

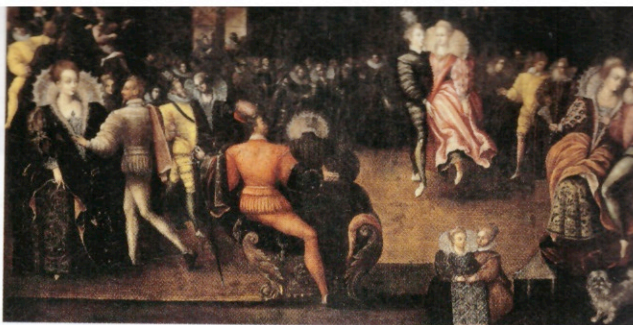
GRAMOPHONE GUIDE TO ...

Masque

One could be forgiven for misunderstanding quite what this genre is, says **Lindsay Kemp**

‘Come now, what masques, what dances shall we have to wear away this long age of three hours between our after-supper and bedtime?’ One could imagine that Theseus is calling for a masked ball in the last act of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but he might well be hoping for something a little more specific. The English court masque had its origins in the ‘disguisings’ or costume dances enjoyed in Henry VIII’s day, but by the early years of the 17th century it had become a more elaborate entertainment combining music, choreographed dancing, spoken drama and opulent designs. Not so much a play, opera or ballet as a themed series of ‘entries’ combining all three, the masque involved its noble audience (or ‘masquers’) in the dancing, their efforts enriched by royal musicians and a troupe of professional dancers (‘antimasquers’) who would execute more energetic comic or grotesque dances.

King James I was hugely fond of them, promoting many at the Great Hall, Westminster, and the Banqueting House, Whitehall. Under his reign, the genre rose to a high standard of musical, literary and visual excellence thanks to the collaborative involvement – in works such as *Masque in Honour of the Marriage of Lord Hayes* (1607), *The Masque of Queens* (1609) and *Oberon* (1611) – of such figures as poets Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont and Thomas Campion, designer Inigo Jones and composers Alfonso Ferrabosco II, Nicholas Lanier, Robert Johnson, Thomas Lupo I and John Coprario.



Dance was an important part of 16th-century court life

King Charles I’s subsequent largesse alighted on such composers as William and Henry Lawes and poets James Shirley and William Davenant. It is said that the lavish nature of the masques *The Triumph of Peace* (1634) and *Britannia triumphans* (1638) helped stoke Puritan rumblings about court extravagance and it’s no surprise that the civil war effectively put an end to such things. The genre did not quite die, however; *Cupid and Death* (Shirley, with music by Christopher Gibbons and Matthew Locke) was presented in London during the Commonwealth, it move towards a greater continuity of music and action proving influential on the tentative future course of English opera.

The idea of a masque as a set-piece musical insertion (now without audience participation) lingered on in the Restoration theatre, notably in Purcell’s semi-operas *Dioclesian* (1690), *King Arthur* (1691) and *The Fairy-Queen* (1692). But when all-sung Italian-style opera prevailed in the 18th century, ‘masque’ survived principally as a term for musical interludes in spoken plays. The first public theatre production of Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas* for instance, in 1700, was presented as a sequence of ‘masques’ within an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*.

Occasionally, 20th-century music is subtitled ‘masque’ (eg Vaughan Williams’s ballet *Job*, 1930; and Constant Lambert’s choral *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*, 1935), the term serving as more vague allusion to olden times than a valid description of the piece.

ARTISTS & their INSTRUMENTS

Eivind Ringstad on his 1768 ‘Vieuxtemps’ GB Guadagnini viola

“I have this on loan from Dextra Musica and have played on it for about four years. It was after I’d decided to keep it that I was told it used to be owned by Vieuxtemps. I’m really happy I didn’t know that beforehand, so that its historic status didn’t influence my decision. I remember when I started to play it for the very first time: there were so many colours in the sound, and it was so inspiring to play on such a tender sounding viola. But it was also challenging. I struggled to make the sound I wanted. Eventually, I learnt that I couldn’t exert pressure with my bow arm, but instead I had to use its natural weight. As a result, my playing changed for the better.

It’s not a particularly large viola, and it sounds warm and graceful rather than dark and powerful. The overall sound is rich, but I find the the A string especially captivating – the way it can sound light and shimmery, almost like a violin. Gradually I have come to discover that the instrument has a strong personality, not always responding in the way I want it to. But when that happens, it can be equally captivating, if not even more so. It has been refreshing for me



to change my mindset on how to play: I try to view it as teamwork rather than me commanding the viola.

I perform all kinds of classical music, and this viola inspires me whatever the repertoire – so there are no boundaries as to what I can explore. I play a lot of transcriptions of violin pieces, which involve high positions on the fingerboard. For that reason it’s good to have an instrument that’s on the smaller side. It’s fascinating playing Vieuxtemps’s music on it. I like imagining that he wrote his viola pieces inspired by its sound. It’s overwhelming to think of all the musical periods it has been through, and I feel that playing contemporary music on it gives it even more history. I recorded my new album with my regular recital

partner, German pianist David Meier. We present a diversity of works by Vieuxtemps, Hindemith, Ysaÿe, Enescu and Arthur Benjamin. We also include a world premiere recording of *Correspondances* by the young Norwegian composer Peder Barratt-Due. I am thrilled to launch a new CD playing on a viola with such fantastic qualities.”

► Ringstad’s new album, ‘Correspondances’, is released on Rubicon on October 30