

"Continuo Playing on the Lute, Archlute and Theorbo" By Nigel North

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Nigel North: *Continuo Playing on the Lute, Archlute and Theorbo*, London and Boston: Faber Music in association with Faber & Faber, 1987. 305 p. ISBN 0-10046-5

The importance of the lute and theorbo as continuo instruments is gradually being recognized thanks to the intensive study of baroque performance practice which has taken place in recent years. The modern (and stereotypic) assumption that continuo was provided primarily by a harpsichord and a cello (or a viola da gamba) now must necessarily be modified. Indeed, to judge by the indications in hundreds of printed books and manuscript sources, the harpsichord was rarely the first choice for accompanying 17th century vocal music. With the aid of up-to-date bibliographical descriptions and the ever-increasing number of available facsimile editions, it can be seen that, more often than not, composers of vocal music from the early-17th century Italian monodists and aria composers to the late-17th century English song writers, thought of plucked instruments in this role.

Nigel North's excellent and long-awaited book is a milestone in the practical application of this idea, and the information it imparts is of vital importance not only to lute players, but equally to ensemble directors, conductors, music editors, and historians. His presentation is not a musicological one, but an exposition of the topic derived from a copious assemblage of contemporary sources and a guide to the ways in which this information can be put into actual practice. The guide is informed by the author's years of professional experience as one of the early music world's most sought-after continuo accompanists.

The book is divided into five parts, the first of which discusses the nature, musical qualities, playing techniques and repertoires appropriate to the lute, theorbo, and archlute in Italy, England, Germany, and France in the 17th and 18th centuries. Without doubt, North's account of the differences between the various plucked instruments is the most readable and reliable source of this information to be found anywhere. The tuning charts and representative drawings of the main instrument types should prove enlightening to even the most experienced lute players. However, some important aspects of performance practice could have been discussed more fully. On p. 4, for example, North describes the bass register of the Italian *tiorba* (synonymous with the *chitarrone*) as being so strong that "it does not need reinforcing by a bowed bass; in fact *this would be incorrect in monodies and much instrumental music.*" This statement is correct as far as it goes, but I think that here North should

have driven home the point that the very designation of continuo in a piece of 17th century Italian chamber music specifically indicates the use of a chord-playing instrument *only* and never implies the use of a bowed or a wind instrument to support the chord-player's line. If a piece of Italian music is designated as "ad una con basso continuo" (c.f. Bartolomeo Selma, Venice, 1638), it means the piece is intended for the solo instrument accompanied by a chord-playing instrument only. Indications of this sort are made clear in a recent study by Tharald Borgir ("The Performance of the Basso Continuo in Italian Baroque Music," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1971, revised, Ann Arbor, 1987). Borgir's work is not listed in North's bibliography.

Part two of the book is an extremely clear explanation of the system of 17th- and 18th-century figured bass which can be used by all players, not merely lutenists. North complements the basic information with a wealth of detail concerning the continuo style, playing techniques and performance practice of the time, completing the section with details and tips on ornamentation. This information seems quite sound, with the exception of one point concerning left-hand graces in France, Italy, Germany, and England after ca. 1650. On p. 94 North makes the now familiar statement, put forth in the Dolmetsch/Donington school of baroque ornamentation, that "the later trill *always* began with the dissonance of the upper note." While this statement may be true for French and French-influenced music, it is not true for Italian or Italian-influenced music of either the later 17th or the early 18th century. As North himself advises on p. 85, "When adding ornamentation today, the style and musical vocabulary of each composer and period must be studied and copied so that the ornamentation does not sound out of place." Such a study of the music of Vivaldi or the Italian operas Handel composed for the London stage certainly should cause performers to question the appropriateness of applying French habits to this very different style of music. Frederick Neumann (*Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music*, Princeton, 1978) has gone to great lengths to sort out differences in styles of ornamentation by place and period by presenting and analysing a monumental amount of contemporary material. To no one's surprise, these styles were, indeed, found to be different. Although North refers to Robert Donington's *Baroque Music: Style and Performance*, nowhere does he mention Neumann's highly important work.

