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# THE SECRETS OF THE LUTE

(Renaissance)

VOLUME I

*Playing the lute is the path to excellence*

*English version by Jacques Tranier*

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[www.edmartin.com](http://www.edmartin.com) FRANCE

*The secrets of the Lute*

### *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

*The Secrets of the Lute* is dedicated to former, present and future students, children and adults alike, who chose to play the lute because they sensed what the 'magical' dimension of the instrument – their own word – could bring them. They prompted us to pass on our experience after more than thirty-five years of teaching.

Our thanks go to former and present students, to friends who contributed their skills to the project: Roger TRAVERSAC for the list of Internet sites on lute music; philosopher Emmanuel FAYE, an old friend, with whom we share a common outlook in total accord with Renaissance ideals; Claire BARDELMANN for our very positive discussions; Christian and Philippe GAMBINI who read the manuscript; François DRY for his shrewd comments; Catherine MAUFROY whose patience extended to reading the whole of *The Secrets of the Lute*; Jean-Charles NEUF COUR for his advice on computer use; Philippe SCHAEFFER for his photographs of students, and other friends and relations who supported our project. Lastly, I should like to extend my warmest thanks to my friend Patrig KERNOA who proof-read the typescript very efficiently before the printing stage.

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# INTRODUCTION

## What history tells us

In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century a sixth course was added to the lute and the plectrum was replaced by the finger technique, as Johannes TINCTORIS (1436-1511) states in his 1487 *De inventione*: '*Lutenists are the only musicians able to play, not just one or two parts, but three or four at once, which is very difficult,*' and then the instrument embarked on an extraordinary adventure that was to last for three centuries, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The history of the Renaissance lute ended when there appeared a new tuning, called 'extraordinary' (as opposed to 'ordinary') at the time when Father Marin MERSENNE (1588-1648) wrote about the lute in his *Harmonie universelle* published in 1636: '*So great are the art or science and industry of the hand that several called it one of the main instruments of wisdom and reason. Suffice it to consider the motions of the hands on the lute, for they are so wondrous that reason is often compelled to acknowledge that it is unable to comprehend their lightness and swiftness, which surpass the nimbleness of the keenest imagination one may encounter...*'

This adventure, unique in the history of music, constitutes the most beautiful heritage created by Renaissance man when he decided to take his destiny into his own hands.

## The philosophical aspect

The first philosopher to give the notion of man's dignity its most meaningful perspective was Charles de BOVELLES (1479-1567) more than Nicolas de CUES (1401-1464), Marsilio FICINO (1433-1499) or Pico della MIRANDOLA (1463-1494).

Indeed, as he was not intellectually limited to Christology he propounded the notion that there is an evolution from Natural man to Studious man.

It is because man is quite apart from all things (*extra omnia*) and separate from the universal order that his knowledge can encompass everything.

Renaissance man occupied a dual place between the macrocosm, which he was increasingly able to comprehend thanks to the work of Nicolas COPERNIC (1473-1543), Johannes KEPLER (1571-1630) or Galileo GALILEI (1564-1642) and his microcosm – his ‘logos’, his ‘ethos’ and his ‘pathos’. He thus established a constant chiasm-like relationship between the two planes.

The same was true of music, which belonged with the seven liberal arts: the quadrivium comprising geometry, arithmetics, music and astronomy and the trivium, including grammar, rhetoric, dialectic. With Josquin DESPREZ (1440-1521) music shifted to the trivium but did not shed its prerogatives inherited from the quadrivium. Music featuring among exact sciences meant that it too was ruled by numbers which influence the fluctuations of the soul. Its function was to guide human nature towards wisdom, i.e., perfect knowledge, since it was supposed to produce the same sounds and the same motions as the essence of the world. So it has a metaphysical dimension because its goal is to reach the harmony of the spheres so as to divert the cosmic spirit to terrestrial ends. This spirit is not made up of the four terrestrial elements – air, fire, water and earth – but of a fifth, the pure and incorruptible ether.

