ON PLAYING THE FANTASIA

by

John Griffiths

The fantasia was the pinnacle of renaissance instrumental music.
It was the goal towards which 16th century instrumentalists
directed their strongest creative energies, and it remains the
genre in which they most deftly reveal their musical skills:
their ability to craft elegant polyphony and to exercise dominion
over the architectural dimension of musical form. Not only is
the supremacy of the fantasia clear from the repertory itself,
but it is also made explicit in numerous theoretical treatises
designed to aid the instrumentalist devise his own fantasias.
To modern performers of renaissance music, the fantasia — and
synonymous forms such as the ricercar and tiento — offer one
of the greatest challenges in musical interpretation and perfor-
mance.[1] This essay is an introduction to the way 16th century
composers thought about fantasias and their composition, and
the processes involved in bringing these works back to life today.
It considers how to approach reconstructing the delicacy and
marvel of pre-fugal instrumental polyphony.

The passion for the fantasia was principally a southern
affair. Most of the impetus came from the Italians and Spaniards,
although the later 16th century contributions of English and
Netherlandish composers number among some of the most outstanding.
A large repertory of works survives for lute and other plucked
instruments that enjoyed pre-eminence at the time, and there
are also substantial contributions for keyboard instruments and
ensembles, especially viols. The fantasia developed from an impro-
visatory tradition where composer and performer were invariably
one and the same person. The development of satisfactory instru-
mental notation systems and the invention of music printing early
in the 16th century allowed for much wider dissemination of music
than ever before. Fantasias passed from being the exclusive
domain of their creators into the repertories of other instru-
mentalists, professionals and amateurs, spread throughout Europe.
The fantasia's original characteristic of being spontaneously
improvised music was transformed. Alongside this change of role

went a stylistic development of the music itself. Through the 16th century composers came to incorporate more of the contrapuntal techniques assimilated from vocal composition into the fantasia so that, by the latter part of the century, works were written that bore virtually no external connection to the highly idiomatic textures typical of works composed fifty or sixty years earlier. Flexibility of style was preserved, yet many basic notions remained constant, almost universal. By selective study, a musician today can come to a basic level of understanding that can be applied to works of seemingly diverse appearance. While the examples cited in this article are largely drawn from my work on the Spanish vihuela repertory, they illustrate concepts that are equally applicable to fantasias of any origin.

Performing fantasias involves a mental orientation geared to re-enacting the creation of a work. The performer is required, in essence, to put himself back into the composer's shoes and imbue his fantasia with the sense of urgency pertaining to those initial creative moments. This requires the assimilation of a general layer of background knowledge of what fantasia is, and the way composers acquired their compositional craft. The second phase is the intelligent analysis of each work that one might wish to play. The most rewarding performances of fantasias are those where the performer has first dissected the work, recognised the composer's essential materials, and understood how these have been organised. Such performances show a vision of the whole work and an understanding of its purpose and not merely the performer's ability to manipulate intricate musical materials. Only after subjecting the music to rigorous analysis is one able to fit the pieces back together again and perform with the comprehension and commitment that enables the work to regain its lifeforce.

There is a conspicuous absence in 16th century theoretical writings of descriptions of the fantasia. While a treatise such as Sancta Maria's **Arte de tañer fantasia** (Valladolid, 1565) literally devotes over 400 pages to "the art of playing fantasia" it avoids discussion of the nature of the fantasia itself. It provides instead extremely detailed instruction on how to compose counterpoint and make imitations for use in fantasias, without any explanation of how these are expanded and linked to form

complete works. Such notions, I assume, were broadly understood and formed part of the common knowledge of musicians of the time. The adbsence of theoretical formulations is perhaps also symptomatic of the great variety of precedures in practice, and the fact that theorists apparently did not encroach upon the instrumental composer's latitude to develop a markedly idiosyncratic style.

