

A musical passage from *Hamlet*, act II, scene 3



Detail from Maurice Bouval, *Ophelia*

Most of us are familiar with the following passage of Shakespeare.

Enter Players with recorders.

HAMLET. O! the recorders: let me see one. To withdraw with you; why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?

GUILDENSTERN. O! my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly.

HAMLET. I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?

GUILDENSTERN. My lord, I cannot.

HAMLET. I pray you.

GUILDENSTERN. Believe me, I cannot.

HAMLET. I do beseech you.

GUILDENSTERN. I know no touch of it, my lord.

HAMLET. 'Tis as easy as lying; govern these ventages with your finger and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.

GUILDENSTERN. But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony: I have not the skill.

HAMLET. Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood! do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

Most Renaissance consort music was written in four or five parts, so we probably have here at least a quartet of musicians, playing cantus, altus, tenor and bassus recorders. (A quintet might employ an extra tenor.) The instrument which Hamlet borrows is a 'little organ', and therefore most likely a cantus in C, about twelve inches in length (what today we call a 'descant' -- the familiar instrument used in schools).

'There is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ': although the cantus is the smallest recorder in the consort, it is the top-line instrument on which the tune or melody is nearly always played. Hamlet selects the cantus as being the lightest recorder in weight, the one which requires least breath, and so the instrument that Guildenstern will find easiest to play.

There are some differences between the instrument of Shakespeare's time and that of today. Writing in 1618, Michael Praetorius tells us (let me try to make my own published translation a bit less formal):

All sizes of recorder (Latin, *fistula* -- the Italians call the instrument '*flauto*', and the English call it '*recorder*') have seven fingerholes on top, and one underneath. Although the lowest hole of the ones on top is drilled in two places which are very close to each other, each member of the hole-duo does exactly the same job in terms of pitch. The only reason for the duplication is that some players use the *right* hand, while others use the *left* hand on the lower part of the instrument. One of the two holes must therefore be filled up with wax.

Most modern recorders are made with only one bottom hole, slightly offset on the right side, so that the *right* hand has to be used on the lower part of the instrument. Furthermore, recorders are normally made today in two or three pieces, whereas the recorder of Shakespeare's day was a one-piece instrument. The narrower bore of the modern instrument allows a greater compass, but produces a thinner and less interesting sound than that of its ancestor.

'Govern these ventages with your finger and thumb' relates to the phrase 'recover the wind of me'. 'Recover the wind' normally means 'get to windward [of another ship]', and signifies the approach made to Hamlet by the two courtiers. In the present context it has to do with covering over again the stream of player's breath, or wind, which has been opened by holes drilled in the recorder's body. It also carries the sense of 'go back to my strange behaviour and analyse it'. The

inarticulate stream of musical ‘wind’ stands for that active expression of Hamlet’s mind which doesn’t explain itself in words.

‘Drive me into a toil’ normally means ‘drive me into a netted enclosure’, like a hunted animal, by blocking all but one path. In terms of the recorder, it denotes sending the air-stream out through a single opening (the end of the instrument’s bore) by covering the thumbhole and all the fingerholes. As Hamlet asks the question, ‘Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?’, he covers the recorder’s holes completely, as if preparing to play bottom C. By so doing he represents Guildenstern’s attempt to ‘sound me from my lowest note’.

When Hamlet tells Guildenstern to ‘govern these ventages with your finger and thumb’, he is not being general, or else he would say ‘with your fingers and thumb’. He is showing Guildenstern how to play one specific note.

‘These are the stops’ means, Look, I’m using my index finger and thumb to stop, or cover, *two particular holes*. Perhaps in order to make the lesson as easy as possible, Hamlet is requiring Guildenstern to cover only two of the recorder’s eight holes -- the top fingerhole, and the thumbhole behind it -- so as to produce the note B (an octave and a seventh above what we call ‘middle C’ on the piano). A cantus recorder can be supported between forefinger and thumb while this note is played. The note B, seventh note of the white-note scale of C, may be regarded as close to ‘the top of my compass’, since in much of the period’s four-part dance-music the range of any one part was often an octave or less. Some of the eight-holed instruments which recorder-players used for variety, like crumhorns, had a range of only a ninth.

