

Featuring interviews with Dr. Tom Sunic & Dr. Phillip W. Serna

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Dr. Phillip W. Serna:

Bringing Viols and an Appreciation for the Arts to our Schools

Dr. Phillip W. Serna is currently on faculty at Valparaiso University and the Music Institute of Chicago where the Viols in Our Schools outreach program is in residence.

Dr. Serna received his Doctorate of Music from Northwestern University where he studied double bass with DaXun Zhang and Michael Hovnanian. Dr. Serna is a freelance writer and an active performer and pedagogue of the double bass and viola da gamba with numerous Midwestern orchestras.

BLACK OAK: Dr. Serna, our readers would like to know, first and foremost, what drew you to classical music.

DR. SERNA: I had interest in the arts and especially music from a young age. I started on violin, then switched to the guitar and double bass during my middle school years. Being surrounded by music in film and television growing up, it was natural that it would become an integral part of my cultural identity. The power of music intertwined with visual media can be very powerful. From playing in metal bands, to orchestras and later Contemporary Music and Early Music groups, my interests have been nothing but eclectic and varied.

My focus on classical music, or *Western art music*, really took off for me when I was accepted to the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in the Houston area. At HSPVA, I was surrounded by creative musicians and visual and performing artists of all kinds who all pushed each other to work at the height of their creativity.

I became enthralled by contemporary music while I worked on my Bachelors degree at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in the late 1990s. I was fascinated by the challenges of performing and relating dissonant and unfamiliar works to an aud



-ience. At the same time, I became deeply intrigued by certain aspects of musical performance: theory (how music is constructed) & the history surrounding compositions. This interest led me to Early Music, and therefore to the viol—opening up whole new repertoires to perform that I did not have access to before. The creative and collaborative aspects of chamber music are what I find most engaging. You have a lot more freedom in this smaller medium than in the orchestral literature, although both offer many rewarding challenges as a performer.

BLACK OAK: Having been raised in Houston, Texas, what influenced your decision to pursue a career in music in the Chicagoland area?

DR. SERNA: I had been away from Houston for some time. I did my undergraduate studies at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on double bass and moved to Chicago to join the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, which had a fellowship that paid for my Masters degree at Northwestern University. It was a pleasure to be able to perform under conductors such as Barenboim, Boulez, Eschenbach and Järvi, but more importantly it was at Northwestern where I thoroughly fell in love with the viol. I studied at Northwestern as a double bass major and with Mary Springfels on viol throughout my Master's and Doctorate.

I felt the chamber and solo literature for the viol was dynamic, full of contrasts and wonderful challenges. This really broadened my business prospects, as it were. As a freelance musician, you have a very narrow career path, but with the viol becoming an integral part of my professional life, it opened up so many more performance opportunities. I have had the wonderful privilege of performing on viol with a number of Chicago-area groups such as the Newberry Consort, the Chicago Early Music Consort as well as the Spirit of Gambo—a Chicago Consort of Viols, a group of which I am a founding member. I find that Chicago has a very vibrant arts scene and is filled with many creative ensembles and entrepreneurs who have started new and dynamic projects.

BLACK OAK: Why did you create Viols in Our Schools, and what do you hope to achieve with the program?

DR. SERNA: In 2006, Viols in Our Schools came into existence on a whim. For a number of years, I took time to go and spend school days at different schools recruiting students into my private studio. I felt that I thoroughly enjoyed meeting students in their own environment and could perform and interact with them on their own terms. The variety of schools that I have visited include suburbs of Chicago to inner-city schools—students of all

ethnicities, backgrounds and socio-economic status.

I bring a chest of viols into schools to show students how they are played and to introduce them to important aspects of performance practice – research that informs us about how different styles of music were performed during several different eras. Many schools do not have budgets to have a comprehensive music history course available to their students, so it is important to incorporate it as early as possible so students understand the context that surrounds the music they are learning.

In order to further assist in promoting my efforts, I was invited to submit an article to the American String Teachers Association String Teacher's Cookbook—Recipes for a Successful Program edited by Joanne May for Meredith Music Publications. Additionally in 2008, Viols in our Schools became an official outreach program of the Music Institute of Chicago, a community music school whose Evanston campus hosts Illinois' only non-collegiate Early Music Department.

My goal is that we will be able to get the program happening in more schools, and the goals that I hope to achieve include: 1) increasing visibility for the viol family & Early Music through classroom education, 2) to make music and history a tangible force in students' lives, and 3) assist in helping those who want to play viol to have access to them.

BLACK OAK: What steps does Viols in Our Schools take to further those goals?

DR. SERNA: Day-long residencies are the mainstay of the program, where I go into a school spend almost the entire day performing for and interacting with students, with as many as 7-8 performances in one day. The reality is that would be very costly for an ensemble to do, but being one person, it is a lot more cost-efficient.

My presentation consists of demonstrating the treble, tenor bass viols, discussing the history of the instruments, performing works for viols, and

then letting students try out instruments. The degree to which each of these activities occurs varies on the size of the group—smaller groups are always more hands on experiences.

Additionally, a feature that has been successful, in tandem with the day-long residencies, has been collaborative concerts. These vary in format from concerts with a schools orchestra, to recitals organized as part of another institution's offerings. In March of 2008, Chicago harpsichordist Jason Moy joined me for a concert in Naperville at Neuqua Valley High School where we performed concertos by Telemann & Bach as well as Bach's 3rd Sonata for Viola da Gamba & Harpsichord.

