

# Music Reviews

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The Food of Love:  
Words & Music for Shakespeare's Theatre

The Gesualdo Consort  
Cantoris CD (CRCD6017) £ 13.

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It is difficult to find good recordings of Elizabethan music pertaining to the stage, one problem being that there simply are so few authentic numbers which can be ascribed to such a specific genre, that all recordings available cover the same ground. According to several scholars, "there are only three authentic songs written and published in Shakespeare's day using Shakespeare's lyrics." Those boundaries can be expanded in several directions depending how one defines them.

The premise of this collection by the Gesualdo Consort from Britain is music "for Shakespeare's Theatre," and contains the usual passel of songs found in previous collections--numbers by Morley ("O Mistress Mine," "It was a Lover [and His Lass]") and Robert Johnson ("Where the Bee Sucks," "Full Fathom Five"), which are rendered competently by singers in a mixed quintet, arranged by Alison Place, the mezzo of the group. The rest of this 75 minute CD is taken with dramatic readings of lyrics for which no contemporaneous setting exists, and music tangentially related to the Shakespeare plays--the title of a song is mentioned in passing by a character, for example.

The musical numbers range from two versions of "Fortune my Foe" (mentioned in *Merry Wives of Windsor*) sung by a quartet and played on the lute, to "Since Robin Hood," sung by a trio, and several solo numbers, including "Sweet Robin," and "Take O Take Those Lips," making the singing portion a most eclectic offering. Furthermore, the solid dramatic readings by British actor John Collins are sometimes underscored by lutenist Dorothy Linell, who is the accompanist in some songs, and in other tracks plays solo. Additional actors and instrumentalists are heard, but are uncredited in the notes. The selections are well sung, with a preponderance of female voices, which is just

as well, as they are the better singers in the small consort, providing a certain ethereal lightness to what amounts to a thick antiphonal sound the part-songs.

It is unfortunate that the tempos in the performances seem consistently to plod, with so many sprightly numbers, taken cautiously, without much contrast or verve. Even an unquestionably uptempo dance as "Kemp's Jig" is given a leaden aspect, and might better be called "Kemp's Pavane." The addition of percussion of any sort would have been welcome. In this version of "La Volta," a dance dear to the feet of Elizabeth herself (known to leap wildly as the title suggests), the Queen would have found this arrangement strictly earth-bound. The most uplifting number of the set is Morley's "It was a Lover," sung by Nicola Kent, which adverts the quality of which the consort is capable, sweetly in tune, sung with great enthusiasm.

An enormous surprise is the first cut, "Were I a King," sung by the full quintet *a capella*, from the poem "by the poet and courtier, Edward de Vere." Since the music is by John Mundy, who was mainly a composer of religious works, it is an unusual, one might say almost unknown piece until now, and would have merited a fuller discussion in the notes. The performance of it, as mentioned above, is stately to the point of being lugubrious, but it is a piece the provenance of which remains most mysterious. One's curiosity is whetted with such an offering as "Were I a King," which Mr. Place says is "de Vere ... providing another substantial part song" when we know there has to be so much more to it than that.

The music is pretty enough on this CD, and will satisfy anyone who wishes to hear lovely, if not exciting, Elizabethan music; the only real fault seems to lie in the liner notes which are maddeningly insubstantial. The song-titles are often brief and truncated simply because not enough space was set aside for them in the disappointing notes enclosed with the CD. The two CD-size pages of notes by Gerald Place (tenor of the group) are concise, yet imprecise. We are told this is music "written in Shakespeare's lifetime," yet those boundaries are difficult to assess and easily breached ("Greensleeves," "The Willow Song"), since many musicologists are not in agreement as to when certain numbers were written, just as scholars have not indisputably dated Shakespeare's plays. The question comes down to, 'just what are we listening to?' Obviously Gesualdo Consort have researched the period and decided to include or exclude certain items, but from a scholarly standpoint, the line between what is 'authentic' and convenient is blurred.

Indeed, the tie-in to Shakespeare is so delicate at times, one wishes they had dropped the premise entirely; after all, to have a four-part song of "Weep you no More" as supposed to be sung by Lucius in *Julius Caesar* is stretching one's credulity to near maximum. Nonetheless, we can hope that in the future the consort will regale us with much more of the same, perhaps improved with more variety and documentation.