

### In defence of real lutes and theorbos—why history matters

It is now more than fifty years since I built my first lute, and during that time we have learned a great deal about the instruments, their repertoire and the manner of playing them. Most of this advance in knowledge has come about through intense study of historical source material: the instruments themselves, the music itself, literature and iconography.

Today, however, we have a crisis in the lute world. A significant number of professional lutenists has chosen to ignore many of the things which are known about historical instruments and the way of playing them, preferring instead to invent their own ways of doing things. This manifests itself most clearly when members of the lute family are employed as continuo instruments. Does this matter? Surely, so long as the person is playing on an instrument with a lute-shaped body and some sort of neck-extension, that is all that matters. Well, clearly, for a number of people that is, indeed, all that matters but, surely, this is not satisfactory.

The lute had a very complicated history, not least because it was always being modified to suit particular musical requirements at various times and in various places. Those people who ignore historical practices are failing to understand these subtleties of the lute's history and this lack of understanding often manifests itself in those players' whole approach to the music.

Let me quote from J. A. Scheibe in 1740. He was a composer and the Capellmeister in Brandenburg-Culmbach and later at the court of Christian VI of Denmark:

How can a piece of music have the effect its author has sought to achieve if it is not also set up and performed in accordance with the wishes of the same and in conformity with his intentions?<sup>1</sup>

Although we know a lot about historical lutes and performing practice there is a lot that we do not know, and that is why it has always seemed to me that the best we can do, at this distance in time, is to try to discover what would have been considered as 'normal practice' at any given time and place. There will always have been people who 'did their own thing' but we are not in a position to judge such eccentricity. We can only hope to discover what the majority was doing and, I think, we should use that as the basis for what we ourselves do.

I will use this picture to represent the Italian theorbo or chitarrone.



It shows a theorbo by Magno Stegher which is in the Ueno Gakuen collection in Japan. Now, many people

think that the defining characteristic of the theorbo is its long neck-extension. Of course, it isn't! The theorbo actually seems to pre-date the invention of the extended neck. No, the defining characteristic is the tuning, i.e. the lowering by an octave of the first or first and second courses, and this was done for one reason only. Because of the large size of the instrument and the long string-length of the fingerboard-strings, it was physically impossible to tune those courses up to lute pitch.

If we think about an all-gut-strung renaissance lute, it is a treble-heavy instrument. When such an instrument plays with other lutes or with other instruments, the bass gets lost. As musical styles changed towards the end of the 16th century it became even more important to have some sort of lute with a strong bass which could cope with music which was strongly founded on its bass line. Experimentation showed that by taking, for example, a 6- or 7- course bass lute in D and restringing it so that it could be tuned to G or even A, the resulting thinner strings on the lower courses together with the large size of the bass-lute body produced a louder and clearer bass response. Of course, because of the long string-length, it then became impossible to tune the first, and often the first and second courses, up to lute tuning and they were lowered an octave. The evidence implies that the impossibility of tuning the first and second courses up to lute pitch was the only reason why these courses were tuned an octave lower. Conversely, if a theorbo is small enough to allow the second course to be tuned to the higher octave, this should be done.

These days I see many players, mainly in Europe, playing on small theorbos which really do not need their second courses tuned down an octave, even though those players persist in doing this. This completely misunderstands the true nature of the theorbo—its large size is the very essence of it.

Michael Praetorius, in 1619, said of the theorbo:

Because of the large and wide finger stretches, coloratura and divisions are not possible, moreover a common and appropriate technique must be used.<sup>2</sup>

I imagine that Praetorius never had the opportunity to hear the great Italian virtuosi.

As I said, theorbos were big instruments. This Magno Stegher has string lengths of 92 cm and 169.5 cm. Here are just a few further examples:

Magno Dieffopruchar, London Royal College, 93.4 and 170 cm

Matteus Buchenberg, Victoria and Albert Museum, 89.0 and 159 cm

Matteus Buchenberg, Brussels Royal Museum, 99.2 cm

Magno Graill, Rome, 96.4 and long neck broken off at 180 cm

Matteo Sellas, Paris, 89.0 cm (neck-extension cut in 18th century)

Giorgio Sellas, Paris, 96.7 and 177.3 cm

Martin Kaiser, Paris, 88.4 and 175 cm

Giovanni Tessler, Christies' sale, 89.6 and 176 cm.

