

# Just How Secret Were Those Muses?

By Pat O'Brien

As one begins to study or teach the *dm*-tuned “baroque” or “French” lute, the lack of appropriate materials is immediately apparent. Where to begin? How does one choose? Students here in America are particularly vulnerable as they are often very far from an experienced teacher or a significant collection of facsimiles which might offer a choice.

## “Which piece to begin withal”

It might appear that beginning chronologically is the best choice. Watching the style evolve from the elder Gautier’s first pieces in the new tuning onward seems logical and is the way a teacher might seek to begin, but French 17<sup>th</sup> century pieces which appear easy often require more stylistic information than a novice has. I have found that such pieces confuse beginners a great deal. True, the 11-course lute has fewer courses for the beginner to negotiate and the music’s texture may be thinner than 18<sup>th</sup> century music for the 13-course, but the notation of French ornaments and special articulations can be confusing to one still having difficulty finding the strings.

Modern methods often progress to difficult material too quickly for the average student. Progressing to J.S. Bach by the end of an introductory book can be unrealistic, however flattering or seductive it might appear to the novice. In writing a method we too often assume that beginners on baroque lute have already played renaissance lute or guitar. This is not always the case, and if true is sometimes more a hindrance than a help.

More accessible modern publications understandably center on famous composers and major works. Publishers and scholars have less interest in the easy pieces that are more useful during the formative period of the lutenist’s development. Also, there are not many original pieces aimed at pedagogy. In the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the average student might have been expected to learn improvisation, very simple pieces might have been created and memorized immediately without being written down. (I prefer to teach improvisation this way myself.)

In two of this Newsletter’s 1985 issues Cathy Liddell chose some pieces from a Brussels Conservatory Manuscript, L. S. 15.132. I have chosen to revisit this source for a few easy pieces. (I must say as I began searching through old L.S.A. publications I was appalled that 20 years had passed since these were published!) These are little-known and unattributed but practical pieces that a novice will find useful. I have provided fingering that does not appear in the original and for two of the pieces I give detailed explanations of the fingering. Accomplished players rarely want to show this sort of speculative fingering in print because there is no one fingering system that

answers both practical and stylistic needs. Each player decides these things for himself upon consideration of many factors and no one system meets everyone’s needs. In teaching a student one often adjusts the fingering to fit the individual. For this reason I have supplied fingering of various kinds so the student might experiment and draw some of his own conclusions about what works for his physical situation and current conception of the music.

A modern guitarist I respect greatly recently wrote to say that she had seen a baroque lute concert and wanted to ask about our articulation practice. She had seen so much repetition of right hand fingers she was wondering if there had been a change in our recent research and pedagogy. Didn’t we still basically play strong beats with the middle finger and off beats with the index as she had learned was true of earlier lute music? Well, yes, I replied, but when one adds the need to span a large number of bass strings the rules one learns on renaissance lute have to be accommodated a bit to each player’s physical needs. It simply isn’t always practical to follow hard and fast rules in practice. On the other hand I too have often seen lutenists repeat their middle finger a dozen times such that no “swing” of varied articulation was apparent. What does one tell a student to do if the “rules” have so many exceptions?

## Right Hand

The later 18<sup>th</sup> century music I have chosen here sounds more familiar stylistically to our modern ears than the earlier French literature. For many beginners this provides the easiest point of entry into the literature. Unfortunately, practical guides to right-hand fingering begin to disappear at this time. In Weiss, for instance, we don’t usually see the little dots under the off-beat notes that originally indicated they were to be played with the index finger. We often are left to rely on our knowledge of fingering traditions, but even in 17<sup>th</sup> century sources the little dots under notes may sometimes be more ceremonial than realistic. There was apparently some difference of opinion on this usage. For instance, many cadential passages marked thus in printed sources of 10 and 11 course lute music:

The musical notation shows a cadential passage on a five-line staff. Above the staff are four notes: a quarter note 'c', a quarter note 'a', an eighth note 'd', and a half note 'a'. Below the staff, the notes are labeled with 'c', 'a', 'd', and 'd' respectively. There are two '4' characters below the staff, one under the first two notes and one under the last two notes. A vertical bar line is placed between the third and fourth notes. The staff ends with a double bar line.

