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Sting & Dowland

He's a rock legend... so why
has he recorded an album of
16th-century lute songs?

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COVER STORY

Renaissance Man

Sting has made millions from pop with his group The Police and then as a solo artist. So why has he now ventured into 16th-century classical to record the songs of John Dowland? **Oliver Condy** asks him...

MAIN PHOTO: KASSKARA/DG

There's something a little odd going on. Sting comes off stage after his Bergen concert, hits the hotel bar and opens a bottle of Chablis. And then he talks about 18th-century keyboard music. I suppose I started it. There's a song of his I particularly like for its harmonic interest: 'Whenever I say your name', a duet with the American R&B star Mary J Blige from his 2003 album *Sacred Love*. So I ask him about it. 'It's based entirely on Bach,' he reveals, not without a little pride in his voice. 'Look at the bass line and you'll see it's all him. It's one of his preludes – in C, I think.'

A quick flick through my Bach volumes later at home confirms the one he means: BWV 924, one of JS's most beguiling and simple preludes from the *Clavier-Büchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, a collection of keyboard works written for his eldest son. ▶

STING OUT LOUD:
'The rules are there to subvert. I feel that my job as a pop artist is to develop as a musician and bring into my sphere elements that aren't necessarily pop.'



'LET'S DO SOME DOWLAND': (inset) lutenist Edin Karamazov joins Sting (above); Dowland's 1595 letter to Robert Cecil (far right) is featured on Sting's disc



continued from over
Sting's love of classical music is, however, well known. 'Russians', a song from his 1985 album, *The Dream of the Blue Turtles*, is derived from the 'Romance' from Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé*, and throughout his 2003 autobiography, *Broken Music*, there are musical similes revolving around fugues, madrigals and counterpoint. As a daily routine back at his Wiltshire home, Sting plucks his way through Bach partitas and cello suites arranged for guitar ('I practise for hours every day... not that you'd pay money to hear me.') In fact, listen to Sting's solo albums, and you'll spot a whole host of influences from world music and country to jazz and Renaissance songs. Now he's tackling the real thing: performing and releasing a CD of John Dowland's lute songs after 'tampering with the music a little bit' for the past 20 years. After a

1982 Amnesty International concert at the Drury Lane Theatre, the satirical actor John Bird suggested he try his hand at the 16th-century English composer's music. Sting had just performed his early Police hit 'Message in a Bottle' accompanied by acoustic guitar, and the unaffected quality of the guitar had convinced Bird that he should have a go at this most intimate of Renaissance music. Hearing that was a 'happy coincidence' for Sting and confirmation that he really should have a stab at this repertoire. Edin Karamazov, Sting's lutenist on the CD, lit the blue touchpaper that finally launched the recording proper. 'When we met in Germany two years ago, I played some Bach for him on the lute. "Let's do something together,"

he said; so I replied, "Let's do John Dowland". According to the press information *Songs from the Labyrinth* (the CD's title) is 'a musical soundtrack to Dowland's life'. So what we get is a selection of his better-known songs interspersed with lute solos (Sting also plays a lute duet with Karamazov) and, to give listeners a bit of context, dramatised extracts from Dowland's 1595 letter to Sir Robert Cecil, Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State. The disc is aimed at the pop artist's many fans, many of whom will be bamboozled by the whole thing but may go and buy the album out of curiosity. 'I wanted to try and present the songs within a context that might help them – which is why I decided to read the extracts from the letter. It was important for

me to put the songs within this historical and political context of a man struggling to make a living as an artist in a very difficult time.' If you want a flavour of Dowland's character – aside from the music – the letter to Cecil makes for fascinating reading. And he did indeed live in difficult times. Little is known of Dowland; we think he was born in Westminster in 1563, but we're not even sure of that. There are clues about his early life: writing in his 1597 volume, *The First Booke of Songs or Ayres*, Dowland talks of studying music in childhood, and scholars have guessed that he was in the service of the British ambassador to Paris, Sir Henry Cobham. Jottings in various books by Dowland's contemporaries, as well as scribbles in his manuscripts tell us other details – court employments, commissions, places of abode. But it's the letter that gives us a valuable window onto Dowland's motives. It tells us that he left England around 1594,

'Pop music is capable of being sublime, of really capturing genuine emotion'

irritated that he hadn't been appointed to the court of Queen Elizabeth after John Johnson's death – probably because he was Catholic. During his journeys through Denmark, Germany and towards Italy where he was employed by the Medicis, Dowland was aware of the accusations of treason directed towards him by the English as both a Catholic and a musician to foreign courts.

'God he knoweth I never loved treason,' he wrote to Cecil, 'nor trechery nor never knew of any, nor never heard any mass in englande... I have reformed my self to lyeve according to her majesties lawes... & most humbly I do Crave p[ar]don...'

