

## The “French Lute”: The Golden Age of the Baroque Lute in the Grand Siècle

Although the lute enjoyed great favour throughout Europe during the Renaissance, the baroque lute may be regarded as a French phenomenon. Thomas Mace, one of the few authors who wrote extensively on the instrument, called it the “French lute”.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, the anonymous author of the *Burwell Lute Tutor* wrote that:

“the viol is the instrument of England, the guitar that of Spain, the theorbo that of Italy, the virginal or harpsichord [harpsicall] that of Germany, the harp that of Ireland, and so of others according to the genius of each nation [however] the French are in possession of the lute, that it is their instrument.”<sup>2</sup>

The *Burwell* Author went so far as to seek the origins of French lute supremacy in classical antiquity, saying that the French genius for the lute was a form of revenge for the Roman conquest of Gaul. The “ingenious” French, “moved by a desire of revenge against the Senate of Rome” and seeking to “subdue those that had subdued them [...] cast their eyes upon the fine arts that flourished then at Rome – the mathematics, and the parts of it that best become a gentleman (as fortification, music, picture-drawing, sculpture, the arts of riding, fencing and dancing). The French then ravished from the Romans their liberty and those fine sciences, in which they have so much refined themselves since that they do excel in it at the présent above the Italians ...”<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the actual motivations of the French lutenists may have been, it is clear that this new lute that Mace refers to, this “French lute”, was

conceived and perfected in France. Aside from certain organological differences with the renaissance lute, such as the addition of several diapason strings in order to extend the bass range downwards, the main characteristic of the new instrument was its tuning – and not its shape, as the best French lutes were often old converted lutes from Bologna, such as those of Maler or Frei.

### The “French Revolution”: Origins of the D-minor *accord nouveau*

The beginning of the seventeenth-century witnessed the emergence of two distinct traditions of lute tuning in Europe, one Italian, the other French. The French tradition would soon dominate the Continent, while the Italian tradition kept to its own course. Although there were Italians such as P.P. Melli and Bernardo Gianoncelli who experimented with new lute tunings, the Italian tradition is marked by its essential retention of the *vieil ton* (G-c-f-a-d'-g'). This tuning would live itself out to the last days of the lute in Italy. The French tradition, however, was marked by such radical change and sustained experimentation that it can be appropriately considered a “French Revolution” for the lute.

By 1600 Antoine Francisque was experimenting with new tunings, which he called *cordes avallées*, in *Le Trésor d'Orphée*.<sup>4</sup> This vogue for new tunings, also evident in Besard's *Thesaurus harmonicus* (1603),<sup>5</sup> involved lowering the fourth, fifth and sixth courses to give drone-like 4ths and 5ths; these tunings were used mainly for branles and other rustic dance pieces. This can be summed up as the first “moderate” phase of the lute-tuning revolution, one that lasted until about 1620.

The second phase of the revolution, lasting from roughly 1620-1650, is somewhat obscured due to a gap in French lute sources from the 1640's. Furthermore, the first publication to use the new tunings, Pierre Ballard's *Tablature de luth de différents auteurs sur l'accord ordinaire et extraordinaire* (Paris, 1623) is now lost, meaning that it is impossible to know more exactly when certain tunings, especially the d-minor tuning (A-d-f-a-d'-f'), first made its appearance. The earliest collection to use the D-minor tuning is the 1638 publication of Pierre Ballard and Pierre Gaultier, although the tuning may well have been in use considerably earlier.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, other collections sporting various *accords nouveaux* survive, containing fine music by Mesangeau, Chancy, Belleville, Robert Ballard, Pierre Gautier and others.

