

**Some Notes in the Margin on Charles Besnainou's Comm 2129; notice of a full rejoinder at <https://aquilacorde.com/en/a/>**

Charles Besnainou's Comm 2129 (Some Notes in the Margin on Mimmo Peruffo's Comm 2095, *FoMRHI Q 143*, Sept. 2018; *The Theory and Practice of Twisting Strings*) in response to my Comm 2095 which appeared in *FoMRHI Q 143* dd. September 2018 is quite extensive: our subsequent response would not only have required a lot of space in the FoMRHI bulletin but would also have imposed heavy limitations on the historical and iconographic documentation we wish to share with the reader. We have therefore decided on a novelty for FoMRHI: to give here a simple final summary with a web link and the related QR code that will allow the interested reader to access online the complete answer with a large amount of documentation, both historical and iconographic.

Among all the 56 pages of Mr Besnainou's work, just 18 relate to lute basses. The remaining pages are dedicated to relating his interesting experiments and some historical references.

To deal with 17th century lute basses, Mr. Besnainou ranges from the Middle Ages to the ancient Romans and Etruscans, and then goes on to deal with ethnic African and Asian instruments (this time of the 20th century), suggesting that, since those instruments fit strings made like ropes, even European instruments at a chronological distance of four centuries earlier (such as lute basses), or a thousand years older, shouldn't have been different because, to quote him, string technology is '*out of space and time*'.

When it finally seems that we get into the heart of the matter - that is, finally, dealing with Europe in the 16th or 17th centuries, he spends most of his time discussing the bass strings of bowed instruments, where one can guess that he considers the bass strings, whether they are for stringed instruments or basses of the lute, to be made in the same way.

He also uses incorrect terminologies (he uses the term violoncello for what is instead a bass violin; the '*...i bassi di Violoni*' found in an Italian book of the second half of the 16th century becomes in his translation a 'violin' instead a violone). There are also some real calculation errors (such as the value of Mersenne's 'Line', for example, and the resulting calculations).

After this wide overflight *in time and space*, having finally arrived at the historical period related to the lute (i.e. late 16th and 17th centuries), one would expect to deal with the specific topic in discussion, but no, not yet; it's time first to deal with the 18th century, but even in this case the topics used to discuss the bass strings of our lute of the 17th century focus on the five-course guitar and the cello instead. And in the middle of the Age of Enlightenment, in the century represented by wound basses and in the presence of a large number of historical sources and evidence that prove the opposite, improbable set-ups that use only gut are proposed.

The low wound strings are indeed barely mentioned if not just for the fourth '*a-demi*' strings of J. B. Forqueray, where he proposes a manufacturing theory that, starting from the twisted colonnade of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, seems to be intended as an historical solution (and not just a simple, but interesting, modern technical solution).

Following this digression, we finally get to the specifics of lute basses (that was the exclusive subject of our Comm 2095) but we discover that the material presented as support for his arguments is really thin: an iconographic image by Caravaggio, a painting by Rutilio Manetti (that actually seems to contradict his hypothesis) and lastly a couple of arguments taken from Dowland and Mace of which, instead of analysing all the content of these two important treatises, he limits himself to giving his personal, subjective interpretation to the words 'knot', used by Dowland, and 'smooth', used by Mace,

without reconsidering such words by comparing them in light of all written evidence, as we have always done.

Whenever Mr Besnainou has to deal with uncomfortable points in our work, he simply overlooks such arguments, constantly using a tiresome rhetorical tone, at times denigratory, that he could have frankly avoided.

His work, however useful and very interesting in its experimental parts (and we suggest everyone to follow it carefully), reminds us of a big-looking, growling dog that loses its impressive size and ferocious appearance once shaved.

The historical and iconographic sources used by Mr Besnainou are often poorly supported by facts, and sometimes give the impression of incomplete research into historical string-making, into treatises regarding historical string types and how they were used, and of treatises on lutes of that period. He passes over inconvenient evidence, for instance, he still has not released any comment on our iconographic examples regarding the details of lute bridges, nor on the treatises' numerous references to the smooth surface of lute basses. Also Mersenne's statement that gut strings were polished with an abrasive plant until they were smooth cylinders receives no comment.

A single iconographic reference is given to summon up the entire context of the 17th century, deciding to ignore dozens of other references that may give another statistical overview. He wholly disregards the topic of string colouring and how we dealt with it in detail: the only example he brings is a modern, brown-coloured gut suture catgut, treated with iodine, comparing it with the brownish colouring of lute bass strings used 400 years ago.

I believe his theory definitely collapses when we come to Manetti's painting. It clearly depicts two different instruments, and its considerable size provides very clear details of both: a cittern with low-twisted metal wires (and there are several written sources that describe how they should be manufactured) and an eight-course lute in which all gut bass strings are brown and perfectly smooth, showing no sign of bumped surfaces. If lute basses were twisted like ropes (like the ones on the cittern), why didn't the painter depict them the same way?

But the most astonishing aspect of this debate is that Mr Besnainou seems not to realise that our final hypothesis is indeed a convergence of the two theories once in opposition. Therefore, the real question is: what was the point of all this discussion?

A full detailed answer in print to Charles Besnainou's Comm 2129 would have used too much space, with the impossibility of sharing with the readers a certain amount of iconographic and written documentation.

We have therefore preferred to submit here a simple summary, reporting our entire response, along with links, photographs, films, iconography and written historical documentation, at the following link:

<https://aquilacorde.com/a/>

As an alternative, it is also possible to access the full response via this QR code:



I prefer not to dwell on the personal attacks I've received, preferring a fair and balanced response in the presentation of the facts and evidence.

*'Much Ado About Nothing'* as William Shakespeare might have put it.