And below is some pictorial evidence.



Back of a chitarrone by Mattheus Buchenberg, Rome 1608, private collection.

This Matteus Buchenberg instrument has a string length of around 99 cm. These illustrations show the characteristic flattened back of the Italian chitarrone.



Engraving by Stephanus Picart of a painting by Lionello Spada (1576–1622, Paris, Louvre).

This engraving was made after the painting by Lionello Spada which was in the collection of Louis XIV.



Painting by Ludovico Lana (c.1597–1646) of Geronimo Valeriani, lutenist to the Duke of Modena (the title on the music is 'Corrente per la tiorba').



Portrait of Gerolamo Gallo by Luciano Borzone c.1625  
(the brand-mark painted at the top of the soundboard shows that this theorbo was made by Buchenberg).



Left: Coloured drawing by Jacopo Confortini (1602–72), Florence; right: Lady playing a large French theorbo, Sotheby's, lot no. 441, 29th October 2014.

This last is an important painting showing the whole of a French theorbo with all the characteristic details which we know from other iconography and the surviving instrument in the Yale collection, discussed below. Note the right-hand position in all of these pictures. This could well tell us something about string tension as well as tone quality.

As I said, I see many people today playing on instruments which are far too small to be real theorbos, or, at least, are only suitable as theorbos with just the first course lowered an octave like the 1611 Venere in Vienna,<sup>3</sup> or the Matteo Sellas instrument in Brussels.<sup>4</sup>

'Ah!', these players say, 'it is impossible to play the solo repertoire on such large theorbos!' Let us imagine that I am about to organise a concert. I ask a violinist if he would play the Elgar 'cello concerto. The violinist would, no doubt, protest that he did not play the 'cello, but only the violin. I would reply, 'What is the problem? Both instruments belong to the same family, they both have four strings, they are tuned in fifths and they are played with a bow.' Still, the violinist would protest that he did not play the 'cello. Ridiculous, of course, and yet, every lutenist who gets a theorbo thinks he should be able to rattle off the music of

the greatest theorbo virtuosi. When they find they can't do it, they decide that the problem must be the instrument and they go off to a maker and commission a small instrument which is easier to play. Well, a theorbo is no more a lute than a 'cello is a violin! Indeed, the difference between the string length of a violin and that of a 'cello is similar to that between a G lute and a proper-sized theorbo! It is worth listening to the recordings of those players who do play the solo music on the proper-sized instruments. After all, I don't think there is any evidence that people in the 17th century were all giants!

'Well, it is so difficult to travel with those large theorbos.' Imagine that you were attending a performance of Brahms' *German Requiem* and you were very surprised to see that the harpist, instead of playing on a proper orchestral harp, was playing on a small, late-15th-century-style gothic harp. You would be equally surprised, upon asking the harpist why they were doing this, to hear the reply, 'Well, it is so difficult to travel with an orchestral harp and I find the small gothic model so much more convenient.'

I am not aware that double-bass players go to their instrument makers and, since they find their instrument so awkward to play and so difficult to travel with, ask, 'Could you, please build me a double-bass the size of a 'cello?'

Why is it that lutenists seem to feel free to invent all sorts of distortions of historical practice? Is it because they do not understand the complex history of the lute? Or, perhaps, they do know what they should be doing, but just don't care. Perhaps it is because, unlike with other instruments, very few lutenists have the opportunity to play on historical lutes and so they are less familiar with the 'real thing'. When some lutenists order an instrument from a maker these days it seems a little like ordering a meal in a restaurant. 'I would like such and such but could I have it without this but with some of that instead?'

I notice, also, that many players today use seven or eight courses on their theorbo fingerboards when the usual disposition on the vast majority of historical theorbos was six courses on the fingerboard and eight diapasons. They say that they must be able to play the low chromatic notes A flat/G sharp and F sharp, but no theorbist in the 17th century could ever play these notes because, with only six courses on the fingerboard, they simply did not exist on the theorbo unless the diapasons were re-tuned.

