

Prepare to Meet the Maker:

Clive Titmuss

by Gordon Gray



CLIVE TITMUSS has been a lute and guitar player, teacher and builder since the early 1970s. His recent solo CD, *The Twilight of the Lute*, features music of the German Baroque period performed on 11- and 13-course lutes, and theorbo. He was interviewed at his home in Surrey, British Columbia.

How did you get started in music?

I started playing the guitar when I was 16, and was never an electric guitar, garage band type of guy. I was always a classical guitar player from the beginning. I then went to a lute seminar in England, before I went to university, and made contact with the beginnings of the early music movement in England.

When was that?

Around 1968 or 1969. Then at the University of Calgary I studied musicology and guitar. After that, with the help of the Canada Council and grants from Alberta Culture, I went to Switzerland and studied for two years at a special post-graduate school which concentrated only on early music. I took courses on medieval music and continuo playing, and lute class, and classes that related — from improvisation to historical performance.

What was it about that period or style of music that attracted you?

My friends were all listening to Abbey Road, and I was listening to baroque lute music! I can't explain it. I discovered classical music as a child and was always attracted to it. And then my tastes just changed, from Tchaikovsky and Beethoven to Mouton and Gaultier. I remember in high school — I was already playing the guitar — I researched the lute, and found out from the dictionary that it was an "obsolete instrument." I wondered why it would be obsolete, heard some lute music on a record, and felt I had to have one. I got one and started playing it, and went through university mostly playing the lute. At that time, in Canada, I was probably the only lute player for thousands of miles. Now it's much more widespread. There are lots of guitar players who have switched to lute and lots of other guitar players who bought lutes and hung them on the wall. There is a certain amount of frustration involved in playing the lute compared to playing the guitar. It's much more of an object, with mechanics much more difficult than the guitar.



Can you place the lute in an historical context for me?

The period of the classical development of the lute was during the Renaissance, roughly from about 1450 to 1600. During this period, the principal composers were Italian for the first part, and then English after that — primarily John Dowland, but many other composers as well. There's a tremendous amount of unpublished, or manuscript, music from this time. After that, in the 17th century, there's the golden age of the French lute, and finally the German lute music of the 1700s, principally Weiss and Bach, although there were many others. There's also a very great amount of manuscript music from this time. That's the period where the lute starts on a high and goes downwards, and the guitar starts off very low and goes upwards. You have an intersecting line there and that period, right around 1700, most interests me. As a lute player, I prefer German and French music from the later 1700s, and as a guitarist, I like the the French and Italian music

of the mid-1700s. My CD is lute music from the German Baroque period, and the largest number of my instruments are for this period.

You mentioned at a recent performance that there was a recording by Julian Bream that was very inspirational for you.

That had to do with baroque guitar. Bream came out with a record in about 1968 called "Baroque Guitar" and that was one of the records that really got me going. But it was really the music of de Visee that was particularly interesting because it's divided between the beginnings of the classical guitar — the Rococo period in the 1720s — and the end of the period of the lute. The lute had a great classical period in France during the 17th century, and it kind of died off after that. There were a tremendous number of composers who wrote for the lute in France during that time, and de Visee was one of them. He was a Spaniard and one of the people instrumental in bringing the guitar into prominence in the courts of Louis XIV and Louis XV. He's at the period of the end of the lute and the beginning of the guitar, and straddled those two worlds, East and West. His music is brilliantly thought out as guitar music and brilliantly joins the worlds of the Lully opera traditions and the old lute traditions. It effectively changed the guitar from being a kind of bar instrument, played with only simple chords, into being an art instrument in the tradition of the lute. That was the thing that really attracted me.

You attended the University of Calgary. Was that because you were from Alberta?

