

The Late baroque lute Seen through S.L. Weiss

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This article should help to get a deeper understanding of our process of perception and mental organisation when we listen to a late Baroque lute interpretation, by examining the fundamental elements that are sonority in itself and the unique sound aesthetic of the instrument; we will try after, in the Appendix 2, to show the enormous preponderance of ornamentation in the musical discourse. In this view, there is maybe no better example than the music of Silvius Leopold Weiss (1687-1750), the great genius of the instrument.

Sonority

For a better definition of lute sonority, it is useful to compare it to the sonority of the harpsichord. In the early Baroque era the pre-eminence of the lute as a polyphonic solo instrument inspired the harpsichordists of the same period to adopt many of the characteristic features of lute playing including 'style brisé', mordents and broken chords. Froberger was to visit Paris and subsequently come under the influence of the lute master Gautier, while coincidentally establishing the pattern of movements for the keyboard suite in accordance with lute practice. As we advance toward the late Baroque, the opposite tendency can be observed. Lute writing began increasingly to resemble those compositional techniques more readily associated with the harpsichord (arpeggiation, runs, wide voice separation, etc.).

In my view the stylistic cross-fertilization of the period tend to justify the natural inclinations of a lutenist toward greater usage of harpsichord-like embellishments while performing the compositions of the late Baroque. In the process, one will realise that the subtitle "for lute or harpsichord" added by J.S. Bach in a few of his works is not strange but quite logical. (1) This stylistic fusion was extended even further with the invention of the lute-harpsichord, this keyboard instrument with gut strings conceived to imitate the acoustical properties of the lute. Though sometimes regarded as an experimental instrument, (it was advocated by J.S. Bach, who owned two of them) (2) the lute-harpsichord had in fact been in existence for several years previous, responding partly to the demands of both the lute and the harpsichord repertoires. (3)

The relationship between lute and harpsichord goes even further. Indeed, as attested to by Luise Gottsched and numerous other witnesses of the late Baroque, musical expression of this period still reached its peak in the form of lute music, of which Weiss was the master of *affekten* thanks to his mastery of *forte* and *piano* dynamics. The combined ingredients of a violin-like cantabile, the sustained harmonies of a keyboard instrument and its unique timbre colours made of the lute the ideal vehicle for the expression of musical thought. The only aspect of the new musical *zeitgeist* that could not be adequately expressed on the lute was loudness, a feature that contributed to the extinction of the instrument. Though the piano evolved from the harpsichord, it must surely be true that the motivation to exploit the wide dynamic range of the piano was seated in a desire to emulate lute music, exemplified as it was by formidable masters from the time of Francesco da Milano (known as the Michelangelo of Music) through to Weiss. When taking into account the important aesthetic principle of a solo repertoire replete with an abundance of dynamic contrast, it becomes quite plausible that

the lute contributed, in tandem with the harpsichord, to the development of the piano. It is also interesting to note that, according to the musicological research of Dr. Johanne Couture, no publications for harpsichord were created in France between 1529 and 1670. We note, interestingly enough that harpsichordists of the time could read fluently from lute tablature and we have several indications that would support the thesis that lute repertoire was considered also to be harpsichord repertoire. (4) This, in my view, goes one step further from the idea of transcription, which was also widely practiced at the time, as much on the lute as on any other instrument. This linkage remains intact until the end of the Baroque era, a fact revealed by the flexibility of the repertoire and the presence of the lute-harpsichord.

One of the fundamental differences between the sounds of the lute and harpsichord lies in the intensity of the string attacks. Harpsichord articulations are characterised by an equality of attack amplitude while a wide variety of attacks are an inevitable by-product of lute playing. These technical considerations contribute to the aesthetic essence of each instrument providing a delightful, much-needed contrast. In a similar vein it could be argued that the lute, or guitar, is compensated for a lack of polyphonic possibilities normally associated with keyboard instruments by the combined resources of sustained harmony and the unique expressiveness of articulation found only on stringed instruments with neck. As a harmonic/melodic instrument with movable frets, the lute lent itself readily to experimentation involving musical temperament. Notwithstanding the still-living disbelief of some of today's musicians, it is worth recalling that in the midst of this strenuous research period we can find a few series of twenty-four pieces in each of the tonalities that have been composed prior to the Well-tempered Klavier by J.S. Bach. Some of the composers engaged in the creation of this type of work include Gorzanis (lute), Wilson (theorbo), and Bartolotti (guitar). (5)

Another important aspect of sonority is stringing. While made exclusively from gut at the beginning of the Baroque, it was quite common by the middle of the seventeenth century to find, for the solo lute, examples of strings made from overspun metal. This manufacturing technique, still believed by many to be relatively modern, was nonetheless described extensively in works such as the *Introduction to the Skill of Musik* by John Playford (London 1664). (6) This technological advancement, along with the influence of the harpsichord, was responsible for the marked change in style discerned in lute compositions written near the end of the seventeenth century. The bass strings made of wound metal gave added brilliance and sustain to the sound, causing an inevitable change in the conception of works written for the instrument. It comes as no surprise, then, to find in the works of Silvius Leopold Weiss for example, the use of long detached bass notes in conjunction with an elasticity of discourse involving continuous turnover of note values.

