

**EARLY MUSIC FAKERY AND THE LUTE****Preamble**

Jeremy Montagu's recent and interesting FoMRHI communication 'The Fakery of Early Music' (Comm 2121) reminds us that it is not really possible to recreate musical performances and hear music exactly as early composers expected, the performers produced it and audiences heard. In short, since any performance is subject to modern tastes and the interpretation of historical evidence, it is, inevitably, a sort of fakery. He also explains how difficult it is to reproduce the music and sounds heard by the 'Old Ones' - not just in ensuring that the original ('authentic') playing techniques are correctly employed, but also because passing fads may impose a musical interpretation at odds with what the original composer expected and auditors experienced.

I certainly agree that one fundamental problem is a recent tendency amongst some 'period' musicians to wilfully ignore hard evidence which doesn't chime with their own preconceptions - thus producing a performance which satisfies them personally (and perhaps some modern auditors) but is not what the 'Old Ones' would have expected and heard. However, I'm not entirely pessimistic and believe that performances may still be achieved which, if not precisely identical to those heard by early audiences, are not too far removed. In particular, whilst some extant instruments may have changed and deteriorated over a long period of time (eg. many of the wind family as Jeremy highlights), I believe it quite practicable to produce stringed instruments which the early makers would have recognised as being not too dissimilar to their own productions. Similarly, should players choose to do so, there is much historical evidence to allow the re-creation of early playing techniques to something close to that of earlier times.

Nevertheless, as well as the areas of fakery Jeremy outlines, there are many others and, in particular, a significant and growing problem amongst the instruments I make, play and love - those of the lute family. Quite a number of the culpable players are professionals, who should know better, and so this modern trend for lute fakery continues to be perpetuated and even to become the established practice. The implications of this on the lute and its playing are briefly explored here.

**Modern lutes and makers**

However, all is not doom – the 'authenticity' (that word again!) of many lute (and guitar) type instruments made nowadays is pretty good: - that is, they are often closely modelled on extant period instruments and based on sound research including iconographic and documentary evidence. Thus many professional modern makers generally produce lutes which, I believe, reasonably reflect what the early makers themselves made.

To set this in context, it is useful to briefly consider the modern history of lute making. The pioneers making new lutes in the twentieth century (such as Arnold Dolmetsch in England and various, mostly German, makers on the continent) generally made quite heavy instruments and therefore without much of the delicate and rather subtle resonant responses of early lutes. It was in the 1960's that makers (many English) started more seriously to come to grips with the true features of historical lute construction. For example, Ian Harwood making instruments with some features of the early lute: - lightweight, properly barred, reasonably delicate bridges, etc. (as an aside, I still treasure a printed leaflet by Ian from the late 60s offering new 8 course lutes for £40! In my impecunious state, even this relatively small sum was beyond my truly modest student means and so I didn't buy, but decided to make an instrument myself which started me on an entirely new direction in life - though that's another story...).

Suffice it to say that by the mid/late 1970s there were quite a few makers offering instruments incorporating important aspects of historical lutes. This was further developed by makers, such as Michael Lowe, starting to look in even more detail at extant examples of particular instruments and making close copies directly modelled on them. The late Stephen Gottlieb was also important by making available, at very reasonable prices, drawings of instruments from many collections. Thus by the late 80s there were many makers offering a good range of historically based lutes and guitars. In short, whilst there are still a few modern lute makers who seem unaware of, or ignore, the historical evidence, by and large many now produce recognisable historically based instruments.

So, I hear you cry, where's the fakery if most makers these days closely model their instruments on extant lutes and other relevant information? The answer is that it's in the manner of playing them that the fakery can now appear. In short, it is not the instruments themselves, but the employment of an inappropriate playing technique for much of the lute repertoire, which perpetuates a deception. This is the target of my polemic.

### **Lute playing and performance**

Thus, whilst lute making now generally follows historical principles, many players (both amateur and professional) increasingly adopt an anachronistic plucking technique. This is to employ what's nowadays called in the 'thumb-under' technique for the entirety of the lute repertoire rather than just for the earlier period up to around the 1570s. This may seem an esoteric matter only relevant to players but, in fact, the right hand technique makes a significant difference to how the music sounds and therefore, of course, is important for wider audiences too.

For non-lute players, perhaps a few words of explanation about this technique is called for. From the late fifteenth century when finger plucking took over from plectrum playing, the right hand plucking fingers were held almost parallel to the strings and so the thumb lay behind (or 'under') the foremost fingers. This seems to have developed naturally from the earlier use of the plectrum held between the fingers and thumb in a similar horizontal position. To allow this hand plucking

position it is generally best to have the right forearm come over the belly of the instrument close to the base or bottom edge of the instrument. For almost a century, to around the 1570s, this technique was that most employed and generally requires the lute strings to be plucked quite high up on the belly and, indeed even over the rose - this naturally produces a gentle, soft and homogenous timbre.