Yes, I didn't think that anyone else would have me! At the time, you couldn't really study guitar; there was no guitar instructor. In fact, there were hardly any universities in North America where you could major in guitar - guitar performance. It was all piano, violin, oboe, traditional orchestral instruments, and voice. It's only been recently that the guitar has been accepted into the 19th century canon of the conservatory, and that's largely been the work of people like Segovia, Bream, and John Williams, making the guitar acceptable as a concert instrument in the 19th century tradition of a single person getting up to play a concert of great music for the pleasure of an audience.

When did you start building instruments?

I started building guitars when I came back from Switzerland. I first repaired a sitar, and then I completed a harpsichord for my wife, Susan. I was already quite skilled at maintaining and voicing harpsichords, and tuning harpsichords and pianos, and this was combined with the skills of woodworking that my father had taught me. What to do with a table saw was part of my early education. All those things came together, and I remember secreting myself away in the basement one summer in about 1980 and building my first lute. After that, I really got hooked on it and couldn't stop. I still can't stop!

Was your father a craftsman?

Well, he was just a builder around the house, but was very capable. He built the kitchen. He built the house, really. I was part of that, mixing concrete, building fences, making furniture.

Did you build your first instruments for yourself?

Yes. In fact, except for the past five years I've built all my instruments for my own use. It's just only been recently that I built instruments that I might want to offer to a market, and the main reason for doing it is that I've become rather tired of teaching guitar. Teaching guitar was something that sustained me for many years and paid my way, but the classical guitar as an instrument of instruction has many disadvantages. There's a very small market for it. Kids who want to learn to play the guitar want to play the latest popular music. I just don't teach that. People started asking me about my instruments at performances, and the next thing you know I had a website, and the next thing you know people are phoning me internationally - mostly from the United States - and wanting to purchase instruments.

Are you a self-taught builder?

Pretty much. I've never gone and studied with anyone, but I have owned very good instruments, beautifully made, brilliantly made. Goethe has an



expression, “a good rider also learns from his horse,” and that’s true musically as well as in terms of building instruments. If you play a good instrument, you have a very good sense of how to build one.

I’ve got two lutes by Bob Lundberg, and he is a very inspiring figure, both as a scholar and as a lute maker. His work is brilliant. He certainly knows what to do with wood, and I think that he is one maker who has had an effect on other makers, and he also has been a craftsman who has tried to make use of local woods. The other instrument I have is a Richard Berg theorbo, and this instrument has also inspired me very much to improve my work and to gain better skills with the tools.

When you teach people to play music, you teach two basic skills. One is to play the instrument, and the other is to learn to read the music and to learn to deal with the musical ideas. This dichotomy is also true in making instruments. The skills of learning to use the tools, how to sharpen tools, deciding what wood to use for what purpose — those are real central problems. On the other hand you also deal with the actual structure of the instrument — how to make it work, how to look at a drawing and know what ideas brought it to life. I think that being a musician has had a tremendous effect on my making instruments, because I know what I want in the music, and that’s what makes me want to make them, and that’s what makes me want to play them. The joy of actually stringing up a lute and playing it for the first time, and hearing it speak and say its first words, and to know what it should do musically, and to have those expectations — that’s the real secret of lutherie to me.

No one expects a violinist to make a violin, and no one expects a pianist to make a piano. But there’s a long tradition of guitarists who make guitars, and luthiers who come from families of musicians. That seems to be a relationship of craftsmanship and musicianship which is long established in the Renaissance and the period after the Renaissance, which today we think of being special. We have a market-oriented mentality of commerce in relation to music, and that never really existed prior to the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution took power away from the musicians and the craftsman, and turned them into machines. It made them feed and

service a machine technology. Fortunately, the conception and execution of the lute and the guitar, and their classical periods, predates Industrial Revolution thinking. For me, that’s what gives it the interest — the idea that a musician can make instruments, and be inspired by both the music and the instrument, and even play them in public. To play one’s own instrument in public — that’s not only unusual musically, it’s also a great thrill.

How many instruments have you built?

I get two questions quite often after “How many strings does it have?” One is how long it takes to make it, and I

am never really able to answer that, because life goes on as well. I don’t just make instruments, I also play them, and I try to divide my time reasonably. I would estimate a few months for an instrument, and I don’t make cheap instruments. The other is how many instruments have I made — probably 50 to 60.