In this context, one is left wondering to what extent the performer would muffle the open bass strings. Indeed, the whole question of methodically muffling unwanted strings is central to any lucid reading of this music, with preoccupation of the precise moment of muffling. (Should we stop the string before the next note?, simultaneously with the next note?, after the next bass?). I would even say that the personality of an interpreter is reflected in strong proportion by his or her way of dealing with bass muffling, because this influences so much the sound atmosphere and the musical discourse. Have a listen to your preferred lutenists' recordings and then the others: don't you realise how important it is in your opinion? The playing is directly affected in terms of accentuation, articulation, volume, legato, thus all the lyrical aspects of the work. (7)

As for the instruments, it is quite clear that Weiss and his Germanic contemporaries were to favour the models in the style of Johann Christian Hoffmann's, who lived in Leipzig

and was apparently a close companion of J.S.Bach, himself a good friend of Weiss (we know, for example that Bach is named in the last will and testament of Hoffmann). (8) The preponderance of this particular model was possibly due, like the change of musical style, to the wound metal strings discussed earlier. (9) However, it is sometimes necessary to use a current model lute because some works contain a few chromatic bass pitches that could only be obtained through transposition, at the cost of disfiguring certain melodic lines. The last five bass notes on a theorbo-lute can only be played as open strings, completely off the fingerboard, due to their connection with the second pegbox, whereas on a “standard” lute only the last two courses are off the fingerboard, leaving the other bass strings over the fretboard, and therefore susceptible to chromatic alteration by the left hand. Though not frequently encountered, this situation arises in a few Weiss works (9 pieces on a total of 237 in the London ms, which actually implies six complete sonatas if all the movements are to be performed), enough to confirm that the master occasionally composed with this type of instrument in hand, necessitating an alternation between two instruments for the performers. The sizes of the instruments are generally similar except for the pegboxes. The strings vibrating length of two of my lutes (a theorbated Hoffmann and a standard Burkholzer-Edlinger) are almost the same: 70cm and 71cm. One notices while comparing the two instruments that the basses of the theorbo-lute are quite bright while those of the standard lute have a sombre but warm quality.

One last detail, of paramount importance for everyone but raising sometimes worthless discussions, is the nails. Whether one uses them or not (both options were in use before just like today), the difficulty of getting a good tone is always there since the fundamentals of sonority are at the start and at the end of our practice work: 1) the choice and maniac precision of the angle of attack of the string, this being for every single note, and 2) the shape and the suppleness of the part of the finger that makes the attack (flesh or nail). (10)

Sound Aesthetic

We should likewise consider the most important aspect regarding the Baroque lute: the relationship between the score and the ultimate sonic experience. Simply put, little relationship exists between what is written and what is heard. A score for Baroque lute - whether in tablature or modern notation - gives to someone who does not play the instrument the same effect as the reduction of a symphony to a simplified work for piano: one simply cannot imagine the variety of sounds and colours. (11) The sound of the Renaissance lute, for example, with its tight counterpoint, follows the score closely. There is an obvious relationship between the aural experience and the written score. The same can be said about the guitar; the number of strings played and the number of identifiable tone colours are almost identical. We have of course a few exceptions like the *campanella* effect. But with the Baroque lute, we suddenly and frankly come upon a universe of shimmering sounds like those of a harp, serious and lingering like those of an organ, all the while infinitely diversified not only because of the double stops at the unison or at the octave and the numerous open strings with their rich harmonics, but precisely because of the *prolonged notes*. This gives a discrete sonic richness not readily apparent by a casual reading of the score. As in the orchestral situation, few contrapuntal voices are needed to create musical discourse – usually two - but many instruments amplify and enrich these voices through varied instrumentation or, as in the case of the baroque lute, many strings *prolong* the melodic-harmonic information. This overlapping of durations, under conscious control, creates in reality other

lines. This problematic is not the same as the problematic of bass muffling, even though both interact with each other.