I once had a client who, having played on my French theorbo, decided that it was this type of instrument which would suit his needs best. 'Of course,' he said, 'I would need to have eight courses on the fingerboard'. When I asked him 'why?' and he replied that he had to be able to play the chromatic bass notes because they were written in the music and music directors expected him to be able to play them, I pointed out to him that no theorbist in the 17th century could have played those notes. He couldn't understand why I refused to do what he wanted as he said that it was a very simple thing to do. I replied that that was exactly why I wouldn't do it because it was just as simple in the 17th century but those players and makers chose not to do it. If we start to see problems with historical instruments and begin to invent new instruments to solve those perceived problems, then we shall never discover how the players in the past dealt with these matters which they, clearly, did not see as problems. This particular client, of course, simply went to another lutemaker who provided him with exactly what he wanted.

Incidentally, many Italian theorbos have double courses on the fingerboard; even the largest sized ones. How many players today follow this practice?

Of course, one can understand how these unhistorical practices spread wider and wider and become accepted. The player, when the music director asks him to do things of which the historical instrument is incapable, fears that he will not get further employment unless he gets an instrument which can fulfill the director's wishes. The maker fears that he will not get further orders unless he provides the player with everything he asks for.

One important piece of evidence that shows that a 76 cm string length is too short for tuning in A with the first and second courses lowered comes from France. Towards the end of the 17th and into the 18th century there was a smaller theorbo, the 'théorbe des pièces' or 'lesser French theorbo fitt for lessons' as the Talbot MS describes it. In that manuscript, measurements for such an instrument are given and, indeed, one survives in the Yale University collection. It was made by Wendelio Venere, converted to a small French theorbo and later to an angélique. The string length is 74.3 cm. But what is significant is that it is intended to be tuned in D, a fourth higher than the usual A tuning. Can you think of any other plucked instrument where one string length can

serve two different tunings a fourth apart? That would go against the whole theory of instrument design at a time when definite proportions were being used.

The other very important plucked continuo instrument is, of course, the archlute. There are two main kinds; the one we tend to call the 'liuto attiorbato' and then the long-necked archlute. Both of these instruments are true lutes and, therefore, will always have double courses on the fingerboard. This is nothing unusual; after all, it is worth remembering that almost all plucked instruments of this period had double courses: lute, cittern, orpharion, bandora, renaissance guitar, baroque guitar and mandolin. The only real exceptions to this are most French theorbos; some Italian theorbos and the angélique.

The 'liuto attiorbato' (see an example by Sellas, below) is really the Italian baroque lute and usually has six or seven double courses on the fingerboard (sometimes a single chanterelle) and double diapasons making 11, 13 or 14 courses in all.

There is one instrument by Magno Dieffopruchar (presumably converted by Sellas, see below) which has 17 courses (10 x 2 and 7 x 2, though the bridge has only 32 holes), all double. This is a large instrument of 69 cm string length. (See further photographs in *The Lutezine* 118, p. 15.)

(Editors note: see *The Lutezine* 126 for Mimmo Peruffo's discussion of the musical inadequacy of plain gut bass strings: single diapasons on the liuto attiorbato were probably not an option, since without a very long neck, the added clarity of tone that came from octave double stringing was needed alongside gut basses that were too short and fat to make a really good bass sound.)



Left: Liuto attiorbato by Matteo Sellas, Venice 1638, Paris E1028;  
right: Liuto attiorbato by Magno Duiffopruchar, Venice, Barcelona MNAC, 404.

The long-necked archlute, I assume, was an attempt to combine the virtues of the lute with those of the theorbo. Like the theorbo, they had six courses on the fingerboard and eight single diapasons. The fingerboard strings were always double (sometimes with a single chanterelle).