which we interpret to mean:



are marked as follows in original manuscript sources like the Robarts ms.:



which we interpret:



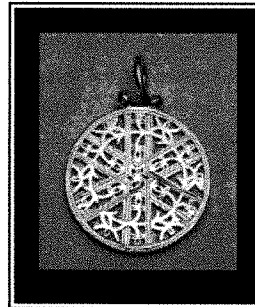
Discovering this discrepancy for the first time was a great shock to many of us who had worked long and hard to master the more unidiomatic printed fingering.

Manuscript sources which may have been intended for players not living near Paris, the center of the emerging baroque practice, were sometimes more carefully notated, with fingering and ornaments written out more explicitly than the printed Parisian sources. We are tempted to think that students living near the origins of the music wouldn't have needed such extensive notation. Perhaps they could watch the great players of their day perform and arrange lessons to learn the fine points of technique and style. On the other hand, a student from abroad whose family had arranged one or two expensive seasons in Paris for him to learn the finer points of a polite education had to reply on his memory after returning to England or Poland. He might have taxed his teachers to write out everything as clearly as possible so he would play in good style after returning home. Thus the Robarts manuscript or some of the Prague manuscripts have more carefully and perhaps realistically annotated fingering than Parisian Prints. In modern times we might automatically assign more importance to a printed source, and certainly to one published in Paris. The reverse may be true: some handwritten sources now found far from the site of composition are more informative on intimate details of fingering and ornamentation.

Again, even these guides disappear in later baroque sources where Weiss and his contemporaries often dispense with the offbeat dots under notes entirely. (Here I should refer you

to Bob Barto's informative article on this subject earlier in this issue. It may have been more common in later baroque lute music to notate the aberrations in fingering than the norms) Was this, as many suspect, because the right hand, when spread over many courses, could not effectively conform to the simple articulation rules as it had on lutes of no more than 10 or 11 courses in earlier times? Perhaps we shall never know for certain, but the average modern player finds a strict strong-weak alternation of middle and index fingers impractical in later baroque lute literature. I have seen baroque lute beginners come to grief trying to achieve strict rhythmic alternation. In theory one tries to play a pick-up or off-beat note with the index finger and a downbeat or strong beat with the middle. In practice one does what one can and often what one must. It is often necessary to break the modern guitarist's cardinal alternation rule and repeat a right hand finger in order to achieve a practical articulation pattern. I should point out that repeating fingers assumes that one relaxes each finger immediately after each pluck, as it may be necessary to use that same finger again on the very next note. Many injured modern guitarists I have worked with have suffered from the aftermath of having been taught to alternate absolutely strictly and hold each finger in the palm after plucking until the next finger began inward. All too often they have lost their proper sense that the default position of each finger when awaiting the next pluck should be relaxed, not held in. Their bodies forgot how to relax the fingers in proper succession, sometimes ending their careers. Thus learning early in the game to relax after each pluck seems essential to me.

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An example of a practical aberration from “normal” strong-weak alternation practice is playing an off-beat note with the middle finger on a treble string to facilitate the thumb’s placement on a low bass course (Brussels Menuet in F, m.10, b. 2):



When the thumb is stretched out to the basses one facilitates a string crossing in the treble ((Brussels Sarabande in dm, m. 20, b. 2&3):

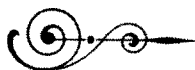
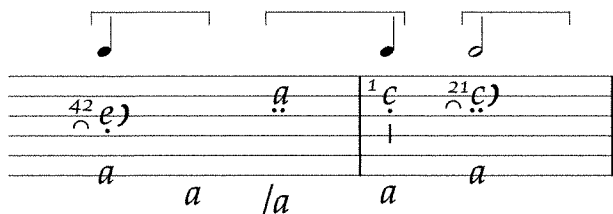


by using the right hand fingers that are closest to each string rather than those correct for the metrical position of the beat. Arpeggios of chords are made of all “good” notes in the sense of consonance, which begs the rules of fingering based on good and bad fingers for good and bad notes.