Courante from solo sonata n° 5 S-C7 in c minor, London Manuscript

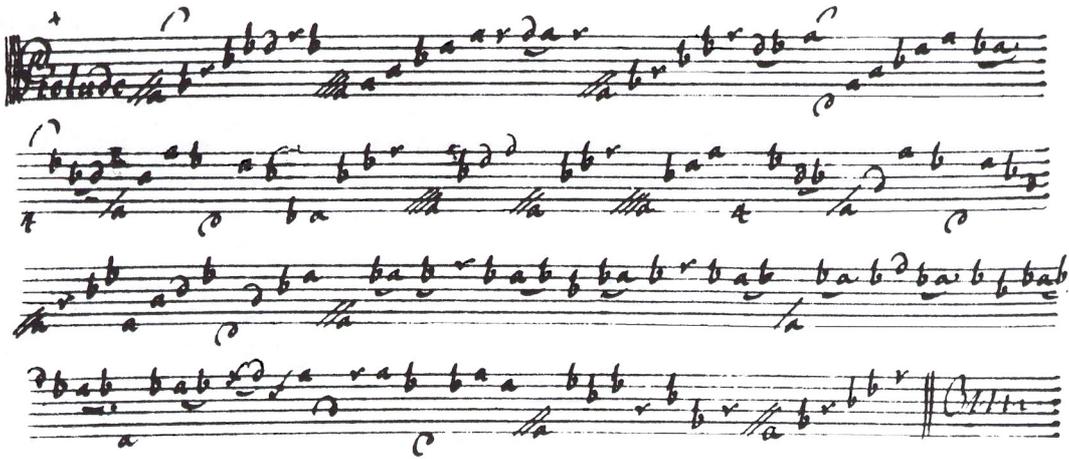
If tablatures or orchestral score reductions are always necessary, it is because they give a quick and clear access to the works; they are nevertheless only a first step in the comprehension of a musical composition. (12) Let's continue now with our second step examination.

It is true that at the keyboard the musician also asks himself how long he must keep the keys depressed, but for him this problem is quickly solved by the number of notes and their often generous flux. With the Baroque lute the number of notes is always small and, as in the case in both a slow and fast movement, if one would write:

1. The real length of each note (never the same because of the perpetual string changes)
2. Their real tonality (taking into account the doubling of strings) and
3. Each indication of timbre (that vary constantly),

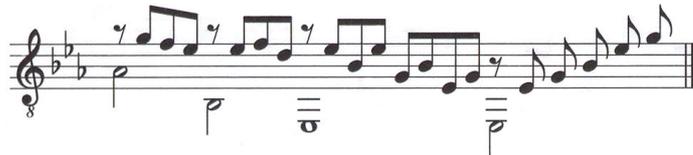
it is certainly not an exaggeration to say that several staves would be necessary to render the two written voices into several precise voices.

Even upon superficially listening to the Baroque lute one can be fascinated. The listener is seduced by the constant movement between a coherent musical discourse - some signing lines - and a mosaic of interior nuances fleetingly tasted due to the fact that they are too complex to be explicitly perceived.

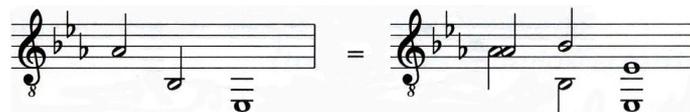


Prelude from solo sonata n° 6 S-C10, London Manuscript

The analogy of the mosaic, or a stained glass window, is appropriate. The rational mind perceives a general image, simple as a sketch. Simultaneously, however, the intuition perceives hundreds of elementary components, meaningless in themselves but which merge into a coherent image. Let's choose, to begin with, deliberately a simple example: at the end of the prelude of Sonata no 6 S-C10, from the London Manuscript by L.S.Weiss, we have a cadence which on paper is exasperatingly banal:



We perceive a rather illogical, completely disjunct bass line. This same line, however, when played with double strings is not only conjunct but enriched in an orchestral fashion:



When played on the instrument, the superior voice becomes:



This banal example, re-evaluated according to these insights, assumes a density of at least five voices. (Changes of left-hand positions and the nuanced attack of the right hand will even necessitate certain indications of tone colour). Nonetheless, rather than contenting himself with numerous furtively superposed additional lines, a genius like Weiss constructs

long melodic strata while taking advantage of judicious interval selection favouring the independence of the voicings.

With the strings resonating independently, one may position their listening according to the horizontal tracings of the melody with reference to what I call 'strings-durations'. It is thus possible for each string to carry an independent voice. The isolated 'strangeness' of these voice fragments (thin and syncopated) is camouflaged by the overall direction of the line, which is in itself enigmatic because of the numerous voicings to which a melodic fragment could belong.