Is the design of a lute specific to the period of music performed on the instrument?

Yes, and even to individual composers, one lute per composer and one composer can even have several different tunings, especially French composers of the 1630s. There are two composers, Dufaut and Mesangeau, who had half a dozen different tunings. And the guitar was like that. Almost every guitar book of the

1620s, ’30s, and ’40s has suites in “Nouveau Tons” — new tunings. Composers seemed to be constantly expanding the different possibilities of new tunings in order to achieve different effects — overruling string effects, nondiatonic tunings, and tunings that would facilitate the playing of certain chords. That’s certainly true of the lute. The lute was in transition from “Viel Tons” — old tunings in G, in fourths with a third in the middle, and with various open strings added for bass lines, to new tunings in D minor which was the standard tuning for the lute for over 150 years from the 1620s to 1780 or 1790, when the lute finally gasped and died.

That difference of one tuning over another really reflects stylistic changes. There never has been a standard instrument. Any guitar may have a traditional guitar shape, but think of the internal differences. There are no two guitars ever the same. Everyone’s got



their own barring, their own bracing, their own way of making necks — the dovetail, what kind of head, how it's spliced, what kind of tuning heads you have — these things only appear to be standardized. Violins look like they're standardized, but they really aren't ever. The woods, the way the backstrip is put together, thickening — these are individual things.

The morphology of lutes is differentiated by the size of the bodies, and the number of strings. But the actual technical joint of the body, the top, the neck and the peg box - these things have never really changed. They are always done the same way, although the sizes change.

What instruments are you building now?

Right now I'm building 11-course Baroque lutes. If there is such a thing as a "standard" instrument, this is it. The Renaissance lute has been the modern lute, in a sense, because it's most similar to the modern guitar in tuning and technique, and people have always wanted to play Dowland and Renaissance music especially. Some of these people are now graduating into Baroque lute music, which is a little bit more designed by the composers to be art music. It wasn't music that was "Gebrauchsmusik", music that has a utilitarian aspect. Art music of the 17th century has a sort of ceremonial aspect to it, almost like a cult, and the composers played on that. They were hired by famous people, and taught famous students, and were always hiding secrets from each other. So the 11-course lute has a kind of mystique about it, and a very, very large volume of music written for it. You can play music from the 1630s to nearly 1720 on the one instrument. So this is my attempt to sort of appeal to a larger market.

Compare for me building a guitar and building a lute.

Well, a guitar is a box. It's got right angle joints, even though it has a curved exterior. It's sort of rectilinear in its basic ideas. There isn't really a concept about end grain. A lute is not like that. It has all angled joints, although its joinery is quite simple. Its interior structure is also quite simple, but its morphology and its relationship of the surfaces and the volumes inside it — that's very complex. The thing about the lute is that it is

a very elegant attempt to minimize end grain. There is no end grain in a lute that you can see. It's all been resolved. The forces in a lute are completely static — it's like an egg you can sit on. A guitar is a relatively fragile instrument with two plates which vibrate in concert with one another.

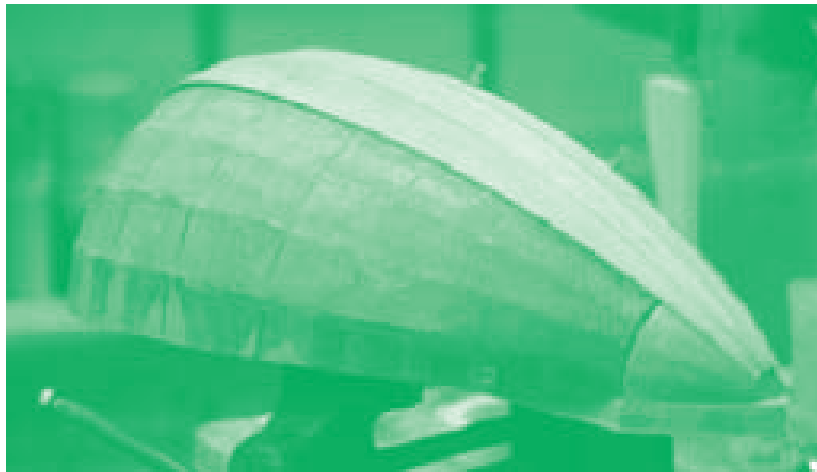
A guitar has become, it seems to me, a sort of expediency for the maker, and that's made it a cheaper instrument to make, and that's why it's so wide spread. But the lute is an object of art, and an object of legend and mythology, and it represents a secrecy and introverted mentality, whereas the guitar is an extroverted mentality. The lute is an instrument of art

