

# The consort of viols of the schola cantorum basiliensis

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## THE CONSORT OF VIOLS OF the SCHOLA CANTORUM BASILIENSIS.

In the "Swiss Observer" of April 14th, 1950, there appeared a report of a concert given by viol players from Basle. I wrote at the time that although attendance was good there were only very few Swiss amongst the audience. If Swiss support was disappointing then the response shown by the Swiss Colony in last week's concert was even worse. All those who stayed away from Cowdray Hall, W.1, on Thursday evening, 15th February, missed a rare treat. Of course, the loss was theirs. But there is more to it than that. We often hear complaints that Swiss get a cold reception when they return to Switzerland. But have they ever stopped to think of how it must strike lecturers and artists coming here from Switzerland to find such lack of interest amongst the Swiss Colony in London. (I believe the colonies in other parts of Great Britain are more patriotically minded.) During the last few years many prominent Swiss lecturers and artists have appeared in London, and the Colony have had many opportunities to hear excellent talks and artistic performances at little or no cost. And almost every time it was the same story — a disappointing attendance, quite out of proportion to both the standard of the lecture or concert and to the size of the Colony. Films seem to have a certain attraction, and both dances and dinners, often at considerable financial outlay, are always a great success. Why is it then that Swiss concerts and lectures fail to attract our compatriots?

At the risk of being accused of repetition I should like to say a few words again on the viol and the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. The viol was evolved in the late fifteenth century, a few decades before the violin was born, and it soon became popular all over Europe. It was constructed in various sizes; the treble viol is larger than the violin, whilst the bass viol is practically the size of the cello. Its Italian name "viola da gamba" indicates that the instrument is held between the legs. It has six strings tuned in fourths and a third. The bow is held in the old oriental manner with the palm upwards. In the sixteenth century the viol was used in combination with wind instruments in church and court music. In chamber music the consort of viols prevailed until the middle of the seventeenth century. The bass viol maintained its position as a solo instrument for another 100 years, and was re-discovered in the twentieth century. Some twenty years later the charm of the consort of viols came back to its own, through the musical "Jugendbewegung" in Germany and the research work of Arnold Dolmetsch in England.

In 1933 the well-known Basle musician and conductor, Paul Sacher, founded the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. Since its foundation it has engaged in research work and teaching of old music. It has especially cultivated consort and solo viol playing. The concert group have been on tour abroad on several occasions, and their outstanding achievement is, as the Cambridge Review (April 48) put it "... to combine complete fidelity to the tradition of their instruments with the highest standard of modern ensemble playing." In fact, the extraordinary precision of their performance is striking. The group had been to this country for record-making and broadcasting but the

concert last year was their first public appearance in England. It was a great success, and it was to be hoped that we should have the pleasure of hearing them again. Under the auspices of the Anglo-Swiss Society and in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain the consort returned to London last week. Again the British public showed keen response. The Swiss Legation was represented by Monsieur Bernath, Counsellor of Legation and Madame Bernath, as well as by Monsieur Marcuard. The concert has had an excellent press.

To me it meant more than a first-class performance. Again I felt that the two hours of viol music brought a message from the past. Most of the music was composed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century — an age when people knew not only how to enjoy art but how to execute it. When we listen to wireless or gramophone music artists, too, perform for us. But advanced scientific progress has made people lazy, and few have the inclination to play an instrument. It is deplorable that good music in the home is disappearing more and more and with it the ability to appreciate it. The concert on Thursday reminded me strongly of how much we have lost.

Not only the leader of the group, Mr. August Wenzinger, is a famous artist, but all four players are accomplished musicians. Mr. Wenzinger played the treble as well as the bass viol. Miss Marianne Majer and Miss Hannelore Mueller performed on the tenor viol. Miss Gertrud Fluegel, a prominent Basle violinist, played the bass viol. The first half of the programme was devoted to English composers (Jenkins, Locke, Purcell). The second part consisted of a divertimento by Haydn and music by several French composers. My own favourite was again the little-known French composer Marin Marais (1656-1728). The consort played his "Five Pieces for Bass Viol and Figured Bass". Especially the last called "15 Divisions upon a Ground" caught my imagination. The lovely rhythm and exquisite tunes, in parts with pizzicato accompaniment, still haunt me to-day. When the deservedly generous applause had died down I left the Hall, moved and happy and feeling richer by another beautiful experience.

MARIANN.

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