In the same spirit, I prefer to use the loose designation 'instrumental motet' to describe the fantasia rather than any more complex definition. Apart from those highly improvisatory works of the early 16th century, the fantasia uses the constructive principles of 16th century vocal polyphony as a point of departure, modifying them according to the specifically instrumental context. Techniques such as imitation are therefore predominant, even though the music was designed to be played rather than sung. Different means are used to create the same effect within the limits of instrumental idiom. In motet or madrigal writing, for example, a musical sentence was frequently constructed from an imitative theme successively introduced in each voice, and prolonged by a free extension of a full-voiced texture until the cadence that signified its conclusion. An analagous passage in a fantasia might typically be based on the same type of imitative procedure, but the prolongation might use more appropriate instrumental devices such as sequential passage work and a reduced number of voices. In comparison, the initial concept of the music is the same: in this instance both the vocal and instrumental composer introduce a theme imitatively and each then employs the most effective devices to increase dynamic intensity towards a cadential goal.

The most obvious difference between the motet and the fantasia is the absence of a text in the latter. To the vocal composer, the text provided unity for the whole work. It guided the overall dramatic shape that the work would take, the position of points of climax, and many of the moods that were to be portrayed. In the fantasia the text had to be replaced by a more abstract concept. The same rhetorically-derived shapes were emulated, but it was the musical abstraction created by the absence of text that gave the fantasia much of its special 'fantasy.' The vocal composer of the 16th century broke up his

text into lines or phrases and constructed his music accordingly. Each line of poetry was set to new music and sectional divisions were made on the basis of both the structure and meaning of the text. In the same way, fantasia composers constructed their music in discrete episodes, the episodes were fused together into longer periods that made some logical sense, and the whole work consisted of two or more such periods. Fantasias thus tend to be cumulative structures made from loosely associative elements that, in combination, outline the same broad shapes that were achieved in vocal composition. Determining these broad shapes and attributing some equivalent of textual meaning is the challenge of the fantasia.

This theory of form, based on analogy with vocal music, can be confirmed by analysis of fantasias, but it is also made more clear by a consideration of the circumstances in which instrumentalists worked. They were largely self-taught composers who acquired their knowledge by experience rather than through formal study. Making instrumental transcriptions of vocal works was their closest contact with the best compositions of their age. These intabulations, designated as such because of the process of transferring them from mensural notation to tablature, make up the largest proportion of the 16th century instrumental repertory. In the vihuela repertory for example, intabulations account for 58% of all existing music, whereas fantasias form the largest group of original music but only account for 31% of the total repertory. The Spanish theorist Bermudo counselled vihuelists on learning to play or invent fantasias. He urged them to begin by intabulating music in two voices, then in three and four voices, beginning first with simple homophonic music such as villancicos by Vazquez, then counterpoint by Morales, Josquin and Gombert. Bermudo concludes with the comment that "players [of the vihuela] err greatly when, commencing to play, they wish to start with their fantasia. Even if they might know counterpoint (even if as good as the above-mentioned musicians) they should not play fantasia too soon, so as not to take on bad style [mal ayre]."[2]

The concept of "playing fantasia" as Bermudo called it is derived from the idea of creating original music from one's own inspiration. Among many 16th century musicians who echo the same

sentiment is the vihuelist Luis Milan who says that each work in his El Maestro (Valencia, 1536) "is entitled fantasia, in the sense that it emanates solely from the fantasy and industry of the author who created it."[3] In the same prefatory remarks he also introduces the improvisatory conception of his music with the declaration that his works were conceived on the vihuela and then written down. This reaffirms the essentially instrumental aspect of the fantasia, to which its grounding in vocal music is purely preparatory. It brings into consideration the role of improvisation in the fantasia. The earliest lute fantasias issued by Petrucci in Venice during the first decade of the 16th century show only a small degree of recourse to learned vocal procedures. They demonstrate a higher proportion of improvisatory instrumental writing, in the form of fast passage work, simple homophony and only occasional use of imitation. It is from the mid 1530s that a marked style change occurs and sets a trend that would become the stylistic mainstream for the remainder of the century.