For most players, the heart of the book is contained in part three, which deals with the practical, how-to-actually-do-it aspects of lute continuo. This section is presented in terms of the G-tuned lute and archlute, and

this is the tuning with which the majority of today's lutenists are likely to be most familiar. The material presented in part two is reviewed here, applying the best chord-shapes, voice-leading, practice in familiar ground-basses, and so on. The presentation is thorough, clear and undeniably excellent, as one would expect from such an experienced player and teacher as Nigel North.

The theorbo is the subject of part four. The instrument, with its characteristic re-entrant tuning layout and pitched in A, its special techniques and idiom so very different from the lute, requires the painstaking explanations and guidance given here. As in part three, North provides the player with just the sort of expert counsel and practical advice needed. His presentation of this material virtually amounts to the first method for learning to play upon the theorbo produced in modern times, a feature which greatly enhances this already invaluable book.

The final chapter of part four gives examples from original sources of continuo and cadence exercises for the common, Italian theorbo, the English theorbo (with its G-tuning and slightly different configuration of strings), and also for the later, D minor-tuned lute. Considering the importance of this last instrument and given that many of today's lutenists, if they own a second lute, are more likely to have one of these than a theorbo, further discussion about the D minor lute might have been in order (though, historically, North's priorities for the G-tuned lute and the theorbo are quite correct).

Part five comprises examples of continuo realizations, beginning with a selection of song accompaniments for the theorbo (chapter 12) as found in original sources. These are highly instructive, providing graphic illustrations of contemporary performance practice, and showing, by means of unambiguous 17th century tablatures, the methods used by some of the original players. A large number of such realizations for theorbo, lute, and guitar survive and, following North's lead, an anthology of these should be considered for publication, especially since the music involved is often by some of the best composers of the baroque era.

Chapter 13 of part five contains examples of North's own realizations of a variety of different styles of music from different periods for various of the instruments with which he has dealt. Then follows an instructive chapter of musical examples without realizations but with helpful commentary. A range of periods and styles is presented in music by

Henry Lawes, John Blow, Purcell, Salamone Rossi, Monteverdi, Marini, Frescobaldi, Lambert, and Handel. These examples, like most of the previous ones, are presented in their original keys (except where noted) and their original note values (as one would expect in any serious presentation of this music). However, one example, Rossi's "Gagliarda detta La Zambalina" (1608), is transcribed in such an idiosyncratic manner, it seems to leap from the page. The original piece is scored for two treble instruments, an optional alto instrument (not mentioned in the transcription), and a basso for chitarrone. It has a tactus signature of 3, which clearly denotes, according to the harmonic movement, units of $3/2$, if the piece is to be barred. This, of course, was the standard meter for all galliards during this period. The piece is short, an even twenty-four bars if reckoned in the 17th century manner, and its structure and phrasing is crystal-clear to anyone wishing to choreograph it. But North has decided to edit this simple piece with its note values reduced by half and barred so as to "interpret" its hemiolas (and other phrase accentuations found in almost all galliards), thereby necessitating a different time signature ($3/4$, $3/2$, $6/8$, and so on) for virtually every bar of the piece! To a 17th century musician each of these time signatures would have implied a different dance form and tempo; thus, the clear metrical indication of the original music source has been totally misrepresented. I hasten to add that this is but a single lapse in a collection of transcriptions that is otherwise more than acceptable.

North ends his book with useful appendices which include translations of foreign texts, a most valuable list of original music sources and a select list of repertory available in modern and facsimile editions. It is, without doubt (and despite my few quibbles), an important book, which should be in the libraries or on the music stands of everyone involved in the study and application of 17th- and 18th-century performance practices.

James Tyler