

# **Eight Facts About *Thomas Pynchon, His Pavane and Galliard,* A Piece for Cello and Piano**

David Ocker\*

1. The first thing I decided about this piece was the title.<sup>1</sup>
2. Next I researched exact definitions of a pavane (slow dance in 4) and a galliard (fast dance in 6).<sup>2</sup>
3. The Galliard was finished on Groundhog Day. The Pavane was (almost) finished on Valentine's Day.<sup>3</sup>
4. Thomas Pynchon (author of the novels *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Vineland*) seems to have no connection whatever to Elizabethan dance music.<sup>4</sup>
5. Sixteenth-century composers are known to have preferred a harder edge between their pavaues and galliards.<sup>5</sup>
6. Roger Lebow, the cellist to whom this work is dedicated, is a fan of Thomas Pynchon's writings. So am I.<sup>6</sup>
7. Beethoven's Eighth Symphony (a classic of his often-ignored *minimalist* period) seems to have no connection whatever to Thomas Pynchon.<sup>7</sup>
8. The last thing I composed in *Thomas Pynchon, his Pavane and Galliard* was the first note.<sup>8</sup>

—South Pasadena

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It happened late at night. I used to take long walks from 11:00 p.m. to midnight on a predetermined course, in the Los Feliz area of Los Angeles, just east of Hollywood. The actual idea probably occurred to me as I was approaching the intersection of Los Feliz and Griffith Park Boulevards from the south. This was the same corner where, on a different occasion, a woman crossed the street to avoid walking near me. She must have thought I was a rapist.

<sup>2</sup>Actually, this involved little more than looking up the words in the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, which I had purchased at a used bookstore (now

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\*Adapted from program notes (never used) for the premier, April 23, 1988.

closed) near the corner of Hollywood and Vine. The book is stamped “Purchased at USPS auction.” I wonder what circumstances would lead to the confiscation of a music dictionary. To my embarrassment, the *Harvard Dictionary* is the most complete musical reference work I own, but who can afford thousands of dollars for a set of *Grove’s*, even though it would be tax deductible. In short, I did just enough research to avoid being called foolish or stupid by experts in early music—but it is unlikely they would give much credence to my piece anyway.

<sup>3</sup>According to the catalog of my works published by Leisure Planet Music (PO Box 923292, Sylmar, CA 91392–3281), *Thomas Pynchon, His Pavane and Galliard* was written in 1988. In fact, the Galliard was finished at 7:30 a.m. on February 2, just before my bedtime, but still well after sunrise in Punxsutawney. The Pavane was completed at 3:30 a.m. on February 15, very late on Valentine’s Day. My first new-music ensemble, the Bemidji Alliance, named after the piano player’s sister’s residence, gave its first performance on Groundhog Day in 1977.

<sup>4</sup>I would naturally be happy to learn information to the contrary. I remember reading *Gravity’s Rainbow* on a United Airlines flight from Omaha to Los Angeles. A stewardess escorted an elderly lady to a seat right next to mine and said, “I’m sure this gentleman here would be a very good conversationalist.” I stuck my nose back in the book and didn’t say a word to her for the entire flight. Another stewardess saw what I was reading and exclaimed, “*Gravity’s Rainbow*, I’m reading that. What a great book.” I still feel guilty for not talking to the old lady.

<sup>5</sup>Because I wrote the Galliard first, I knew exactly what would follow the Pavane. The Pavane begins with a long note in the cello and simple chords in the piano. Gradually the tempo increases until the music returns to the beginning, only at a faster tempo. Once this section is played again, the music begins to slowly introduce elements of the Galliard. The actual moment the Pavane becomes the Galliard is not clear unless you are visually following the score. The Galliard is in two sections which repeat exactly. In a conventional galliard the six beats are usually accented into two groups of three, with the occasional hemiola: three groups of two. In my Galliard there are many measures with five beats in them.

<sup>6</sup>Roger and I both play in an ensemble called XTET, which currently has twelve members. Before this we played briefly in another ensemble called The Thirteenth Floor, formed especially to perform Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*. Schoenberg was so afraid of the number thirteen that he died on Friday, September 13, 1951, at the age of 76. I wonder whether, had he lived another year, he would have died on September 14 at the age of 77. My father died at age 77, and I wrote a large set of chamber pieces in his memory, each of which has 77 measures in it. *Thomas Pynchon* has 107 measures in it, plus a pickup.

<sup>7</sup>The piano part of the Galliard is fairly brimming with quotations from the first movement of Beethoven's Eighth, one of my favorite pieces of music. Since the piano part is very contrapuntal, this is never particularly obvious. To throw people off the Beethoven's Eighth scent, there is one very obvious quotation from Beethoven's Sixth Symphony ("It's over, it's over, at last the storm . . ."), which the cellist is instructed to sing or whistle as well as play. Beethoven was unafraid to repeat motifs over and over again, transposing the pitch higher and higher to achieve a crescendo of tension and excitement. No one ever noticed that he had actually invented minimalist music in his Eighth Symphony because people listen to that symphony in the context of his other symphonies. Similarly, Ravel reinvented minimalism in his *Bolero*, but hardly anyone cares because the melody is so seductive. No one notices either that there is a quotation from "Sweet Georgia Brown" in the piano part of my Galliard. This is a good thing, because I have no reason to explain it.

<sup>8</sup>The first full measure and the last measure of *Thomas Pynchon, His Pavane and Galliard* are nearly identical in content, although very different in function. This leads naturally to the notion that the piece could be played continuously for a very long time by repeating from the end back to the second measure without a break. This would be tiring for the performers and the audience. It would serve only to emphasize my own mind games, filled as they are with repetition, recursion, and the ultimate return to the source. Ultimately, I believe this notion has something to do with the writings of Thomas Pynchon, but I can't prove it. That doesn't mean I can't believe in the connection. I know the Pynchon books inspired my little duet, because the first thing I decided was the title.