Right

fol. A6[v] from Milan's
El Maestro (Valencia,
1536).

The early improvisatory ricercars such as those in Spinacino's **Intabolatura de lauto** of 1507 are freely composed, or are elaborations of chansons, such as **De toutes bien playne**, that were popular in Italy at the time.[4] Both types present the same interpretive problems. The works are basically constructed from cadentially-defined units. A keen ear is readily able to perceive the cadences that mark off one phrase from another, even if the voice-leading is at times a little unusual. The simple textures facilitate the shaping of the predominant melodic part. Imitation usually occurs in sequential motives between the two voices of the texture and again is readily identifiable. The most difficult aspect is to give shape to an entire work and not merely to proceed under the control of the everpresent motor rhythm. As a general rule, one can avoid this by relaxing dynamic levels and brightness of articulation immediately after cadences and increasing the rhythmic insistency towards subsequent cadences. Changes in register offer sufficient scope for timbral variety in what appear to be continuously improvised works. The greatest difficulty is deciding which of the possible interpretations is the right one, the one that will hopefully come closest to the composer's original image of the piece. In the case of these ricercars, comparative analysis of many works has not revealed a clear structural model. The most satisfactory solution appears to be for the performer to allow his imagination to run free and mould the independent episodes into what he believes to be the most artistically satisfying whole.

The implicit desire for instrumentalists to absorb polyphonic vocal technique did not extinguish their love of improvisatory idiomatic gesture. It became part of a tighter ordering of materials according to more rational architectonic principles. In fantasias dating from the second third of the 16th century, it is not possible to determine the degree to which this was a conscious or unconscious process but several writers have demonstrated an uncanny level of symmetry in many works. Many works, for example, have their principle division into episodes occuring at precisely the midpoint of the work. Certainly later 16th century fantasias reveal a higher degree of planning and are more remote from the older practice of spontaneous improvisation. They demonstrate polyphonic precision of the kind that

could only have been achieved through composition on paper, without instrument in hand. Fantasias from the mid 1530s onwards therefore require much more careful analysis in preparing them for performance.

In the fantasias of Luis Milan, whose music stands half-way between the older improvisatory practice and the later architectonic approach, their is clear evidence of a broad organisational principle. His book of vihuela music **El Maestro** is organised with the student in mind and proceeds with forty fantasias of increasing difficulty of technique and structure.[5] It is therefore a valuable anthology for today's vihuelist or lutenist. Even though Milan's textures are far away from vocal style, the fantasias emulate many characteristic formal features of vocal works. Irrespective of whether they be imitatively or idiomatically conceived, opening sections are built from longer phrases that give the impression of the broad unfolding of vocal polyphony. Inner episodes are more motivic, and in them we find clear evidence that Milan was drawing from an improvisor's reservoir of devices. His fantasias are usually concluded by the block repetition of the terminal episode. In effect, the works correspond to a loose formal model, unfolding slowly at the beginning, developing more tension as they proceed, and having their imminent conclusion signified by repetition. In many cases, the inner episodes have important points of repose where the entire process appears to begin again, unfolding slowly and attaining or surpassing the previous level of forward impetus. John Dowland's lute fantasias, although composed much later, are organised in a similar way with respect to all but the concluding sections.[6] His preference was to maintain dynamism until the final cadence by the use of more virtuosic and overtly idiomatic writing.

The architectonic conception of many fantasias deserves careful attention in preparing works for performance. Studies by Gombosj and Vaccaro concerning Francesco da Milano and Albert de Rippe offer splendid models for any performer.[7] My own study of the vihuela fantasia provides a similarly detailed analysis of the Spanish repertory.[8] These studies all deal with musical problems and are equally applicable to keyboard and ensemble fantasias.

