

Will Kemp Returns!  
More Elizabethan Jigs  
*Program Notes*

The Newberry Consort welcomes back British actor, dancer, and guitarist Steve Player to portray Will Kemp, “Shakespeare’s clown”. Two years ago we ventured into this repertoire with our first staged production, presenting three full jigs plus some dancing on our stage. This time, we will explore broadside ballads as well, and expand our two favorite jigs with extra material for their characters.

Jigs are short musical comedies that could be extended through dancing, fight scenes, and improvised comedy. They were enjoyed at court and in the city as stand-alone entertainments, but most often were performed during the intermissions of long dramatic works, bringing comic relief to tragedies and providing some low humor for the folks in the cheap seats. Incidentally, it was by stuffing a jig into the intermission of a play that these sorts of bawdy comedies became known as “farces” - from the Latin *farciare*: to stuff!

Jigs are preserved in the form of printed scripts of rhymed poetry, sometimes including the titles of the tunes to which the poetry should be sung, as well as some rudimentary stage instructions. Improvisation in a style the performers wore like a second skin provided the rest. That investment of creativity and imagination is both the most challenging and the most satisfying part of staging a jig today.

For our jigs projects, we have worked closely with Ross W. Duffin, Professor Emeritus at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Professor Duffin is a renowned scholar of English music and theater, especially relating to Shakespeare and ballads. His best-selling work *Shakespeare’s Songbook* gave us the tools to present Shakespeare through the musical lens of the Elizabethan ballad and was the inspiration for our concert program of the same name a few years ago.

Our primary reference for this program is a fascinating book by Roger Clegg and Lucie Skeaping entitled *Singing Simpkin and other Bawdy Jigs*, which presents a wealth of information about the history of the jig and its performance practice. Getting at the character of any style is tricky, and recreating comedy is the trickiest of all. We are not just setting comic poetry to early tunes - we’re looking for the roots of Monty Python, Benny Hill, Mr. Bean, and all those other wonderful purveyors of modern English humor. Getting to know the clowns of early England helped us to connect the dots. This year, an article by Roger Clegg entitled *The Relationship between the Broadside Ballad and the Dramatic Jig* inspired the format of our program. Clegg asks:

*“If the dramatic jig was a sung-drama featuring props, disguising, and dance, to be acted out on the common stage when a play was done, might the*

*broadside ballad also be a script to be acted out as a dramatic performance?'*

We think so! It's clear that the broadside ballad and the staged jig were closely related: both tell stories, both are preserved primarily as text with suggested melodies for performance, and both require improvised accompaniments for performance. Thus, in *Will Kemp Returns*, our characters will give us a bit of back story about their characters, and introduce the jigs with ballads and dances that act as commentary. Our program includes a ballad that tells the story of the story King Lear in about seven minutes, as well as a collection of tunes directly connected to dialogue spoken by Kemp's characters. Shakespeare's audience had these popular tunes in their personal musical memories, and allusions to the songs called up the emotional and references. *There dwelt a man in Babylon (Merry Wives of Windsor)*, *Sellenger's round (A Midsummer's Night Dream)* and *Mounsieur's almaine (Love's Labour Lost)* are all associated with bits of Shakespeare's dialogue, and were some of the greatest hits of the Elizabethan musical canon as well.

We preface the jig *Singing Simpkin* with a ballad about the ubiquity of cuckolds, sung by the title character – a master of cuckoldry! *The Cheaters Cheated* is introduced with two ballads. In the first, Moll Medlar sings "A Caveat for Cutpurses" to the tune *Packington's pound*, warning her companions about the dangers of a life as a pickpocket. They respond with "A Light Heart's a Jewell", to the tune of *Jacke Puddings*, dismissing her concerns, and blithely vowing to "have their own vagary", or "do their own thing".



During the reign of Elizabeth I, William Kemp was Shakespeare's most beloved clown. He was a founding member and part investor in the *Chamberlain's Men*, a company of actors for which Shakespeare wrote. From the roles we know the Bard wrote for Kemp, we get an excellent idea of his range as an actor and a clown. There is evidence to suggest that the role of Falstaff was written for him, but he is best known for playing Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*,

Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, possibly Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* and Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although Kemp played mostly these secondary roles, his actual stage time may have been extended with dancing and improvised comedy.

In addition to acting in the plays, Kemp was responsible for providing a jig or two to follow or fill the intermission in the performances. It's likely that *Singing Simpkin* was actually written by Kemp and performed on Shakespeare's stage, since it had been in his repertory and performed on his tours through Germany and the Lowlands. It was published in England soon after the creation of the Chamberlain's Men.

It was said that Will Kemp's comic strengths lay more in physical comedy and dancing than in his ability to improvise clever poetry. Kemp excelled in buffoonery and in

improvised interactions with the audience. By the first decade of the 17th century, Will Kemp became so famous that he once played himself as a character in a play where he confesses to his many weaknesses. He declared that the public wasn't looking for poetry or art, but just "harmless mirth, for that's my part."

Kemp died not long after Queen Elizabeth did. But even without the star power of a William Kemp, jigs thrived well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *The Cheaters Cheated* is one of the latest surviving jigs. It was written by Thomas Jordan (c.1614-1685) and published in 1663, and not long before its publication was performed for the Sheriffs of London as part of a grand civic ceremony. As Clegg and Skeaping point out in their book, there are passing references to that occasion in *The Cheaters Cheated*. The play includes potential interactions with dignitaries in the audience, and the strict enforcement of law is deemed the cause for the pickpockets' distress.

*Cheaters* is a relatively complex jig with lots of tunes, and they are some of the best ballad and dance tunes from the English Renaissance repertory. A majority of this music comes down to us only as single melodies, and Renaissance style calls for accompaniment with additional harmony and part-writing. All of the music in *Will Kemp Returns* has been arranged by David Douglass for our band and his spot-on period arrangements always leave room for individual instrumentalists and singers to improvise as well, when they are inspired to do so.

If all this farce weren't enough, The Newberry Consort is pleased to present the fabulous fiddle and bass duo of our own Jeremy David Ward and Timothy Macdonald. They'll perform music from their newly-released CD (also available in the lobby) during intermission. It's our own 21<sup>st</sup>-century "stuffing" in the program. Enjoy!

-David Douglass and Ellen Hargis