During the fall, I collaborated with orchestra director Dana Green at Naperville North High School where we organized the Naperville North Renaissance Strings Project—a semester-long project introducing students to aspects of performance practice on modern instruments with a focus on the consort music of John Dowland. Another example of the latter is, prior to a recent symphony concert, I performed and discussed the viol with patrons. This proved to be most successful with that orchestra's patrons, so I hope I can setup more events like that in the near future.

My online projects include arrangements of viol composition for string orchestra, and will hopefully, have excerpts available for download by school orchestra directors soon. Another web project that has been successful has been the GambaCast—Viols in Our Schools' video podcast that started in April of 2008. With a number of ensemble collaborators, as well as solo artists, the podcast works on an international scale to offer viola da gamba performances and information for the curious to find. Look for it in iTunes and at www.thegambacast.org.

BLACK OAK: For those of us who are not familiar with classical instruments, what is a Viol? How is it unique from other stringed instruments?

DR. SERNA: A viol (pronounced 'vy-al'), or viola da gamba, is literally a 'leg-viol.' All the instruments in the viol family are suspended on a performer's legs. It is a six-stringed instrument that is fretted like a modern guitar, although there are Baroque bass viols that have an added seventh string. Unlike a modern guitar, the frets are made of gut and are wrapped around the neck. The instrument has a flat back, and because of the wood is very thin, the instrument resonates, or vibrates for a long time. The tuning is slightly different than a modern guitar. The instrument is tuned in fourths with a central third. Like many Western instruments, the viol is part of a family with many different sizes (from smallest to largest): Paredessus, Treble, Alto (less commonly used) Tenor, Bass, and Violone (Contrabass).

The modern double bass is the only modern stringed instrument to derive many of its characteristics from the viol family. Modern players will find the bowing style unusual. It is what we refer to as an underhand grip. Before the introduction of the concave Tourte bow, or modern bow in the late 1700s, the bow was slightly convex, and viol players held it from underneath which gave the performer the freedom to attenuate the tension of the hors-hair. This is a wonderful challenge for string players who have never tried a viol bow. It is amazing how little physical effort is required to make a sound, but in the end, it requires a lot of control.

Viols were often played in a consort, or in ensemble together. Typically, consorts ranged from small in number up to six players.

There are numerous solo pieces that survive from the 17th & 18th centuries. Additionally, composers that are familiar to audiences today such as J.S. Bach & G.P. Telemann composed music for the viol. There are numerous other viol composers including Abel, C.P.E. Bach, Byrd, Coperario, Gibbons, Hume, Jenkins, Lawes, Marais and Sainte-Colombe—each completely different from the other. Some composers focus on chamber music, others on

solo literature, but all of them offering compositions that are rare and beautiful.

BLACK OAK: Why do you think the fine arts have become a 'bad word' in contemporary popular culture?

DR. SERNA: Consumerism has run rampant and the fine arts have paid dearly because of it. Just watching television gives you an idea of where music is relegated—to the background. Arts are made to seem so pretentious and alien as compared to the media juggernauts controlling what people watch on television and hear on the radio. Music and artists are treated as a commodity, and it is painful to see a culture that is more home-bound than ever, with fewer and fewer people going to see live performances.

The media has sidelined so-called 'Classical Music,' as well as jazz, and over-categorized music in general into convenient labels in order to market it. In a consumer culture that is obsessed with the everyman, it is no surprise that truly exceptional artists will never be heard in the mainstream. Even with a sometimes bleak assessment regarding the arts and culture in America, the Internet has actually seen a rise in the sales of classical music, while the brick and mortar stores offer little to no selection of recorded materials. Many musicians and artists are embracing the new media, and I have hope that the arts and culture will thrive again as a backlash against current trends.

BLACK OAK: What do you think children gain from having a background in classical music?

DR. SERNA: There is a lot of research that points to higher brain function in children when they are exposed to the arts early on in life. This translates into better performance on tests and in schools, yes, but I think more importantly it helps them develop into fuller human beings. Childhood education could benefit from interdisciplinary studies.

Integrating music, history and art will give students a richer experience of our world.

There is such a social-Darwinist superiority complex built into modern American culture that I think students don't seem to respect or attempt to truly understand events around the world. I think this is where classical music helps. America was built on ideas of diversity, and this does include European art forms too.

BLACK OAK: What do you see as the future of the Viols in Our Schools program?

DR. SERNA: In addition to expanding school residencies to more schools in and around the Chicago area, I want to expand the series of collaborative concerts to colleges and middle schools as well. All of this depends on funding or logistics to make them happen. It is most important to me to expose not only young people to music for these beautiful instruments, but I want to bring this literature to a wider audience. I hope the number of collaborators for the podcast will continue to grow. It is just a matter of patience and time. Thank you very much for taking the time to interview me about Viols in Our Schools. I passionately believe it to be a worthwhile endeavor and I hope that your readers will agree with me. ■

Find out more about Dr. Serna at www.phillipwserna.com and his viola da gamba educational outreach projects and podcast at www.violsinourschools.org & www.thegambacast.org.

Interview conducted and edited by Michael Kleen.