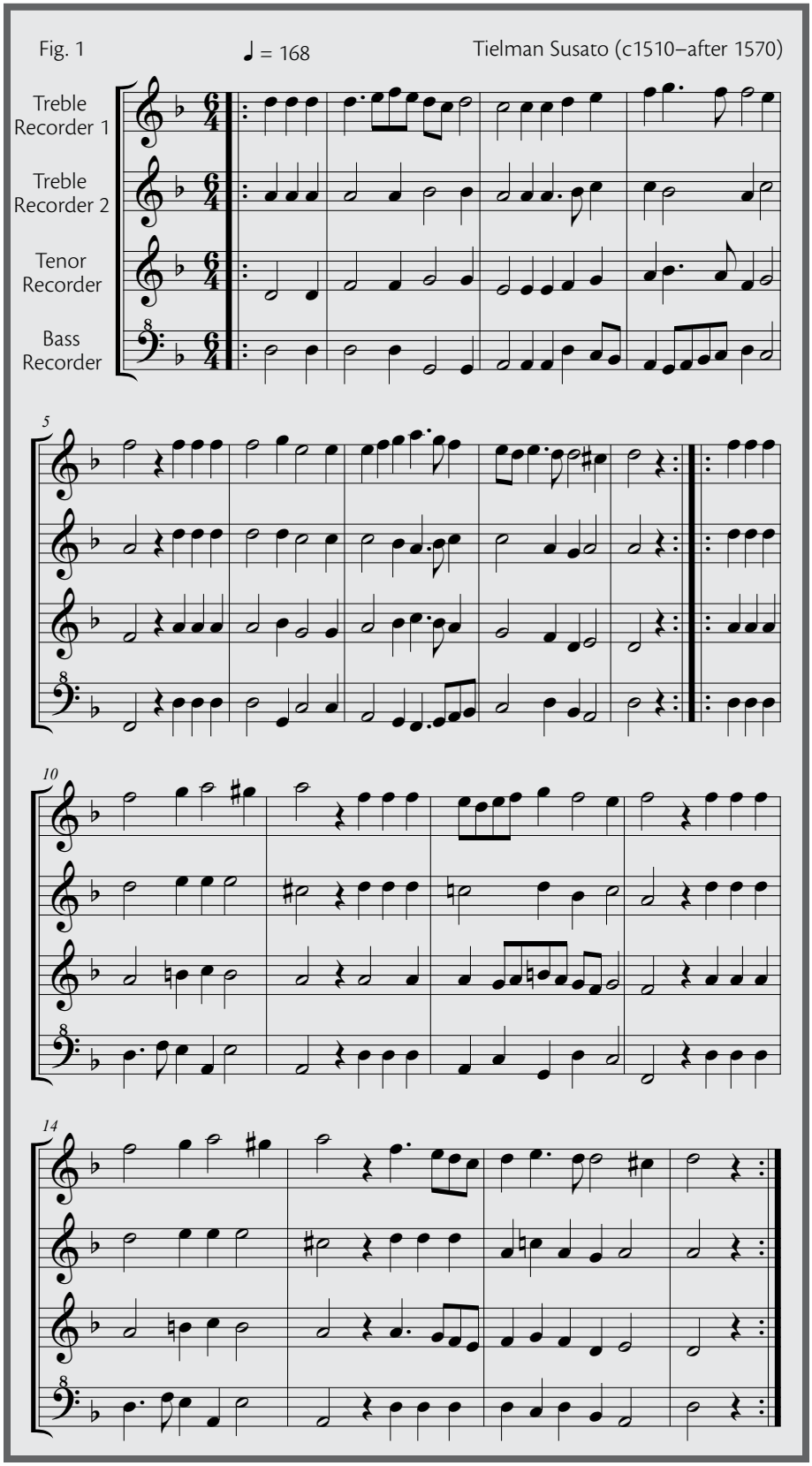
tially more difficult for students, it's worth teaching them to read from simple scores: they can see how all the parts line up, which will help them maintain the pulse and realize how their part fits into the whole.

Nowadays, string orchestra students aren't satisfied with having the first violins play the melody all the time: they want their share of the melody too, and rightly so. Good editions of Renaissance dance music for strings should include multiple parts, with each instrument given both the melody for the entire piece and a harmony line. This allows music directors to choose how they want their ensemble to perform the piece. Since most dances are short tunes with a simple AB or ABA form, ensembles can play the entire piece up to four or five times if desired, cycling through the melody played by violins, violas, cellos and basses. This kind of arrangement, where each instrument has both a melody and an accompaniment part for the entire tune, is simpler for students than an arrangement where the melody is distributed throughout the various instrumental lines; with the latter, students are often unsure of what type of material they're playing, and the form is muddied as a result.

Now for the big question: where can string orchestra directors find good editions of Renaissance dance music? As previously noted, good editions are hard to find. A number of tunes arranged for four or five parts are available online for free on IMSLP (International Score Library Project). One example is a set of dances by the sixteenth-century composer Susato, neatly typeset (Fig. 1 previous page). However, many IMSLP scores are in original notation, too difficult for students (and teachers!) to read. In addition, most are scored for recorder ensembles, where the third line from the top is written in octave treble clef and played an octave lower than written. Student string players aren't accustomed to playing in this clef, since violists, who often play the third line in ensembles, usually read alto clef. Enterprising teachers could scan and import IMSLP music files into Finale and convert the third line to alto clef for violists or regular treble clef for a third violin part; they could also rewrite the third line themselves.

Sheet music distributors such as J.W. Pepper and Shar Music also carry a few titles that work well for beginning or intermediate string orchestra; but directors will need to look at the music to make sure it fits the playing level of their ensembles. For violin-only ensembles, the collection titled *The Early Music Fiddler* by Edward Huws Jones (published by Boosey & Hawkes) contains fairly unadorned versions of popular medieval and Renaissance tunes, with both a melody part and an easy accompaniment that can be played by beginning violinists.

St. Paul-based early music specialist Julie Elhard is currently publishing a collection of dance tunes for string ensembles. Titled the *Renaissance String Band Book*, the collection will be available in January 2016 from her website, http://julieelhard.com/. It can also be purchased online from the



music distributor Honeysuckle Music. The tunes include both a melody and harmony part for each instrument; interchangeable third violin and viola parts are included as well. Elhard's arrangements, one of which is shown above (Fig. 2), are clearly presented and the form is easy to comprehend. Most of the tunes are in the string-friendly keys of D, G, and C. The melodies are unadorned, allowing room for students to create (and notate) divisions; and the accompaniments have similar rhythmic notation to the melodies.

Hopefully, more good editions of Renaissance dance music such as these will become available in the near future, providing student string ensembles greater access to this very approachable genre of music.

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Fig. 2