Music also has a psychological and ethical dimension gained through knowledge as revealed by the senses, in keeping with reason. Through virtuous use of his gifts, the dignity of Renaissance man was to lead him towards truth, as he grew to trust more and more in his natural abilities during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## **The place of the lute in 16<sup>th</sup> century instrumental music**

The lute is by far the main instrument of the Renaissance. Lute music represents more than 65 % of printed music in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, apart from a great number of manuscripts. The corpus of the Renaissance lute is vast and prodigious, leaving aside books and manuscripts, lost forever because of wars, fires and sheer ignorance of the specific mode of writing for the lute – tablature. What is remarkable is the ratio: to each ensemble piece there are more than one hundred and fifty solo pieces. Why such a discrepancy? Probably because the sense of otherness is universal in the polyphonic structure of lute music. Also, this sense of otherness is magnified, idealized and transcended, making of otherness an entity characterized by respect, dignity and piety. The passing of religiosity from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards with the triumph of reason and freedom gained momentum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the industrial revolution. Many social groups too exploited or ignored were compelled to federate as a challenge to established authority, moved by common ideals, and this downplayed individuality. Music did not escape the trend with the symphonic orchestra progressively growing in size.

## **What lute playing entails**

Charles de BOVELLES gave hearing pride of place. In his days everything was a matter of vibrations at cosmic level with the ‘harmony of the spheres’ and on earth with musical sounds, noises and the sounds of nature, colours, stones and, for mankind, passions, paranormal and ecstatic states.

By daily playing the lute, Renaissance man thus became commensurate with the world of vibrations around him, to purify himself for the beauty of his soul, something comparable to an act of piety. The very specific pear-shape of the lute body reminds one of the child in its mother’s womb, thus suggesting there is also vibration before life and eternal vibration of the soul accompanying man’s finitude.

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This way one gained an insight into the infinity of worlds and because he advocated this thesis, Giordano BRUNO (1548-1600) was sentenced to be burnt at the stake in 1600.

Faced with themselves lutenists know that, thanks to their playing they will undergo a transformation. This is because they seek optimal vibration, the sign of an ineffable and indescribable presence which is the source of infinite joy. The aim is to create a vibratory world, the most beautiful that can be achieved, in which the sound of the lute, a true sun to the soul, gives a glimpse of perfect knowledge before and after life so that wisdom may establish itself in an eternal present. In order to achieve this, it is imperative that one's innermost world, the outside world and the sounds from the lute should be beautifully and harmoniously in phase, so as to vastly increase energy, whatever the stage reached in learning how to play the lute. The beginner and highly skilled lutenist alike must follow the same approach to derive maximum gratification and benefits.

### Introducing *The Secrets of the Lute*

We endeavoured to offer in the course of the 12 years necessary to master the lute the means to achieve plenitude and satisfaction at each stage.

Lutenists should not boast their technical progression – this irretrievably condemns them to 'hell' because of the pride it implies; technical progression should be the means to get as close as possible to the quest of human perfection, which consists, as Charles de BOVELLES writes, in going back to the source of all things increate.

Charles de BOVELLES adds that there is within us a metaphysical intellect able to learn the principle of all things to become wise and find in perfect knowledge one's felicity and goal.

This is the main reason why we formally favoured pieces involving pure composition, such as fantasies, ricercari, preludes, toccatas, tastar de corde, tientos, pavans, in short, lute pieces suitable for the metaphysical moments so convincingly suggested in the background of Renaissance paintings. Other pieces, such as passemezze, ballets, almains, sarabands have a medium tempo comparable to the background in a painting, where the mind may still have enough space to wander despite the vivid action depicted. Then we have the here and now of gaiety and joy with fast pieces such as currents, branles, galliards, voltas, canaries, gigs... a feature to be found in the foreground of paintings where the characters are totally caught in the action depicted, which totally distracts the attention of beholders. Let us not forget the social dimension, with many adaptations for the lute of then fashionable polyphonic songs along with parts of masses, motets and psalms.