Paranoid and rambling the letter may be, but his music certainly isn't. Pianist Joanna MacGregor has called him one of the great 'blues' artists of the late 16th century – and scholars place his songwriting abilities next to Purcell and Britten. The *Grove* dictionary credits him with inventing the English lute-song into which he crammed the broadside ballad (bawdy street songs), dance music, the consort song and the madrigal. Sting's CD contains both sides of Dowland's lute-song writing – from the strophic song 'Can she excuse my wrongs' with its brilliant precision, poetic metre and dance-like exuberance, to the remarkable 'In darkness let me dwell' written in 1610,

the CD's closing track. Karamazov's opinion of 'In darkness' as the finest song ever written is not just enthusiasm-gone-mad: the lute's accompaniment alone is a contrapuntal wonder – suspensions and dissonances mark anguished lines in the solo voice part ('The walls of marble black, that moist'ned still shall weep') – and the ending is one of the most mysterious of all, with the A minor string finishing on a hanging G sharp. Yet it appears surprisingly simple on first hearing. 'His feeling for space and silence is really refined', observes Sting. 'That's what I love about it. And just having a voice and a lute. There's such air there – such freedom.'

16TH-CENTURY POP?

Although it would be crass to call Dowland the 'pop musician of his time', as I quiz Sting on the role of popular music, it's hard to resist the idea that pop, as a genre, hasn't changed a great deal since the late 16th century. No matter the sub-genre – R&B, punk, garage, or the simple ballad – pop still largely attempts to express ideas about love, defeat, revenge, beauty, anger... in a four-minute package. 'Pop music is essentially folk music based on simple harmonies and nursery doggerel,' Sting suggests. 'But it's also capable of being sublime – of really capturing genuine emotion. The best pop music does that and I fell in love with that ideal when I was a youngster.'

And for Sting, John Dowland's songs have those qualities: 'For me, they're

JOHN DOWLAND ALWAYS MISERABLE?

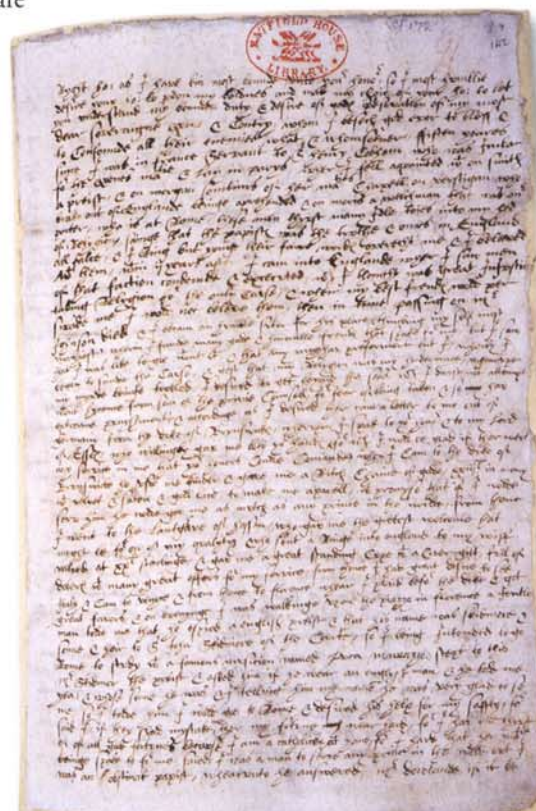


Beyond a few documented facts – e.g. that he studied at the Vatican in 1595, converted to Catholicism in France in the 1580s but reverted in 1597 after an unintentional involvement with treasonably-inclined English Catholics, supported himself as a lutenist and composer but failed to secure a much-coveted appointment as a Court lutenist until 1612 – Dowland's biography is shadowy.

His personality remains a puzzle, too. Some contemporaries considered him cheerful company, others believed him sour and paranoid. There is ample evidence that he was bitter at being constantly passed over for Court appointments but the melancholy cast of many of his songs doesn't necessarily tell us much, since it reflected the fashion of the Elizabethan Court. And he does seem to have had a sense of humour: he wrote a song called *Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens* ('Always Dowland, Always Doleful') and, again in keeping with the spirit of the times, his humour could be quite ribald.

Dowland was the foremost composer to consolidate and popularise the English form of lute-song or ayre, providing more complex parts for voice and accompanist than was usual. In his *First Booke of Songes* (1597) he adopted the practice of including different versions of a composition to facilitate performance as an a cappella polyphonic piece, solo vocal with lute accompaniment or by soloist accompanied by small ensemble. He also seems to have pioneered new techniques, including a way of striking the strings of the lute to produce a brighter, stronger sound. At pains to point out that he was properly appreciated away from home, he showed his cosmopolitanism by incorporating song and dance styles originating from various European countries into his music, including the pavan and galliard from Italy and the alman from Germany. *Barry Witherden*

pop songs written in 1603 or whatever – beautiful melodies, fantastic lyrics, great accompaniments...' Dowland's European travels enabled him to incorporate the best of French and Italian music into his lute songs – you can hear pavans and galliards in the music that Dowland would have picked up on his journey. Injecting freshness into a well-worn popular genre is something Sting is passionate about. Any pop musician wanting to keep his integrity, he argues, should try and venture as far as he can from the rules. 'Pop music is very conservative – you're not



AND FOR MY NEXT TRICK...

Other rock stars who have performed classical music...