‘.....give it breath with your mouth’: put the beak of the instrument between your lips, and blow. No special embouchure is required to play the recorder, which has always lent itself to amateur use. Hamlet is a competent player of the instrument. We may presume that he is unable to play the much more difficult hautboy, or shawm (a double-reed instrument of the oboe class, used only by professionals). Hautboys played for the entrance of the dumb-show, and are still at hand if Hamlet wants to hear them. Instead he sends for recorders, but when the players arrive they are not asked to perform. Hamlet uses one recorder as the basis of a virtuosic verbal display. (Something similar happens in *Romeo and Juliet*, act IV, scene 5, when Peter exhibits his musical knowledge before three musicians who don’t get the chance to perform onstage.)

‘Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me.....you would sound me.....’ Make of *me*, play upon *me*, sound *me*. The names of our modern solfa syllables *doh*, *ray*, *me* go back to the medieval names *ut*, *re*, and *mi*. *Mi* was the syllabic name for the note B in the major mode of G. We recall how Bianca reads ‘the gamut of Hortensio’ in *The Taming of the Shrew*, act 3, scene 2.

Gamut I am, the ground of all accord,
A re, to plead Hortensio’s passion;
B mi, Bianca, take him for thy lord.....

The first note is G ('gamut' = first three letters of the Greek letter-name *gamma*, concatenated with the syllable-name *ut*). The second is A (= *re*). The third is B (= *mi*, pronounced 'me'). Hamlet's reiterated pronoun 'me' may stand for *mi* = the note B.

In addition, B is the middle note of the G major chord G-B-D, and it may be encrypted in the phrase 'the heart of my mystery' (that is, the middle note of my chord). But the instrument is a lute this time, since it has to be *plucked*. Why 'mystery'? The word 'mystery' stands not for the preceding mysterious play ('mystery-play' is a modernism), but for Hamlet's private world, which the two courtiers are trying to penetrate. Now 'pluck' is an obviously musical word. Is there anything musical about the word 'mystery'?

