Introduction

With this issue of the LSA Quarterly a new column begins, devoted to describing the various elements that go into playing the lute at a high level of artistry. While there has been extensive writing about the scholarly and historical aspects of the lute, there is still fairly little detailed writing about how to play the lute beyond a basic level of instruction.

“A Third and very Considerable Reason is, From the Closenesse of Masters in the Art, who (all along) have been extreme shie in revealing the Occult and Hidden Secrets of the Lute.

The French (who were generally accounted Great Masters) seldom or never would prick their Lessons as They Play’d them, much less Reveal any thing (further than of necessity they must) to the thorough understanding of the Art, or Instrument, which I shall make manifest and very plain.

Nor was there, nor yet is there Any Thing more constantly to be observed among Masters, than to be Very Sparing in their Communications concerning Openness, Plainness, and Freeness; either with Parting with their Lessons, or Imparting much of Their Skill to their Scholars; more than to shew them the Ordinary way how to play such and such Lessons.

This hath been, and still is the Common Humour, ever since my Time.

So that it is no marvel, that it continues Dark and Hidden to All, excepting some Few, who make it their Chief Work to Practice, and Search into its Secrets.

Which when they have done, and with Long Pains, and much Labour obtained, THEY DYE, AND ALL THEIR SKILL AND EXPERIENCE DYES WITH THEM.

So that the next Generation is still to seek, and begin again a-New, for such Attainments.”

As Thomas Mace wrote in 1675, describing the reasons why the lute had been difficult in the past: In the spirit of Thomas Mace, I’ll try to describe some of the “Occult and Hidden Secrets” that I have discovered – or learned from others – about the lute. I will focus on those aspects of lute playing (both technical and musical) that are not usually addressed in lute method books or in basic private instruction.

~Ronn McFarlane