music, whereas the guitar is an instrument of dance music. One is intellect, and the other is the physical world. You can express the same concept in many ways: yin versus yang, extrovert versus introvert, economy versus consumption. It's very much a bipolar relationship. The guitar represents the Latin world or

Christian world, while the lute represents Islam. The rose of a lute is like a mandala, which absorbs and concentrates the psyche inwards. The guitar has a hole, which ventilates the sound cavity and makes the instrument louder. The guitar is designed to push music out, whereas the lute keeps music in. These are archetypal ideas, which have been established over thousands of years of tradition.

You mentioned Robert Lundberg's emphasis on use of local woods. What woods are you using in your instruments?

The thing about the lute is that, during its peak period around 1600, give or take 50 years, the pre-eminent material was yew wood. In the Northwest, both in the United States and in Canada, we are very fortunate to be surrounded by rain forests. These rain forests have yielded us not only soundboard woods, softwoods, but also the yew tree. The yew tree was a mystical tree in the medieval period. It was used for bows, spears, poles, weapons. It was used as a poison, because of the taxamine. And the latter is what liberated it from the forests in our time because of taxamine being used for the cancer drug Taxol. **The fact**



that it's a softwood, a conifer, but with many of the properties of a hardwood, makes it ideal for lutes and also guitars. It's a fantastic wood for guitar backs. It can be built up in strips for sides, using a tropical hardwood for contrast. Lutes done this way are sometimes referred to as "beach ball lutes", where you have contrasting ribs of yew and rosewood, for instance. These kinds of multi-acoustical structures can have amazing effects on the sound.

Yew wood, because of its lightness and its bending properties, has the most amazing acoustical diffraction. It resonates at so many frequencies, and it's so flexible, so bendable, and so workable. I do most of the making of a lute with a chisel and a plane. You don't need any high-tech tools to make a lute. It's very simple and straightforward. Guitars are a little bit more industrial in how they are made, because they require these large flat plates, but lutes are made out of little strips. The yew tree doesn't yield great enormous slabs of wood. There's only a very small amount of useful wood in a yew tree, and so there's an immense amount of labour involved in taking a log of yew and cutting it up, and discarding 99% of it, to get to the really good stuff of the lute.

Give me a sense of sizes, thicknesses, the scale of materials involved in building a lute.

For guitars, we're talking thicknesses of 2 mm. For lutes, we're talking 1.2 - 1.5 mm. I think that, for a lute maker, the most important tool is the scraper, and for a guitar maker, the most important tool is the saw. That's because you are essentially sawing wood off a block when you make a guitar. When you make a lute, you're thickening ribs, and making things out of veneers. Things are thinner, and that means that the materials are more critical. You can't just make a lute of anything; it's got to be the right material. And it's got to be high quality material, whereas guitars can be made out of inferior materials very easily. You couldn't make a lute out of plywood - it'd be inconceivable. But the vast majority of guitar backs now are made from plywoods, composite materials. This would be ridiculous in a lute. A lute is about lightness and about the airiness of the structure. And that's what gives it that wonderful otherworldly sound, it's ability to resonate with many frequencies from a single nodal point. The guitar is more multipurpose. It has two cavities built into its shape, whereas the lute has only one. The guitar is more about a consonantal sound, an impact sound, whereas the lute is more about a vowel sound, a more sustained sound, and about maximizing the amount of energy that can come out of a very fine plucked string. The guitar is a little more bluff, a little more volume-oriented.