The key development in this phase is that, unlike the earlier "moderate" phase of the revolution, where the *cordes avallées* were essentially a scordatura device, the *accords nouveaux* totally reconfigured the instrument. It is for this reason that the second period can be rightly considered to be the "radical" phase of the revolution. Indeed, one can well imagine that for contemporary amateurs trying to keep their instruments appropriately strung (and in tune!), that this period of ever-changing *accords* could easily have been dubbed "The Great Terror". Although many different tunings existed throughout this time – there were perhaps twenty in varying degrees of regular use – they mainly followed a new trend that favoured open thirds rather than fourths as the principal interval. This is a break from the renaissance lute in *vieil ton*, which was tuned like a viol in fourths. These new tunings naturally yielded harmonic triads when openly strummed, and this in turn greatly simplified chordal fingerings. Excepting Italy, this "French Revolution" quickly

swept all of Europe. The *accords nouveaux* were widely used in England from the 1630s onwards. They came to dominate north of the Rhine too, penetrating as far north as Sweden. The revolution completely overtook German-speaking territories, and then travelled eastward, notably conquering Bohemia, and then Silesia in present day Poland. Although the last printed sources to make significant use of multiple *accords nouveaux* are those by Esaias Reusner (1676)<sup>7</sup> and Jakob Kremberg (1689),<sup>8</sup> from 1650 onward until the end of the eighteenth century the d-minor tuning became the rule, the others the exception. The *vieil ton* was a thing of the past. This marks the transition to the third and final phase of the lute's "French Revolution", one that ushered in a period of stability where the D-minor tuning reigned as *lingua franca*.

### The *luthé* style

The French baroque lute was characterized by a playing style called the *style brisé* (broken style), a modern term covering a series of traits that François Couperin referred to as the *luthé* style or *les choses lutées*.<sup>9</sup> This basically meant that the notes were played successively rather than simultaneously. When playing a chord, for example, the lutenist would not pluck all its notes at once, but rather separately, in such a way as to prolong its resonance. This approach was an attempt to overcome the limitations of an instrument with little natural sustain. Since the lute's sound was gentle, and the notes faded out as soon as they were played, lutenists created a style that eschewed the rules of strict counterpoint in a quest for a richer texture, inspired by the Italian *seconda pratica*. The quality of baroque lute music was not determined

by the ingenuity of its counterpoint as much as by the way a composer used harmony to create an effect, an atmosphere, an unforgettable and sensuous instant of beauty. Thus, in order to prolong the resonance and make the harmonies more interesting, chords were arpeggiated, the tenor and alto voices were “broken”, the rhythms offset. A new style was born in which the melodic lines were ambiguous, the phrases asymmetrical, and in which lines could move freely amongst the various registers. This style was in flagrant contradiction with the traditional rules of composition. That is perhaps the reason why lutenists often had to defend their art before other musicians. Robert Ballard, for example, wrote:

“Lecteur, Je j’ay bien voulu auertir que cét ouvrage n’est pas peut estre en telle perfection que tu l’eusse peu desirer de moy, pour l’observation des scrupuleuses reigles de la Musique: toutes-fois si tu le consideres, & que tu entendes bien la portée du Luth, tu ne m’accuseras peut estre pas si facilement d’ignorance, ou de negligence ...”

[Dear reader, allow me to warn you that this work is perhaps not as perfect as you may have desired of me, in terms of the scrupulous observation of the rules of music: however, if you give it consideration, and if you understand the nature of the lute, you will perhaps not so readily accuse me of ignorance or negligence...]<sup>10</sup>

In a similar vein, Jacques Gallot affirmed that one could find “all the parts, high and low” if one attempted to reconstitute the counterpoint of his lute pieces.<sup>11</sup> In point of fact, however, that composer’s counterpoint is more implicit than explicit. Who were the most significant masters of this new music? The first important lutenist of the

French baroque school was René Mésangeau (died in 1638) who “[gave] to the lute its first perfection”.<sup>12</sup> But the most famous was undoubtedly Ennemond Gaultier, known as Vieux Gaultier (ca. 1575 - 11 Dec. 1651). The *Burwell Lute Tutor* considered him to be “the sun among the stars”.<sup>13</sup> He was the founder of the Gaultier dynasty, which included several renowned lutenists such as Denis Gaultier (ca. 1597-1672), best known for his book *La Rhétorique des Dieux*, and the “English” Jacques Gaultier, who gained fame at the court of Charles I. Other lutenists worthy of mention are Jacques Gallot (d. before 1699) and François Dufaut (active between 1629 and 1669), renowned for the depth of their compositions, Germain Pinel (d. 1661) who was Louis XIV’s lute master and whose style was known for its extreme refinement, and the Dubuts, famed for their sense of structure. Finally, we should mention Charles Mouton (ca. 1626-ca. 1699), a star of the Parisian salons, one of the last lutenists of the *Grand Siècle*.