A good example would be the courante of Weiss's fifth sonata in C minor. At the outset one finds a broken line, sprayed out over two or three registers:



The natural resonance of the strings allows us to hear a dialogue, and the superior voice intones the melodic cell  which is constantly renewed up to the end:



(In passing, it should be mentioned that this two-note cell unifies the entire C minor sonata: it is present throughout all six movements.) Through the action of the held notes, or 'strings-durations', the superior voice contains within it two other distinct voices, whose uniqueness become evident in the sixth and seventh measures:



One observes that in these measures, one of the voices becomes prolonged in terms of note values while the other fills the time with the usage of the previously mentioned melodic cell. This gives the illusion of a ternary measure:

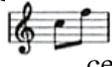
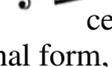


In other words, the voices define each other by means of rhythmic syncopations and prolonged note values. In this context the weak beats and thinner material are, to say the least, eminently reusable.

Due to the difficulty of playing several simultaneous independent voices, Weiss became master of a technique wherein several levels of musical thoughts are elaborated in a deceptively simple melodic continuum. This is a much more elaborated process than in solo violin or solo 'cello works like those of Bach since they do not imply duration overlapping.

We must not diminish the importance of the contribution of the hemiolas (secondary meters caused by accents and syncopations) to the elasticity of the durations. The following passage could have remained symmetrically moulded in its ternary metre, but the hemiola (in this case a temporary binary metre) creates an interesting diversion while prolonging in the bass the aforementioned two-note cell:



During the second section, dominated from one end to the other by the inverted version of the same cell: , supervenes a very astute pedal passage due to the fact that the first note of the  cell becomes the second note of a countermelody formed by the same cell in its original form, but prolonged and straddling the bar-line.

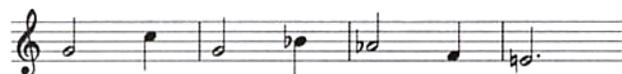
What appears to be :



becomes in reality :



After the listener identifies this florid thematic treatment, he or she can resituate at his leisure the countermelody which (behold the genius of Weiss!) remains very cantabile in spite of the limitations imposed by this multi-melodic process. One can reconstruct the melody either with the charming syncopation or with the more 'normal' strong beats:



and it is even possible to imagine the superior voice stretched over four beats:



This ambiguity among different rhythmic realities, due to technical artifice, forms an integral part of the aesthetic of this music which, as we have seen, is inseparable from the nature of the instrument. Like a mosaic, the contour of each coloured square becomes part of the overall image through diverse associations.

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NOTES

1. The heading of Bach's manuscript of the Prelude, fugue and Allegro BWV 998 bears the mention: *Prelude pour la luth. ò Cembal. par J.S.Bach.*
2. In the *Specificacio* of Bach's goods, made after his death, are listed two lute-harpsichords and one lute made by Johann Christian Hoffmann.
3. Please refer to Bruce Gustafson and Willard Martin in "The Art of the Lautenwerk", CD by Kim Heindel, Kingdom 1990.
4. See the doctoral thesis of Johanne Couture, McGill University, Montréal, 2002
5. See the list of works by Gorzanis and Wilson in the Grooves Dictionary, and, about Bartolotti, the article by Massimo Moscardo in *Les Cahiers de la Guitare*, no 53, Paris, january 1995.
6. Not to be confounded with the other 18 editions, at the same period, of this same popular work.
7. See examples of bass muffling in *Method for the Baroque lute* by Toyohiko Satoh, Tree Edition, Munich 1987.
8. Please refer to the dictionary of luthiers *Die Geigen und Lautenmacher, vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Schneider, Tutzing 1975.
9. In a letter to the author of this text, Joël Dugot, lute maker and curator of the Music Museum of the Cité de la musique in Paris said: "*I view the appearance of the 'shortened' double-pegbox of the type made by J.C. Hoffmann as proof of the utilisation of wound strings, at least for the five bass courses*".
10. See the letter by Weiss to Mattheson as mentioned by D.A.Smith in: *Baron and Weiss contra Mattheson: in defense of the lute*, LSA Journal 1973.
11. Hans Neeman, in the preface of his edition of works by Reusner and Weiss, in the series *Das Erbe Deutscher Musik* (1938), already said: « *...und ihr wahrer Wert wie die Klangfülle des im Notenbild zuweilen "mager" scheinenden Satzes enthüllt sich erst bei meisterlichem Erklingen auf der originalgemässen Laute* » : « *(...)the sonority of the musical phrase sometimes seems thin in the notation and is only revealed when sounds mightily the lute faithfully conformable to the original instrument.*”
12. See : *Editing XVIIIth century lute music:the works of S.L.Weiss* par D.A Smith, in *Le luth et sa musique* , Éditions du CNRS, Paris 1984, p. 257-8.

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