ROGER DALTRY

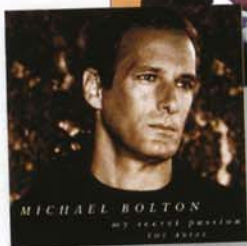
In 1983, director Jonathan Miller's televised production of *The Beggar's Opera*, by 18th-century composer John Gay, brought together the unlikely partnership of The Who frontman Roger Daltrey and conductor John Eliot Gardiner. As the highwayman Captain Macheath, Daltrey's vibrato-free voice and London accent suited arias that Gay had drawn from popular ballads of the time.

KEITH EMERSON

One third of Emerson Lake and Palmer, the prog rock threesome whose songs incorporated Musorgsky, Copland, Tchaikovsky and others, keyboard player Keith Emerson ventured onto the grand piano to play Ginastera's *Dance Creole* for a 1996 compilation CD called *Steinway to Heaven*. 'I discovered Ginastera in 1969 and was ecstatic,' he says. 'I had never heard music like it before.'

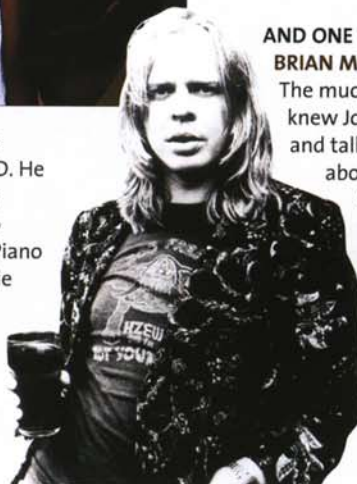
RICK WAKEMAN

The RCM-trained Yes keyboard wizard, a Prokofiev fanatic, frequently dabbles with classical repertoire and



has recorded Beethoven's 'Pathétique' Sonata on CD. He did, however, pass up his most prestigious offer: to perform Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 1 at Carnegie

Hall in 1975. 'It wouldn't have been right,' he says. 'I couldn't help but think back to all the performers I knew at college while here I was, to put it bluntly, being asked to put bums on seats.'

**AND ONE WHO DIDN'T:****BRIAN MAY**

The much admired Queen guitarist knew Joaquin Rodrigo in person and talked to him at length about the latter's famous *Concierto de Aranjuez*. However, when asked in a TV interview at last year's Proms whether he had ever considered performing the work in concert, May admitted that it probably would not be best suited to his style of playing...

'If I was doing a Dowland record to make money, you'd shoot me!'

really allowed to have flattened fifths and you've got to have a certain length of intro and chorus. But the rules are there to subvert in order to maintain your integrity as a musician. I feel that my job as a pop artist is to develop as a musician and bring into my sphere elements that aren't necessarily pop – more complex intervals, complex time signatures...'

A CHANGE OF TONE

Sting is clued up about Dowland but the news of this disc must have been surprising for any Dowland fan: is Sting unnecessarily invading a specialist area already inhabited by the likes of Andreas Scholl, Emma Kirkby, Alfred Deller et al? Does a pop musician without professional classical experience have anything new to say about Dowland? 'Having listened to a lot of Dowland records,' Sting says, 'I thought that no one was doing what I could do: I don't have that trained operatic voice, but this music was composed around 1600 and the bel canto style wasn't invented until 100 years later when they had a full auditorium which encouraged a certain vocal technique. I imagine people would have sung without that technique. I feel there is an intimacy to this music and I can do

something that's really me – and still, I hope, respect the music.'

For Kamarazov, who has accompanied Scholl on his album of Dowland, *A Musical Banquet*, Sting is the ideal musical colleague: 'His voice is pure and so child-like. It's perfect for renaissance music. He is a great musician – a natural-born singer with a beautiful voice.'

Sure, but I still want to know exactly why Sting would want to release a record like this: esoteric in the extreme and way off his musical beaten track. It isn't, it turns out, as simple as that. The disc was almost not released – what saved it was the letter extracts which turned the project from a purely musical album into dramatic tableau. It seems that singing and recording Dowland was initially intended to be for Sting's edification alone, a

diversion or musical folly: 'For me it's all about development – becoming a better musician, a better singer, a better songwriter... a better person. And you improve by putting yourself at risk creatively or entering a milieu that may seem uncomfortable at first. If you think you know about arranging, listen to Ravel. If you think you're a composer, then listen to Bach – and be humbled; but know you can get better. I didn't think the disc was worth releasing until the last minute. I was thinking "I can't see this becoming a record, and me taking this risk".'

But it was released; and by now, *Songs from the Labyrinth* is in the hands of the dreaded critics. Does Sting fear rejection by some of the fiercer critics – or even alienation from fans? 'If people like it, public or critics, then that's the cream on the cake. If I was doing a Dowland record to make money, you'd shoot me! I did it out of love, I did it out of curiosity, a sense of adventure... I can't really explain why. My instinct told me it was right for me.' ■

Sting sings Dowland at LSO St Lukes on 4 October (correct at time of going to press). See lso.co.uk/lstlukes. 'Dowland: Songs from the Labyrinth', DG 170 3139, is out now, £13.99