A stylistic aberration from normal practice might be finishing a phrase’s final strong downbeat note gently with the index finger (Brussels Aria in F, m. 20, b.3):



or articulating the right hand in accordance with an less apparent rhythmic scheme like a hemiola, (Brussel Menuet 2 in dm, m. 26-27):



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(the feature of triple meters which spans two triple measures with a double-sized triple measure).

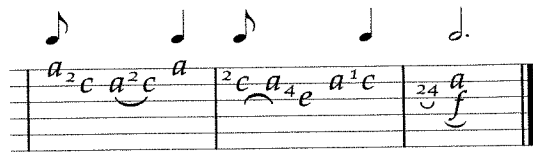
We should mention some of the highly individual choices each player might make depending on specific anatomy. For instance, there is often a difference in hand and finger sizes among students. Obviously people have different hand sizes. When the thumb is on the low basses, someone with a larger hand will reach the index finger out to the first string more easily and often than a small-handed person. More subtly, a person whose index finger is longer than their ring finger might also find the index a more frequent choice. Many people, (like myself), have an index finger considerably shorter than their ring, in which case they feel more comfortable reaching for a weak beat first string with their middle finger when the thumb is on a low bass.

There are also differences in string spacing from lute to lute. Some historical models of baroque lutes have barely 11 millimeters between the centers of the courses whereas some have in excess of 13. The relationship between the string spacing and the individual's hand size may determine many preferences in fingering.

Players choosing to play somewhat "thumb-under" on their baroque lutes often use the ring finger on the first string as it is closer than the middle finger in this hand posture. Former classical guitarists will sometimes find the ring finger easier to use as they have previous training to give them confidence in the use of that finger. Neither of these choices may reflect the most likely usage of early players or composers, but we each make these practical decisions for ourselves based on our individual situation. As we adjust our performances in myriad ways to accommodate our choices they become invisible to us. Students ask, "Why do you play it that way?" and we have forgotten when or why we adapted to a particular practice.

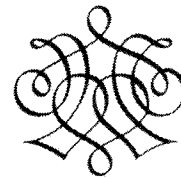
### Left Hand

In modern pedagogy guitar students learn to use "one finger per fret." In practice this is too simplistic a plan on guitar and utterly fails to answer the needs of the baroque lute neck, which is often 5 to 10 centimeters longer than a guitar. Surviving original left hand fingering shows half steps are often played with 2nd and 4th fingers and whole tones with 1st and 4th. A study of the now almost invisible left-hand fingering in the Dresden manuscript's copy of the gigue of the most common Weiss d minor Sonata, which we all try to play in our first months on baroque lute, could save us a lot of trouble. The red ink has faded but with care one can make out the tiny fingering numbers. Bearing in mind that this is one of the suites in Weiss' own handwriting this evidence is very compelling. In this and other surviving fingering there is a marked preference for using non-adjacent pairs of fingers, (2-4, 1-3, 1-4), when playing legato slurs and ornaments. This might be because of the greater independence from one another of non-adjacent pairs.



Frequent use of the little finger, especially on the treble strings, encourages a more relaxed left shoulder and a more supine forearm than most modern players use. The longer third finger is used more on the basses, while the shorter fourth is more rarely used there. This is a very practical system with which to begin.

Here then are some of the thoughts one might have when attempting to finger the first "easy" pieces on dm-tuned lute. Remember, there is no absolutely, perfectly right way to play. There are many possibilities, and you must try them yourself, with your own hands, on your lute, with your technique and current musical sensibilities; don't expect to make all the same decisions when you return to this piece next year, as so many of these factors will and should change. Perhaps we can "chalk up" our various attempts "to experience." Each way one plays a phrase has different qualities, and none of our experiments goes to waste. Even something that doesn't sound good to us now might have its proper place somewhere else in the literature. (Experience, I tell my students, is usually what you get when you don't quite get what you want.)



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