Left: Archlute by Magno Dieffopruchar, Venice, Vienna, C45; centre: Archlute by David Techler, Rome; New York Metropolitan Museum; right: Portrait of an archlute player by Francesco Trevisani (1656–1746)

A large number of players today are removing half the strings from their archlutes and ‘liuti attiorbati’ and some even from 13-course German baroque lutes. Why do they do this? Perhaps it is because most people nowadays tend only to play on single-strung theorbos and think the archlute ought to be the same. Perhaps they think it enables them to play more loudly and, as we know, these days loudness is considered a major virtue in music. Granted, it is more difficult to make a good, strong sound on double courses but, just as violinists, flautists etc. have to learn how to make a good sound on their instruments, so, I’m afraid, lutenists must learn likewise. Perhaps these players have never managed to banish from their minds the aesthetic of the modern guitar which, of course, has nothing whatsoever to do with our historical instruments.

So far as I am aware, these single-strung archlutes are a completely modern invention and did not exist at all in times past. They are, perhaps, most closely related to the ‘Wandervogellauten’ of the early 20th-century German folk-revival.

I often think that people imagine these days that the role of plucked continuo is to provide a constant background of sound—a clatter of plucking, just as younger people, getting on a bus or train, immediately stick things in their ears so that they can have a constant background noise, clearly being afraid of silence or their own thoughts. I think the use of these unhistorical instruments encourages this.

A little while ago I went to a concert at the Wigmore Hall given by a well-known ensemble who were playing a programme of wonderful 17th-century French music. I noticed that the music director did not choose to play continuo on a modern Steinway concert grand piano but on a French-style harpsichord. The plucked continuo, however, was on one of these newly-invented lute-instruments (described in the programme, of course, as a theorbo). It was lute sized with a neck-extension, tuned like a lute but with single strings. This allowed the player to do all sorts of virtuoso passage work with plenty of strumming and scales up and down, turning each piece into a mini lute concerto. This approach was even employed in an air de cour by Moulinié for which the composer had, kindly, provided an accompaniment in tablature. ‘Le bon gout’ it certainly was not! I wonder why the player did not play on a 10-string classical guitar as guitarists sometimes do when they are pretending to be lutenists. I suppose it would then have been more difficult for him to pretend that he was being historical.

Let me give you one or two quotations from historical sources. The first is from Bacilly, from his *L’art de Bien Chanter*.<sup>5</sup>

Among the instruments used at present to sustain the voice are the harpsichord, the viol and the theorbo, the harp being no longer in use. The viol and the harpsichord haven't the grace and the accommodation found in the theorbo, which is a necessary thing for accompanying all kinds of voices. This may be because the sweetness of the theorbo adapts itself to weak and delicate voices while the other instruments tend to obscure such a voice. The question, therefore, arises: 'Is it necessary to be accompanied by a theorbo in order to perform a song properly?'

Undoubtedly, the beauty of a song is not set off to good advantage when it is accompanied by an instrument which obscures the voice. The instrument ought to accompany the person singing the melody . . . for the purposes of outlining the harmonies properly. This type of accompaniment is much more serviceable than the type in which the union of voice and instrument serves only to suffocate the fine points of the song in the resulting confusion, even though the result may be harmonically appropriate.

However, it is necessary to establish the fact that if the theorbo isn't played with moderation—if the player adds too much confusing figuration (as do most accompanists, more to demonstrate the dexterity of their fingers than to aid the person they are accompanying) it then becomes an accompaniment of the theorbo by the voice rather than the reverse.

Denis Delair (1690) states that:<sup>6</sup>

The theorbo does not have a range that is high enough to supply the compass needed for the treble clefs. One makes up for this defect by taking the treble notes an octave lower.

Not every instrument is suitable for accompanying since, in accompaniment, the trebles should not dominate the basses . . . This is the reason one ordinarily does not use the lute or guitar to accompany, since the trebles are too dominant and the basses not long enough.

Very few chords are played in fast pieces and in slow recitatives chords are separated by some silence in order to feature the voice.

And from an earlier generation, Agostino Agazzari (1607):<sup>7</sup>

I say the same of the lute, harp, theorbo, harpsichord etc., when they serve as a foundation with one or more voices singing above them, for in this case, to support the voice, they must maintain a solid, sonorous, sustained harmony, playing now piano, now forte, according to the quality and quantity of the voices, the place and the work, while, to avoid interfering with the singer, they must not re-strike the strings too often when he executes a passage or expresses a passion.

