

How to Learn Your First Pieces

BY PATRICK O'BRIEN¹

Perhaps the most frequent question I am asked by lute teachers is “What do you do with beginners?” Modern method books progress a bit too fast for beginners, they tell me.

Looking at the history of the lute's early repertoire, I am struck by how dominant melodic playing and its technique were to the training of early players. When a novice player is ready, we all assign some treble and ground duets to learn, realizing that the right hand's articulation of a melody is fundamental to 16th-century lute. I discussed this with my friend Paul O'Dette years ago, and he had brilliant insights into how a method for beginners for Renaissance lute might be organized around the function of the right hand. It occurs to me that some of our ideas might help the average teacher or beginner.

Most modern methods seem to use a few of the same short English pieces to begin. Many English manuscripts have little pieces roughly suitable for beginners. These do not occur as often as continental sources. While basically simple, a melody over a simple bass, these pieces contain textures which vary from one to four voices, requiring a wide variety of right hand skills. Perhaps we might take a few of these pieces and “deconstruct” them, building them up from one to two to three voices, providing the beginner with a path not only to learning the techniques required to play the pieces but to understanding their structure. We could create many more “easy” pieces in this way. Of course complex pieces of polyphony cannot be treated this way, but a true beginner isn't ready for these for some time.

One could do this with any simple beginner's piece that is constructed with a melody over a simple harmony or ground. The student learns to articulate the melody as the first generations of Renaissance lutenists did, alternating strong and weak fingers and allowing the right forearm to move slightly up and down as it does in many early bowed instruments. Later the bass is added, and finally the larger chords are filled out. (Ray Nurse used this idea to create a group of wonderful easy “reporting” duets based on small English tunes.)

Here is a piece common in many method books, treated in this way:

¹ Thanks go to Douglas Hensley for providing the content of this article.

How to learn your first pieces, by deconstructing them.

First, examine the whole piece:

Buffons (Passamezzo Moderno)

William Ballet Lute Book

original

p. 104

Begin by extracting the melody only, making a one voice version
and playing it with by thumb and index fingers.

Use left hand fingering which will fit into the larger chords.

| = thumb plucks

. = index plucks

Next add the bass under the melody and play a two voice version.
 with the middle finger playing the top voice on strong beats while the thumb plays bass.
 Remember to allow the notes to be strong and weak.

∴ = middle finger plucks

Add the third voice and you are back to the original piece in 3 voices,
 Remember to retain the lilting character of the strong and weak beats.

One of the most common mistakes we make at first is
 to make all the notes sound equal, as we are taught in modern music lessons.