It's also about homophony versus counterpoint. The guitar is a homophonic instrument. That's why it has a longer neck. That's why it has resisted the attempt to add strings to it like a lute. The lute is about polarity. It comes from a tradition of counterpoint and vocal counterpoint, whereas the guitar comes from a

homophonic tradition of chordal dance music.

You mentioned earlier that the lute basically disappeared from the public eye, but has recently become popular again. Why do you think this has happened?

Broadcast media, CDs, Internet, late 20th century communication technologies, have had a tremendous influence on dissemination of music. The kind of influences that would have shaped the lives of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Debussy and Satie are the same influences that are shaping our lives now. We've had a period of unprecedented growth, which puts a lot of money in a lot of hands. There are very small markets for microclimates of intellectual pursuits, and this gives us recent publications of long lost manuscripts and books, and virtually unlimited access to music that's been stuck in libraries all over Europe but basically ignored for 150 years.

I think that interest in the lute and the guitar has resulted, to some extent, because of a reaction against 19th-century Romanticism. Because of my training as a historian, I like to date things, and decide when and where and why, and the post-war period has been the big boom period for the guitar and lute, particularly the guitar. Even though Segovia and many of his contemporaries were active in the pre-war period, it wasn't really until 1950 that the guitar started to take off as a musical instrument an audience could respect. The idea that the guitar could be a vehicle of art music is a relatively recent concept. Before that, it had pockets - Fernando Sor and his contemporaries, the origin of the classical guitar - but it's only been in the last 30 - 40 years that the guitar has attracted any attention from





the conservatory crowd, and that's just pure economics. I have a friend who distributes my CDs, and he told me that the most popular instrument in terms of sales of classical CDs is the guitar. Who would have thought you could push over the piano, but apparently it's been done. This means that there are a lot of people out there who want to hear the guitar.

I think the personal dimension has a lot to do with it. The fact that there's no mechanism other than the human body - that really reaches people. It's a reaction against being victims of technology. We are victims of our own success. The guitar reaches beyond these things, and it reaches into people at all levels. And another thing about the guitar is that it crosses commercial and class barriers. It's an instrument of popular music, but it's also an instrument of art music.

Who's a typical person who becomes interested in learning the lute?

Well, nearly everyone who plays the lute now has at some time played the guitar. That may change in future. Whereas we are quite familiar with prodigies, very young kids playing the piano or violin, we do not see these prodigies on the guitar or lute, and there's a reason for that. The neuromuscular development, and the psychological development, of a guitarist takes longer. It takes longer to develop that ability and that kind of complex knowledge. The two hands do entirely

different things. There's something special about guitar players, and I know this from being a teacher. A guitarist or a lutenist has to have a separate mentality for left and right brain, because the hands do different things. The plucking hand controls all the musical inputs, the phrasing and the dynamics and all those other things. The other hand essentially performs a simple mechanical function. To do this well, there has to be a schism in the mind between intellect and the physical world, and that is not very common.

I think that the world of the late 20th century has accentuated this schism. There is so much going on in our world which happens at the very highest levels, and at the very lowest levels, and we seem to have become much more polarized.. This is perhaps why Baroque music is so popular. In the Baroque period the same psychological and social conditions existed - the polarity of the very wealthiest people and the very poorest people, and no middle ground.

For a lute maker and player, what does the next decade bring?

Well, if you walk into a music store now, you find more lute recordings than ever before, and there is even more interest in the Baroque guitar. In fact, I think that even guitarists have ignored their own pre-classical literature, and they haven't really paid enough attention to the likes of de Visee, Sanz, Guerau and other composers who provided a lot of music of very high quality which hasn't yet been played. It's great music, and it needs to be heard. This is a frontier for all players. —————

