

## 'Meantone Fretting'

Eric Franklin (Comm 1942, Bull. 119, p.4) is rightly doubtful of this curious practice. It is technically impossible, and the evidence which its exponents rely upon will not bear critical examination. The historical evidence also, examined fully, is convincing beyond reasonable doubt; fret spacings for equal temperament were always the norm. A few attempts to 'improve' on it are recorded, but never came to anything.

Any unequal spacing for twelve notes to the octave is unattainable with seven frets set at right angles to the centre line. I have examined all the pictures (about a hundred), dating from 1500 to 1800, of lutes and viols which show spacings clearly, which have come my way over many years. Not one of the hundreds of frets is sloped or bent; neither is such distortion even hinted at in any historical text known to me. Even with such distortions the result can be only an approximation; and sloping frets are of course inherently insecure.

There are two ways to achieve a genuine unequal temperament. One is to add more frets. This makes things more complicated for the player, the more so because different tunings of the open strings will need different patterns. The tenor will not be the same as the treble and bass, even though both are the conventional f.f.e.f.f. Varied tunings – Ganassi–Praetorius–lyra – would be a nightmare. The other option, fragmented fixed frets, has the same intolerable complications.

'MT fretting' first came to my notice in (I think) the 1960's, in the journal of the America Viola da Gamba Society. It reached a wider readership when it was advocated in Appendix 1 of Alison Crum's popular book 'Play the Viol' (OUP 1989) (I should make it clear that Alison did not write that appendix or recommend 'MT fretting', but was prudently non-committal). The appendix had not a word to say about historical practice. I pointed out the fallacies at the time, and hoped that that was the end of the myth.

But no; it persisted, and prompted me to raise the subject, at first as a detail in a wider discussion of the temperament business, but later more thoroughly, in 'Early Music Performer' (2000, 6, pp.13–16; 2000, 7, pp. 1–4; 2001, 8, pp. 13–16; 2001, 9, pp. 18–20). My conclusions have never to my knowledge been confuted or even challenged in any periodical of scholarly standard, and I hoped again that this was the last of the matter. Alas, not so. Such myths develop a life of their own. It has recently surfaced again, and involved me in weary hours of patient debate, in private correspondence and in print. I am frankly fed up with it.

It is a matter in which a little knowledge is dangerous. Temperament is an interesting subject, and in its simpler aspects, as applied to keyboard tunings, in which every individual note can be tuned independently, well documented and not difficult to understand. But many meantoners have difficulty in grasping that you can't do so with fretted instruments unless the frets are stepped and fragmented, and that the pattern changes if the tuning of the open strings is changed; this was for example completely ignored in the 1989 'Appendix 1'.

Having adopted belief in MT fretting as authentic historical practice, many devotees then display a widespread human failing well described by Francis Bacon four centuries ago:

*"The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable in itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects..."*

That is exactly my experience over many years of battling for historical truth on fret spacing.

Suggested reading for newcomers; the papers in EMP above, and 'Why People Believe Weird Things', Michael Shermer, Souvenir Press, 2007.