

***Basics on the Baroque Lute and
Foreword to Anthology of Easy to Intermediate Music for 11-course Lute***

Thomas Mace, in his 1676 treatise on the lute *Musick's Monument*, suggested that the adoption of extra bass strings on lute made the instrument easier to play. While this is probably true for the fretting hand, it is certainly not easier for the plucking hand. Most of these exercises are directed at the plucking hand, and they assume that the player has placed the hand in the proper place, with the little finger on the soundboard for support.

Numerous easily-obtained images of 17th Century lutenists provide a source of inspiration. The lutenist must fix the instrument securely, and it may be played at a table, with a strap, or just held in the lap, allowing the plucking hand to address the strings in just the right way to achieve a speaking, non-legato articulation, which is often mentioned by contemporary writers.

Whether the hand is held with the thumb slightly out, as with Mouton's portrait, or more inside the hand, the position favouring thumb and index alternation is still the basis of 17 and early 18th Century lute-playing. Unlike the balanced stroke used on the guitar, the lute is played deliberately with a strong and weak emphasis, and this basic binary structure underlies every phrase. The position of the thumb is determined by the angle of the wrist, viewed as radial to the rose. It is easy to see in contemporary images that the hand was held closer to being parallel with the strings. This result is a pluck that is lighter, and more likely to play the pair of the course (in the middle register) equally, resulting the characteristic doubling of the tone for each note.

When the number of bass courses increased, beginning in the last quarter of the 16th Century, the thumb gradually took on a specialized role playing the bass line. It never lost its position of alternating with the index. Fingering with the weak beats indicated with a single dot never actually disappeared from lute music, even as it neared its twilight period.

The integration of the thumb and fingers is sometimes a difficult technical obstacle for the lutenist, because the thumb must occasionally execute notes in the tenor register (on the third, fourth and fifth courses) then leap down into the bass for a low note, and then return to the upper courses. This feature of lute technique is often seen in Piccinini, the Gaultiers and many other lutenists of the French tradition; in Weiss and later music. Therefore, the player must exercise the kinaesthetic sense of the position of the bass notes from the beginning, and several exercises will be seen to develop this skill. Reusner recommended playing in the bass with strokes that rest on the next note above (in pitch) and this is good advice. There is a similar problem in finding the balance of sound for the main note and its octave string. The thumb has to execute a clean and direct pluck which takes in both notes, so that the correct mixture of sound is heard.

Similarly, the index, middle and annular fingers have to execute a swinging stroke, which takes in both unison strings. We can imagine the feeling and sound in the poetic invocation found in various places: "Man schlägt die Laute" (One hits, strokes, or strikes the lute); "Die Laute spricht" ("the lute speaks"); as Purcell urges, "Strike the Viol, Touch, Touch, Touch the Lute". In the Ode to St. Cecilia's Day, he and his librettist Brady refer to "the Warbling Lute". One of the early occurrences of the form of quasi-improvised prelude, composed by Borrono, is the "Tochata", literally "touching" the lute; the term "Toccatà" was later adopted by both keyboard and lute players such as Frescobaldi and Piccinini.

The stroke should be direct and quick whatever the tempo, it must be clear and perhaps a bit nasal. Many players are depicted playing much closer to the bridge than people do today. It is even possible to play with the nails, if they are short, as they support the flesh, and can occasionally be used plucking nasally for emphasis. Anyone who has heard or seen a Flemish or English-style harpsichord with a "lute rail", will note a special set of jacks coming up through the pin-block, plucking close to the nut. This observation would support the idea that the lute's basic sound was more nasal than we might expect. (Beware of confusion with the "lute stop", known more properly as the "buff stop", which damps the strings slightly and makes the pluck sound more like that of a harp or theorbo.)

Another challenge is clarity in the bass. The frequent stepwise bass lines found in much late 17th and early 18th Century lute music can result in a blurred effect. The thumb must be prepared to play stepwise, disjunctly, and leap around with complete confidence. This takes a degree of skill and time to develop, and may be compared to the gymnastics of the organist's feet. There is an unconscious level of skill involved and the player must constantly be planning where the thumb is going, where it will land next, and what to do about notes ringing over into now-changed harmony.

Even as clarity is prized in the bass, on the playing strings the opposite effect seems to be one of the principal aesthetic goals of the D minor tuning. Many of the scale tones overlap when string are only a third apart, and this seems to be one of the main reasons that the composers of the early 17th Century experimented with different tunings, finally arriving and fixing the tuning of the classic 11 - course lute around 1640 - 50. The exact circumstances are mysterious: Germain Pinel, François Dufaut and the Gaultiers, Ennemond and Denis, may have prompted the adoption of this tuning.

These exercises are generally in order of difficulty, but that will vary according to the skill and experience of the player, whether they have had some previous exposure to multi-course music, and whether they have had experience with the guitar or other plucked instruments.

An Anthology of Easy to Intermediate Music for the 11-course Lute in D Minor Tuning

It's not easy to begin playing the lute, and especially the lute of the 17th and early 18 Centuries. The style is far removed from the Italian dance style of the 1500s, and does not have the strong harmonies and formal clarity of the music of the 18th Century. There is wealth of pieces and lute-books, but there is little contemporary writing on the subject.

Occasionally composers have made important remarks about how actually to play their music: Reusner, Mouton, Gaultier, Philippe Le Sage de Richée and even Piccinini are valuable sources on the application of principles that underlie their compositions. But there is little that answers the questions we are most likely to ask: How did it actually sound, how quickly or slowly shall we play, how much variety of pulse should there be? We must deduce the answers to these questions almost entirely from works in other media, or from the music itself.

The lutenist must read writers in other media to gain any real idea of how contemporary music sounded: Santa Maria, Mersenne, Praetorius, Quantz, C. P. E. Bach, Couperin among others wrote cogently about music and instruments. but other than Mace's Musick's Monument there is little information that clarifies questions of other than a purely technical nature.

The music itself can be difficult to grasp, musically speaking. French sources in particular impart a wealth of graphical details about chord playing, ornaments, and rhythm. They are sometimes cryptic, incomplete, and inconsistently notated. So there is a need for an anthology of music which contains basic movements and ergonomics with a musical text from the the student may learn the basics. Rather than loading the page with specific instructions provided by an editor, I have opted for a diplomatic facsimile approach. I have hardly amended the sources; in order that the student, who may well have previous experience on either lute or guitar, may draw their own conclusions, add fingering and other directions, which seem right for them and their lute.

Just remember Mouton's injunction to play slowly so that the rhythm is clear, and Reusner's that the thumb should rest on strings in the bass.

At the end of the anthology I decided to add lesser-known groups of pieces which I feel exemplify the culmination of the 17th Century broken style, by Dix and Logy. They are not easy to play, but very rewarding, and full of useful tricks that influenced composers such as the young Weiss. They make a complete statement in the form of the *Partita* or Suite as we would call it, and are excellent vehicles for public performance.