The Pavan-Galliard combination showed that if Renaissance man relished melancholy, pavans are not about morbid melancholy – they are to do with a generous form of melancholy which can drive man's spirit to the most extraordinary intellectual achievements. The Galliard is its opposite; The Pavan figures a challenge to death, while the Galliard enables one to recover one's poise in a conquering spirit.

Our pedagogical experience over more than thirty-five years, involving six or seven-year old beginners up to future professional players, makes it possible, for the first time in lute studies, to offer a progressive course based on stages spread over twelve years, which has never been attempted before. Given that on average a student cannot go through more than 12 to 13 pieces a year, for the time being, we offer double that number, i.e., 25 pieces per year, making 300 pieces in all spread evenly, with 150 pieces contained in volume I of *The Secrets of the Lute* and as many

in volume II. This widens the choice, and besides, all those who wish to satisfy their passion for the lute will find extra material to perfect their own selves, as Baldassare CASTIGLIONE (1478-1529) recommended in his book *Il cortegiano*, as well as Michel de MONTAIGNE (1533-1592) on the subject of children's education.

We are aware that the choice of lute pieces restricts the repertoire but we attempted to emphasize variety of composers, including many anonymous ones; variety of genres; the use of technical means to express specific aspects of musical inspiration and the artistic quality of a given piece so as to get the most of the lute sound and to gratify lutenists who will necessarily spend many hours practicing to bring out the polyphony with elegance, inspiration and depth, if they mean to play such pieces.

*The Secrets of the Lute* is not meant to be a method based on musicology – it is first and foremost a concrete approach to lute playing with a technique that evolved throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting the progress of music writing, itself reflecting the emancipation of Renaissance man fulfilling his destiny in his quest for perfection.

Concerning the choice of pieces, the sources are mentioned at the end of the work with an index of composers' names and an index of anonymous composers without the concordances, still to be worked out, though much has already been done in this field.

For each year 8 extra pieces were added: they are pieces from the repertoire with a purely technical aim, such as the numerous *passemesure* pavans built on a bass pattern, that lend themselves to tackling specific technical aspects. Thanks to this type of composition which helps the memory, the bass can be repeated over many bars, sometimes in an even very exaggerated way. Also among the supplementary material for each year, exercises were included to deal with specific technical difficulties to be overcome in lute playing, such as *barres*, slurred notes for ornamentation, developing the independent action of the left-hand and right-hand fingers, finger leaps, practicing chords in fine detail, finger spread across the fingerboard, arpeggios, the fundamental lute technique of runs, finger inversion, finger extension and so forth. For years eleven and twelve *Continuo* will be briefly discussed in the chapter on technique, as well as improvisation, to give possible openings, considering that improvisation and *continuo* also require many further years of study. Figured ornaments will be briefly dealt with in the part concerning year 10.

For year 12 only 25 pieces are given, featuring the most difficult aspects of Renaissance lute playing, with the technical comments voluntarily suppressed, so that lutenists who have reached that stage in their studies may feel they have reached a perfection which, we hope, will be with them throughout their lives.

Following the 12 years, we give suggestion for other repertoires or diverse adaptations for the lute, ensemble music and contemporary repertoire. The lute will find its rightful place again when more contemporary composers take a competent interest in it; let us hope it may, once again, complement verse through accompanied monody.

The best compromise to play most of the pieces contained in *The Secrets of the Lute* is an 8-course instrument with 15 strings on 8 courses, the first string being single. Some bass notes were transposed an octave higher so as to retain pieces of real artistic value. This latitude was highly recommended in those days, as lutenist Nicolas VALLET (1583-1642) very explicitly states.