Miguel de Fuenllana is one of the vihuelists whose music

illustrates the increasing use of architectonic principles. Fifty-one fantasias were published in his **Orphenica Lyra** (Seville, 1554).[9] They are largely of the imitative polythematic type, composed as a number of episodes each dealing with a single theme treated in imitation. By various forms of inner logic, individual episodes are fused together into longer periods representing the germination, maturation, and culmination of a single impulse. It is usual for each fantasia to be built from two or three of these longer periods. In Fuenllana's typical four-episode fantasias, periods are built from paired episodes, and the pair of periods form the broad unity of the work. The works are symmetrical, and their heirachical shape can be represented thus:
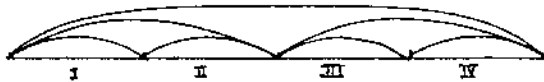
While there is no archetypal ground plan for their sequence of events, certain trends can be observed in Fuenllana's fantasias. They are forged into cohesion by their narrative continuity and unified by a strong dramatic force. The episodes are defined by theme, texture and cadence. Although episodic, the fantasias are continuous, not sectional. Cadences are often taken in passing and, even when they are separating episodes, they are often given in interrupted form. The average length of each episode is between twenty and thirty semibreves (ten to fifteen bars in transcription), but there are considerably longer and shorter examples. Each fantasia comprises between two and eight episodes, although four is the most frequent number. Divisions between episodes occur close to the midpoint of at least twenty of Fuenllana's fantasias. The structural significance of these divisions varies. In a significant number of the fantasias, however, the beginning of new episodes and periods appear to coincide at this point. There is a case for seeing the midpoint as a place of division for two parallel or contrasting structural phases. Such planning shows the fantasia to reflect the same values of balance and symmetry that dominate all renaisance art forms. This is of paramount importance, and a facet of renaissance

music that has not attracted sufficient comment from modern
writers.

Fantasia 13 represents Fuenllana's most typical fantasia
style and is reproduced overleaf from my own transcription. It
is a work in four voices, of 113 semibreves, and composed of
four episodes of similar length. It is a clear and comprehensible
work, highly dependent on its themes and their imitation for
its structure. There is little free material. Cohesion is pri-
marily due to a consistency of mood. The fantasia's four themes
are of similar length and the flow of events, controlled by
thematic statements, occurs at a steady rate. Bold harmonic ges-
tures fill the texture with colourful suspensions that are dis-
tributed evenly throughout. The character of the fantasia is
broad and expansive. Resemblances between the themes add further
unity. The themes of episodes I, II and IV share a prominent
ascending fourth, and in episodes I, II and III the themes begin
with repeated notes. The form and logic of the work is made
evident in the way the episodes are paired together into two
periods of equal length. The episodes of each period are fused
by interlocking cadences, whereas the second period (from the
last beat of bar 28) does not commence until the final cadence
of episode II is fully resolved. The first period culminates
with a superius statement of theme 2 at bar 24, followed by a
gradual release to the cadence. The climax of the second period
and of the whole work occurs at the end of the third episode,
and is marked by a subtle increase in rhythmic activity. The
fourth episode is accordingly anti-climactic, and the music
becomes more settled towards its conclusion.

By considering the inner workings of this fantasia in detail,
the musical factors that determine both its structure and drama-
tic shape become more evident. The first epiode is introductory
and is less controlled by thematic statements. It begins with
a pair of duos which are followed by the most substantial passage
of free counterpoint in the entire work. The placement of the
sixth note of the theme guarantees dissonance and is first heard
as early as bar 3, setting a trend followed throughout the work.
After three bars of free extension, a fifth thematic statement
is given by the bass, in a form modified by augmentation of the
final notes. During this statement, the other voices maintain

FANTASIA 13 — MIGUEL DE FUENLLANA

Orphenica Lyra, fol. 34

their free extension apparently unperturbed by the thematic intrusion, although the alto shows a hint of wanting to harmonise the thematic statement in tenths.