However, by the later decades of the sixteenth century, changing demands gave rise to a radical change in plucking technique and arm position: partly to do with the changes in musical texture and of the kind of sound now preferred. This the more widespread adoption of a 'thumb-over' plucking technique: - where the forearm rests on the side of the lute (roughly about the bridge position) and the fingers now attack the strings at a much less shallow angle than necessary for the old 'thumb under' approach. This position allows more vigorous plucking and frees the thumb for a more independent role and, incidentally, in a position more suited to addressing numerous additional bass courses which soon became increasingly common. The early instructions are also very clear: the little finger still rests on the belly but now much closer to the bridge, perhaps even touching it and, indeed could even be found behind. All this produces a much more edgy, brilliant sound and allows more light and shade, dynamics, etc.

This new hand position can be seen in numerous representations from the late sixteenth century onwards. The historic change is also reported by no less a figure than Dowland (*A Varietie*...., 1610):

*'First, set your little finger on the belly of the Lute, not towards the rose, but a little lower, stretch out your Thombe with all the force you can, especially if thy Thombe be short, so that the other fingers may be carried in a manner of a fist, and let the Thombe be held higher then them, this in the beginning will be hard. Yet they which have a short Thombe may imitate those which strike the strings with the Thombe under the other fingers, which though it be nothing so elegant, yet to them it will be more easie.'*

But perhaps the best wider contemporary description is that given in Stobäus MS23. This celebrated treatise records the momentous change in plucking technique (translated):

*'The right hand is to be held close to the bridge, and the little finger firmly placed there and held down. The thumb is to be stretched out strongly, so that it stands out almost as a limb [by one knuckle] to the other fingers. The fingers are to be plucked cleanly inwards under the thumb, so that the sound resonates cleanly and strongly. The thumb is to be struck outwards, not inwards like the people in the past used to do..... For it has been shown that it is far better to strike the thumb outwards: it sounds purer, sharper, and brighter, the other way sounds very faulty and muffled'.*

This 'thumb-out' plucking position remained the general style for the remainder of the historical lute's existence (as an organological aside, the 'lute' or 'theorbo')

stop on the harpsichord mimics this edgy sound by placing its row of jacks closest to the bridge). However, it is precisely this clearly documented and historically preferred playing style which is effectively denied by a lot of modern lutenists who employ the anachronistic early 'thumb-under' technique for the entire lute repertoire and not just the earlier part for which it is, of course, appropriate.

### **Why does lute playing 'thumb-under' fakery persist?**

As Eph Segerman presciently remarked many years ago: the use of 'thumb-under' even by those who should have known better, was often a conscious attempt to distance themselves from the abhorred (and faintly embarrassing for them) modern 'classical' guitar which, ironically, many had started out playing. So nowadays many players, perhaps unwittingly, adopt this 'inauthentic' manner for the entirety of the lute repertoire - perhaps hoping that modern audiences will see that not only does the lute not look like a guitar, but that its right hand playing style is quite different too – and even, by implication, superior to that nowadays employed on its despised relative.

The adoption of this unhistoric ('inauthentic') technique purports to suggest that the performer is playing their instrument with the same historical technique used by all early lutenists and so they are therefore producing the 'correct' sound. Alas – they are not. It is, in practice, a deception on the audience who attend such events (or listen to recordings) expecting to hear works performed in a manner as close as possible to that of earlier times.

This modern fakery may also be perpetuated by some players with a vested interest (they don't have to become skilled at two different techniques) and, of course, by the recording industry which allows 'sound engineering' to turn anything into something considered more desirable. And not just by some professional players, but also by amateurs misleadingly taught that this fake practice is correct for the entirety of the lute repertoire. And so we end up in the present situation where, for much of the lute repertoire, the correct historical playing technique is ignored, and even criticised, and an incorrect uniform performance practice is promoted.

### **What can be done?**

The early days of the early music revival were frequently experimental, but also therefore exciting, and thus misunderstandings (sometimes enjoyable in retrospect) could arise. However, there was also great effort to try and understand alternatives and explore them - much of this outlook has now, to some extent, disappeared from parts of the early music world. This reactionary conservatism is, I suggest, the core problem.

So, how can we recapture the earlier exciting and highly desirable earlier situation and also thereby attract young people to early music in large numbers as, for example, the lute once did? Perhaps a second early music revolution is

now required, not only to address those many issues Jeremy identified but also those in the smaller, but still much loved, world of the lute.

The restoration of music and instrumental tuition in schools and local colleges would be a first good step. But I also believe a more diverse and critical exploration of early music performance practices, based on the historical evidence, could engender some of the excitement of earlier times - as well as having the benefit for the lute of encouraging the appropriate playing techniques in performance!

### **Postscript – some other fakery in early music...**

In addition to fakery in playing the lute and the examples Jeremy mentions, there are, of course, many more and I leave it to others to comment on these. Nevertheless, I can't resist mentioning a couple of other modern early music practices which, in my view, are also highly debatable:

- the widespread use of the falsetto male voice (ie using just the edges of the vocal chords) as an acceptable substitute for the early male soprano (ie castrato) roles (what's wrong with a suitable woman?);
- the ubiquitous involvement of modern sound recording engineers who often seem ignorant of how early voices and instruments actually sound in the flesh or, if they do know, prefer to suppress the knowledge and substitute their own preferred 'balance'.