He who plays the lute (which is the noblest instrument of them all) must play it nobly, with much invention and variety, not as is done by those who, because they have a ready hand, do nothing but play runs and make divisions from beginning to end when playing with other instruments which do the same, in all of which, nothing is heard but babel and confusion, displeasing and disagreeable to the listener.

How do these modern-day players manage to get away with such blatantly unhistorical practices? Well, of course, the answer is ignorance and it is not just on the part of the players.

I think there are three groups of people involved in all of this. First, the players themselves. Are they ignorant of the history of their own instrument? For professional players, that would be unacceptable. It is forty years since the late Robert Spencer published an article in *Early Music* (October 1976) entitled 'Chitarrone, Theorbo and Archlute' (now at <http://www.vanedwards.co.uk/spencer/html/>). Yes, we have learned quite

a lot since then but it is still the best introduction to the subject and every lute student should read it and absorb it.

Perhaps these players know what they ought to do but simply couldn't care less about doing it. That would be worse than unacceptable. In this group I would also include teachers because they have the responsibility of passing on to their pupils the proper, historical way of doing things. Students and young players inevitably have a narrow view of their music-making, tending to copy what they see around them and especially following the example of any famous groups. This is how unhistorical practices spread—perhaps this is why we have to experience the annoying habit of sticking drums with everything! It is the teachers' role not to encourage such things but to point out how different the historical practice was. Remember Socrates—he was unjustly accused of corrupting the young but he had to drink hemlock just the same!

The next group is that of music directors and I would include here directors of early music festivals and the 'fixers', i.e. those people who book the players in ensembles. These are all the people who employ lutenists. Even though throughout the whole period with which we are concerned the lute and its related instruments were central to music-making, they are, today, considered rather fringe instruments and directors of music, for the most part, do not feel the need to understand the various types of lutes and theorbos. Their background is most likely to be as a keyboard player, an orchestral stringed-instrument player or a choral conductor, and their feeling no need to understand the lute is the same as if a specialist in 19th and early 20th-century music were to ignore the piano as a completely alien instrument. They, probably, just assume that the lutenist will turn up with the right sort of instrument for the job. Well, they should be able to trust the lutenist but, as I have indicated, such trust is often ill-founded. I should like to think that music directors would learn enough about plucked continuo instruments and stop employing players who blatantly flout historical practice. Their ignorance often means that plucked continuo is used in an unsuitable way and is, therefore, not as successful as it should be. We see theorbos and, Heaven help us, baroque guitars in works by Bach. Did Bach ever use a theorbo, I wonder?

When Constantijn Huygens was part of a diplomatic trip to Venice, he went to vespers on the feast of St John the Baptist in the church of St John and St Lucy and heard music composed and directed by Monteverdi. He describes the forces as 10 or 12 voices accompanied by 2 cornetti, 2 violins, 2 fagotti, a bass viol of monstrous size, organs and 4 theorbos.<sup>8</sup> How often do we hear an ensemble like that today?

The third group is that of the critics and the audience. Critics generally know nothing about lutes and, even if they did, would probably be too polite to criticise a player for being blatantly unhistorical, or may consider that it didn't matter.

The audience is the only group which is entirely innocent. Because there has been an 'Early Music Movement' over the past fifty or so years they, reasonably, assume, when they see a lute-like instrument with some sort of neck extension, that they are about to hear an historically-minded performance, only to be deceived! I can illustrate this in another way. Everyone thinks that they can own Bach. His music is played on the banjo, the piano-accordion, the concert grand piano and the modern classical guitar but, with these instruments, no one is under the illusion that they are hearing the music as Bach might have intended it to be heard. When it is arranged and played on a theorbo or a single-strung 'archlute', because of the 'Early Music Movement' most audiences would assume that they were listening to the sort of performance which might have been heard in Bach's day whereas, in fact, they are not getting anything different from the performance on the banjo or piano-accordion.