Increased rhythmic activity in the alto, together with consecutive dissonances, heralds the introduction of the second theme and episode. Episode II is built from two groups of three closely-spaced entries. The frequency of thematic entries contributes to the increased intensity of the music, strongest in bars 25 and 26. The music subsides after this point, marking the passing of the first climax. Strong dissonance and inverted chords are the features of the episode. Coupled to the proceeding one, the two episodes may be seen as one period, a single gesture. It is a dramatic programme built on the gradual textural expansion of a slowly unfolding beginning.

Essentially, the second period is a modified repetition of the same programme. The polyphonic style of the second period is marked by the exclusive use of non-overlapping entries. The texture once again gradually expands from two voices for the first entry to four voices for the fourth and fifth entries in epidose III. The superius entry at bar 35 signifies the climax not only of its episode, but also of the second period and of the whole work. The climactic entry is made more arresting by the use of the lower sonorities in the passage immediately preceding it, and its intensity is augmented by the quickened rate of harmonic change beneath its opening three notes.

Episode III becomes episode IV by means of a seamless join and prepares the work for its conclusion. The placement of the opening notes of the theme on weak beats prevents it attaining a significant identity and impact, and it is further weakened by its varied form in subsequent statements. More focus is placed on the harmonic progressions of the quasi-homophonic texture as it moves steadily and constantly in a long phrase, not concluding cadentially but simply by breaking the rhythmic pulse at bar 49 with a single long chord.

There are two essential problems that must be resolved by the performer in order to recreate the inner lifeforce of a fantasia. It is not sufficient merely to play the notes in a vain hope that the work will resuscitate itself. One of the problems is the internal relationship of voices. As is clear

from the Fuenllana fantasia discussed, it is imperative to be aware of the movement of each voice, and to distinguish thematic statements of theme from the lesser function of providing support for the other voices. On instruments that use tablature notation this requires more careful attention as tablature can easily disguise part writing. Transcriptions provide the lutenist with an invaluable aid. Whatever the performance medium, statements of theme need to be clearly articulated. Performance of ensemble fantasias, whether they be mid-16th century Italian works or 17th century English compositions, are invariably more successful when each player knows the other parts well and shares a common view of the work with his musical companions. A stylish performance can thus be attained, one where form is articulated through consensus of dynamics and understanding of the important points of structural demarcation. Individual voices need to be more prominent when stating thematic material, and should similarly recede when their role is supportive. The thematic material is the structural fabric of the fantasia and should emerge clearly in performance as the outer web of the musical image. Similarly, solo fantasias require the same careful control of balance between the voices, particularly to allow submerged thematic statements to reach the listener's consciousness.

The second problem is at the outer structural level. How does one achieve balance between the static architecture of a work and its own dynamic thrust forward? These seemingly opposed views of the music need not be the source of conflict. To me, reconciling the two aspects involves finding the manner of superimposing the structural architecture so that it can be perceived by the listener during performance time, and so that it can provide a lasting impression of the work. The obvious first step is to determine a structural architecture for the music in question. Thereafter, the formal plan can be articulated by a number of musical techniques that are analagous to the structure of language as phrases, sentences and paragraphs. Just as some full stops are more important than others, the same is true of cadences. Cadences are the principal means of formal delineation in the fantasia. They can be played with differing force of dynamics and articulation and can be approached with fine changes in tempo according to the desired effect. The length of musical

breath that follows a cadence also contributes to its relative importance within the context of the entire work: the longer the breath, the greater the impact of the cadence.

