

Report on “Topping Tooters” course, Dartington August 2011

This year for the first time The City Musick, lead by William Lyons, ran a course at Dartington International Summer School specifically about the music of Waits. For those who don't already know, the Summer School at Dartington has been running for 64 years and offers courses over 5 weeks in the summer on a range of musical subjects from large scale orchestral and choral works to composition, chamber music and keyboard instruments. They also regularly put on Early Music themed courses. Participants are able to attend more than one course during their stay.

For those on the Topping Tooters course the week began with a class for all participants where we immediately set to and arranged a set of Bransles de Villages by Praetorius for massed shawms, curtals, cornetti, sackbutts and recorders, then tried our hand at some more stately church music from the Spanish Town of Lerma. In later classes we were able to separate the reeds, brass and recorders into consorts that met to play en mass towards the end of each class. Members of the City Musick were also very generous with their time giving people individual lessons, group coaching, tweaking instruments and the chance to try out new instruments throughout the day.

The week also included a talk by William Lyons given to a good audience of both “Tooters” and participants from other courses on the subject of Waits of the 16th & 17th centuries, especially those of London. This included not only information of the Waits' origins and their civic duties with which members of the Guild will be familiar, but also their activities in the theatres of the South Bank and Blackfriars, and as “Singing Men” in the Parish Churches. Although we tend to think of Waits as mainly players of loud winds it seems that, in London especially, they were well known for their broken consort playing on recorders and bowed and plucked strings. So much so that Thomas Morley dedicated his “First Book of Consort Lessons” to them in 1599.

The following evening The City Musick gave the evening's main concert to a delighted audience in Dartington's Great Hall. They performed a varied program of the kinds of music that the London Waits were likely to have played, including pieces by Waits who were also composers: John Adson & Simon Ives. The musical fare ranged from dances and masquing airs to arrangements of popular songs and hymns, and was performed on shawms, cornetti, sackbutts, curtals, recorders and bagpipes.

Later in the week it was the participants' turn to perform with outdoor spots to entertain the queuing public as they waited to see the main concert and a participants' concert given by “Tooters”, early brass and recorder players on Friday afternoon in the Great Hall. This included performances of Gabrielli Canzonas by the brass, pieces from Lerma by the 8 piece reed band and the suite of Bransles de Villages performed on the massed band of all the shawms, curtals, cornetti, sackbutts and recorders we could muster.