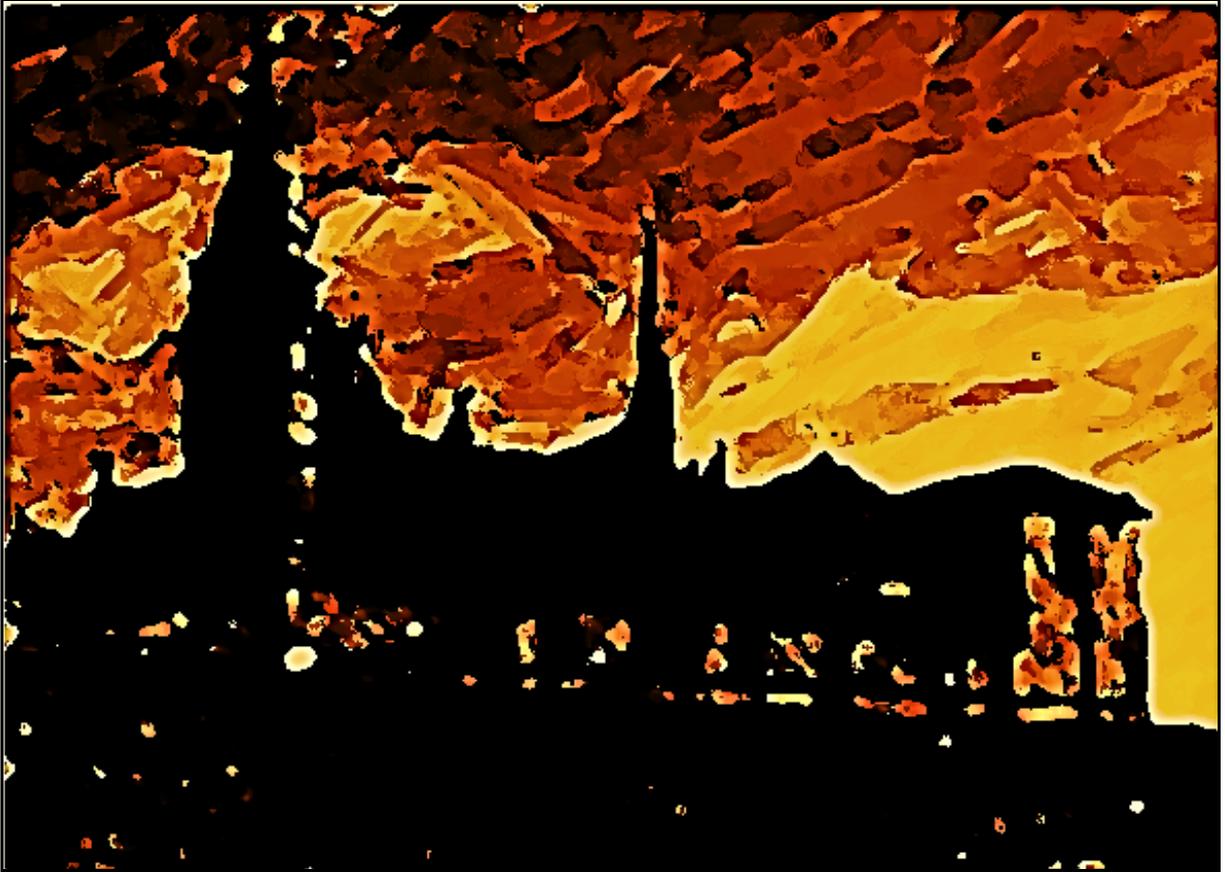
Perhaps. The words *heart*, *pluck*, and *mystery* may have their genesis in verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 49: '.....the meditation of my HEART shall be understanding.....I will open my DARK SAYING upon the HARP'.

Whatever the case, once Guildenstern has plucked the *heart* -- one of the middle letters, the T -- out of Hamlet's *mysTery* (the exact original orthography is unimportant), he will leave behind only *mys ery*, or *misery*. In chordal terms, the triad G-B-D sounds bright and rich. If the 'heart' or middle note, B, is plucked out, removed, the thirdless chord G-D which remains will sound unglad and deficient.

The words 'Call me what instrument you will' expedite the transition from a wind to a stringed instrument ('though you can *fret* me'). 'Fret' means first 'annoy', and secondly 'furnish with frets' (in the manner of a viol, lute, or guitar). How does a musician who 'plays upon' a violin or rebec vary the sounding length of a string? By applying to that string the fingertips of his left hand at exact points, whose whereabouts he has learned by assiduous practice. On the viol and lute, the fingerboard is 'fretted', or crossed at the requisite points by tied-on loops of gut: on the guitar, the frets are little bars of metal. In either case the frets mark the points behind which a player must apply his fingers. Since the player of a fretted instrument can rely on his frets to produce good intonation, a fretted instrument is much easier to play than an unfretted one. When Hamlet says 'though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me', he means: you can set bars across my fingerboard in the form of leading questions that you think will produce particular answers, as indeed you 'seem to know my stops' (the word 'stops' can denote the fingering of both wind and string instruments), but I'm not going to cooperate with you, I'm not going to be manipulated.

'Give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music.....' You imagine that if *you* say the right things, then *I'll* tell you what you want to hear. Hamlet perceives each of the two courtiers as trying to 'play upon' him, like a hack psychiatrist armed with a clipboard and a questionnaire.

'.....there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.' People as intelligent as Hamlet are not suitable instruments for investigators like Guildenstern, who -- like many tame courtiers -- can't actually *do* anything.



Elsinore (a dreadful painting by DZC)