As to calligraphy we chose a big font for the first six years reserved for volume I of *The Secrets of the Lute* and a smaller one for the other six years because the pieces are much longer in volume II. Manuscript writing, despite its real faults and clumsiness has the advantage of offering an individual hand, of making the music less distant and impersonal, and more pleasant than a



modern printing font. All pieces come with fingerings, with some explained. We do realize that when a certain level of proficiency has been reached such fingerings can be thought inadequate – they can be changed freely in favour of one's preferred fingerings but it is through a rigorous approach that the lute will go beyond amateurishness.

*The Secrets of the Lute* comes in two separate and deliberately independent volumes, each with a complete list of composers and different indexes: this should make carrying around easier – also beginners will not be put off, as they might understandably be, by the technical leap between year one and year twelve.

In the commentaries accompanying each year are given and explained hints on how to overcome specific obstacles and to achieve the best results through the quality of one's playing.

We will tackle notions about phrasing, analysis, style, fingerings, endowing each note with the required qualities in relation with the grammar of the music, emotions and spiritual dimension; this will be done at the level of musical phrase segments as well as whole phrases, in the many genres dealt with in *The Secrets of the Lute*. The aim is for students to become as self-reliant as possible as of year ten, even though many more years will be needed to reach musical maturity.

## Extending the method to guitar players

Though apparently similar, the lute and the guitar are worlds apart. The best lutenists to come will be those who will never have played the guitar because, otherwise their fingers will have developed irreversible habits to the detriment of the lute. There is so much difference in string tension between the two instruments that their respective techniques are incompatible, both for the right and left hands; also there is the problem of right-hand finger nails necessary to play the guitar, which is absolutely forbidden on the lute : because nails hamper controlling the weight of the fingers on the strings, hence, their accentual value, in the ever so subtle and delicate phrasing inherent to the weak string tension, not to mention the quality of the sound. However, for the benefit of their musical culture and because of the high artistic value afforded by the lute repertoire, guitarists can play from tablatures directly by tuning down the third string of the guitar to F#.

## The lute in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

It can be observed that the historical lute, rediscovered in the late sixties, is meeting with increasing success throughout the world. The reasons for such a keen interest are still not clear. Yet we can see that for years we have all been unconsciously subjected to a form of conditioning caused by the multiplication of luminous phenomena which bathe our daily lives, such as the many manifestations of primary colours (blue, red and yellow) to be found in many objects, the very varied city lights. These colours and lights can remind us of the timbre of the lute rich in overtones, hence very 'luminous' too. What adults and children find fascinating about the lute, beside its enthralling sound, is its attractive, so aesthetically perfect, shape, like the violin's, its lightness and the ease with which such a polyphonic instrument can be carried about. The young generation is becoming aware that quality must in future take precedence over quantity, hence the necessity for political leaders to invest in education so as to shape tomorrow's lifestyles in connection with the major ecological issues and the financial crisis of 2008. The latter is bound to lead rulers to overhaul the whole system

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to avoid aberrations, so far removed from common sense because of the billions wasted away. In the course of its history, music very often anticipated the societal U-turns following internal pressures and growing social awareness, linked to new social needs and the taking into account of fears and diverse forms of injustice. Those upheavals led to the disappearance of whole areas of aesthetic for a long time; those areas had been thought to be inseparable from concrete reality but little by little their aesthetic quality was forgotten.

The mutations seem to be partly dependent on the law of cycles as the contribution of Greek thinkers to the Renaissance shows.

Hasn't the time come for the Renaissance and its humanist ideals to help along our mutation towards a better world in which human values will once more fill the role they should never have lost?

It should be stressed again that it is urgent to include in the education of future generations what constitutes the cultural richness of the past. The education being now dispensed leaves out both the emotional and the sacred so indispensable to 'homo naturalis', aware of his finitude.

The lasting quality of art works carries to the highest level three fundamental elements – reason, emotions and the sacred. These three elements must be raised to the highest standards for us to try and reach for human perfection.

We extend our warmest thanks to Auguste Zurfluh publisher for supporting and encouraging this publication; through different approaches we met on common ground – striving towards human perfection.

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