## Conclusion

“As the lute is the king of instruments, so hath it few things that are common with other instruments.”<sup>14</sup> These words from the *Burwell Lute Tutor*, still valid today, aptly describe this instrument with its unique tuning and distinct style. This is perhaps why Burwell advises its readers against playing “tricks with one’s lute” such as “playing behind the back”.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the lute is not appropriate for “debaucheries, ranting or playing in the Streets to give serenadas to Signora Isabella”.<sup>16</sup> Being so soft that even “the noise of a mouse is a hindrance to that music”, it is clear that the lute was meant for intimate listening.<sup>17</sup>

Burwell reminds us that “This instrument requireth silence and a serious attention. It is used commonly at the going to bed of the Kings of France”.<sup>18</sup>

by Benjamin Narvey

1. Thomas Mace, *Musick's Monument*, London, 1676, p. 206.
2. Anon., *The Burwell Lute Tutor*, ms., private collection, f. 6.
3. *Burwell*, f. 5.
4. Antoine Francisque, *Le Trésor d'Orphée*, Paris, Ballard, 1600.
5. Jean-Baptiste Besard, *Thesaurus harmonicus*, Cologne, 1603.
6. Pierre Ballard, *Tablature de luth de differents autheurs, sur les accords nouveaux*, Paris, 1638.
7. Esaias Reusner, *Neue Lauten-Früchte*, Berlin, 1676.
8. Jakob Kremberg, *Musicalische Gemüths-Ergötzung oder Arien*, Dresden, 1689.
9. François Couperin, *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin*, Paris, 1716, p. 61.
10. Robert Ballard, *Premier Livre de Tablature de Luth*, Paris, Ballard, 1611, f. 1.
11. Jacques Gallot, *Pièces de luth*, Paris, 1684, p. 1.
12. *Burwell*, f. 5.
13. *Ibid.*, f. 5.
14. *Ibid.*, f. 68.
15. *Ibid.*, f. 69.
16. *Ibid.*, f. 70.
17. *Ibid.*, f. 40.
18. *Ibid.*, f. 70.

## German Baroque Lute Music

In the 17th century, music for the baroque lute was mainly a French phenomenon. In the early 18th century it spread increasingly throughout German-speaking Europe. The French lute tradition continued and matured in Silesia, Bohemia, the Austrian territories and in those that correspond to present-day Germany. Changes, however, occurred at several levels, involving style, playing technique, the practice of music and instrument-building.

### Style and Interpretation

German baroque lute music was played from the late 16th to the early 19th centuries. As far as music in general is concerned, many fundamental changes occurred over that time, and cannot be dissociated from those that affected the lute's repertoire. The term “German baroque lute music” indeed encompasses works in the baroque, galant, preclassical and, to a very limited extent, classical styles. That is why it is so difficult to speak of a single German lute style. It may be more accurate to call it with Quantz a “mixed taste” (*vermischter Geschmack*),<sup>1</sup> which connects certain aspects from other styles to forge a new one, what makes it easier to assimilate and keep pace with new musical developments.

The French style (*style brisé*) was characterized by an interweaving of melodies and voices, creating an impression of polyphony. At the same time, an increasing demand for clear melodies arose, ushering in a transition from the two- or three-part counterpoint of the baroque period to the homophonic and galant style of pre-classicism.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to the additional bass courses, (see below “Changes to the instrument”), it became possible