Each theme in a fantasia has a melodic identity that distinguishes it from the others. Once again, comparison with vocal music is enlightening. Composers of vocal music constructed themes for each line of text in order to match both the meaning of the words and their metrical accent. The abstraction of the fantasia consists of the separation of music from text. However, each theme needs to be articulated on an instrument as if it were texted. Appropriate articulation is often self-evident. Stepwise motion in long note values suggests smoother articulation than a more angular theme in shorter notes. Melodic direction may also suggest a workable pattern of both articulation and dynamics. In less clear situations, one might experiment by fitting words to a theme and then emulating the articulation instrumentally. The melodic identity is thus enhanced by the manner in which it is performed, and the chosen articulation pattern should be applied to each reiteration of the same theme. Composers were themselves careful in the choice of thematic material and the placement of each theme in relation to the whole. Similar care by the performer can only serve the best interests of the music.

While much of the above discussion centres on polythematic imitative fantasias, 16th century composers used a much wider range of techniques in their compositions. Some imitative works are monothematic, others are based on cantus firmi or ostinato principles, parody of vocal works, non-imitative counterpoint or other devices of a more idiomatic instrumental nature. The composers were, however, men of their age who responded to general artistic principles in similar ways, even when the outer layer of their technique adopted a different guise. The level of creative energy invested in the fantasia is undeniable. We have at our disposal a large repertory of music created by some of the finest musical minds of the renaissance. It is an area of music that invites the serious attention of performers who will reap from the fantasia an abundant pleasure, and who will reward their audiences accordingly.

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Notes

1. There was no apparent difference between the terms fantasia and ricercar in the 16th century. This has been convincingly demonstrated by H.Colin Slim in his dissertation **The Keyboard Ricercar and Fantasia in Italy, ca. 1500-1550, with Reference to Parallel Forms in European Lute Music of the Same Period**, (Harvard, 1960). Spanish keyboard composers used the term 'tiento' for works of the fantasia genre. In this article the term fantasia is used throughout except when citing works originally titled Ricercar.

6. See **The Collected Lute Music of John Dowland**, ed. Diana Poulton and Basil Lam, (London: Faber, 1974).

7. See in particular Otto Gombosi, "A la recherche de la Forme dans La Musique de la Renaissance: Francesco da Milano," in **La Musique Instrumentale de la Renaissance**, ed. Jean Jacquot (Paris: CNRS, 1955), pp.165-76, and Albert de Rippe, **Fantasies**, vol.1 of his **Oeuvres**, ed. Jean Michel Vaccaro, Corpus des Luthistes Français, (Paris: CNRS, 1972).

2. Fray Juan Bermudo, **Libro llamado Declaracion de instrumentos musicales** (Ossuna, 1549), fol.99^V.

3. Luys Milan, **Libro de Musica de vihuela de mano. Intitulado El Maestro**, (Valencia, 1536; rpt. Geneva: Minkoff, 1975).

4. Francesco Spinacino, **Intabolatura de lauto**, (Venice: Petrucci, 1507; rpt., Geneva: Minkoff, 1978).

5. There are three modern editions of **El Maestro**, edited respectively by Leo Schrade, Publikationen Alterer Musik, 2, (Leipzig, 1927; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), Ruggero Chiesa, (Milan: Zerboni, 1965), and Charles Jacobs, (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971).

8. John Griffiths, **The Vihuela Fantasia: A Comparative Study of Forms and Styles**," (diss., Monash University, 1983).

9. A complete transcription of **Orphenica Lyra** has been published under the editorship of Charles Jacobs, (Oxford: OUP, 1978).

Detail from the title page of Fuenllana's
Orphenica Lyra

EARLY MUSIC NEW ZEALAND

Early Music New Zealand is published quarterly, in March, June, September and December. Contributions are invited and should be sent to the Editor at 70 Glenmore Street, Wellington 5, N.Z. Promoters of concerts featuring early music are invited to send details of their concerts for listing. Deadline for copy for the June, 1987 issue is 1 May, 1987.

Early Music New Zealand is published in association with the Auckland Early Music Society, the Early Music Union, Wellington, and the Early Music Society of Canterbury, and with the support of the New Zealand Musicological Society and the Turnovsky Endowment Trust.