As you know, when you go to a concert, you usually get a programme which lists the music about to be played, probably some programme notes as well as short biographies of the performers. These biographies will tell you with whom the players studied, all the masterclasses in which they have participated and all the ensembles they have played in (many of which you will never have heard of) but I have never read anything to the effect that 'these players are not particularly interested in an historical way of doing things, preferring, instead, their own way, unrestricted by considerations of the past.' Well, why not? That would simply be being honest with the audience who would then know what it was they were listening to.

You probably think that I am being totally negative and you may be muttering things about 'the authenticity police'. Everything that I have said boils down to one word: 'respect'. We should remember that all we

who earn our livings from the music of the past whether as players, instrument-makers or musicologists—we are all parasites. We depend for our livelihoods on the creativity of people three, four or five hundred years ago. We should admit that the instrument makers and performers of the past did actually know what they were doing. In the case of the lute, they were sophisticated people dealing with a highly refined instrument. If something seems to us to be problematic or not to work, then the problem almost certainly lies with us rather than with them. They knew far more about their own music and their instruments than we shall ever know, and I think we would gain deeper understanding if we simply accepted what they did as being what they chose to do rather than assuming that we know better and can improve on their inadequate or unsuitable methods.

People will say that there was a lot of freedom in performance practice in the past. Well, there was some freedom in some areas and not in others, and it is up to our researches to try to discover the details of those. There is also a lot of evidence that composers wanted their music to be performed according to their instructions and that even goes into modern times. François Couperin complained that although he had gone to the trouble of giving detailed instructions as to the performance of his music, people, nevertheless, were ignoring these.<sup>9</sup> Ravel, after a performance of his 'Bolero', complained to Toscanini, 'That's not my tempo'. Toscanini replied 'When I play your tempo, the piece is ineffective'. Ravel answered 'Then don't play it'.<sup>10</sup> Even Wagner said 'I care absolutely nothing about my things being given: I am anxious that they should be so given as I intended: he who will not or cannot do that, let him leave them alone'.<sup>11</sup>

I should like to recommend two books which do not concern themselves with lutes but do relate to these general problems: *The Composers' Intentions* (Boydell, 2015) by Andrew Parrott, and *The Notation is not the Music* (Indiana University Press, 2013) by Barth Kuijken.

Of course, all these arguments have been rehearsed for the last forty or fifty years, and I find it particularly depressing that in my world of the lute there is still a need to reiterate them today. The least we can do is to respect the players and makers of the past and their mastery of their own arts.

One can usually find an apposite quotation from Roger North, Thomas Mace or the Mary Burwell Lute Tutor and I will end with one from the latter, an English source of around 1670. The teacher is advising the pupil of the correct approach when playing music not of their own composition:

He must shake off self-love in playing those lessons as the author does, without altering or adding anything of his own which, if he does, he will disoblige them and be esteemed a vain man, as if he had more wit than those whose production he is glad to borrow.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Johann Adolf Scheibe, *Der Critische Musicus* (Hamburg, 1740), pp. 709-10.
- 2 Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma musicum* band II De Organographia (Wolfenbuettel, 1619) p. 52.
- 3 Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, C47.
- 4 Brussels Instrument Museum, no. 255.
- 5 Bertrand de Bacilly, *Remarques curieuses sur l'Art de Bien Chanter*, 1668) from the section on the necessity of instrumental accompaniment in vocal music.
- 6 Denis Delair, *Traité d'accompagnement pour le theorbe, et le clavecin*. (Paris, 1690).
- 7 Agostino Agazzari, *Del sonare sopra il basso* (1607).
- 8 Constantijn Huygens, *Journal van de Reis naar Venetie*.
- 9 François Couperin, *Pieces de Clavecin III*, (Paris, 1722).
- 10 M. Long, *At the piano with Maurice Ravel* (London, 1973), p. 18.
- 11 Richard Wagner, *Saemtliche Briefe* (Leipzig, 1993); a letter of 30th December 1852.
- 12 The Burwell Lute Tutor (facsimile, Boethius Press, 1974). p. 40<sup>v</sup>.