

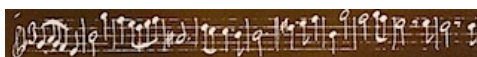
The Guitar under Lully

G rard REBOURS interviewed by Elizabeth Benson
for Guitar International magazine, June 1988.

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1987 was the Villa-Lobos year, and many articles, concerts and records have been devoted to this great Brazilian composer who was born a century ago.

But just three hundred years before, in 1687, the famous opera and ballet composer Jean Baptiste Lully died in Paris. Therefore there were a fair number of musical and musicological events last year to celebrate the tricentenary of his death: concerts, books, exhibitions, recordings, and the production of an opera, complete with the ballets and sets of the baroque age.

The guitar circle was not very involved in all that, except the baroque guitar player Gerard Rebours, who has recently given in Paris, France and England a recital called "The Guitar under Lully". This is what led me to the following interview.

First I asked Gerard Rebours about the role played by the guitar at the end of the XVIIth century.

G rard Rebours: Whether we consider the social, the musical or the technical aspect, the guitar was, at that time, under Lully, at its zenith. Its position as the favourite courtly instrument is well known. This was due, among other reasons, to the fact that Louis XIV, just as other foreign sovereigns and members of the aristocracy, were particularly fond of it. Robert De Vis e, the greatest guitar composer of this period, was a wonderful and accomplished musician. He left us a legacy of dozens of pieces of a high and constant quality, that can be played on the lute, the theorbo or other instruments. This proves that his music was composed in accordance with musical standards, and not only as purely instrumental pieces, although he used all the range

of the technical possibilities of the guitar. But he did so in a very considered way, without looking for pure virtuosity. I feel this man was very committed, because he favoured the musical style before all. Besides these interesting pieces by De Visée, there are also many good compositions in the books of Corbetta, Médard, and those of other minor composers. But there was another source of repertoire at that time : the settings, or transcriptions made from harpsichord, lute, or orchestral music. And, of course, Lully was one of the composers whose music was most arranged, in tablature or otherwise. There is a fair amount of it in manuscript form, perhaps also in other books I have to research, including some "anonymous" pieces that I identified as being taken from Lully's operas or ballets. A thorough research is in progress about this in the Paris National Centre of Scientific Research (C.N.R.S.), which I have been associated with for some four years now.

So there is a wide repertoire for the five course "baroque guitar" of that period, which actually represents only a small part of the entire repertoire for that instrument, covering about two centuries.

1- E.B.: Was Lully's musical style influencing guitar music then ?

G.R.: Lully's music was the standard. Its influence prevailed over all the music in France, and abroad too. German, Italian and English composers came to France to study with him, and then spread the style "à la Française" in their own countries. Telemann, amongst others, adapted Lully's opera in German. He said that he had known people from various countries who could sing by heart various extracts from the opera *Atys* or *Bellerophon*. I also read that the English royal court had tried to employ Lully. But one must say that, on the whole, French culture was tremendously fashionable at that time. So, of course, guitar music was also influenced by Lully. De Visée wrote in the preface of his 1682 guitar book that he had been trying to conform to the "Inimitable Monsieur de Lully's" fashion. And he succeeded ! Once, as I was playing some pieces by De Visée my early music master, the distinguished musicologist and harpsichord player Antoine Geoffroy-Dechaume, exclaimed: "*That sounds like Lully !*"

2 - E.B.: Could you describe this musical style ?

G.R.: Basically, there are two main voices : the upper one, the melody, and the low one, the bass, that supports the harmony that was played in a more or less improvised way by plucked string instruments. This is the usual musical pattern. And when there were other parts inside these two lines - up to three for the full orchestra - Lully had not always written them himself, but often gave the job to his assistants, such as Colasse who even wrote whole pieces for the opera *Achille* and *Polixène*, as Lully died before completing it. The music by Lully is really easy to sing, for a simple reason : there are almost never any arpeggio patterns, and there are seldom two or three wide interval leaps one after the other. They are usually included between diatonic or chromatic series of notes. See, for example, how easy his "*Sarabande pour les Espagnols*" is to sing compared to the *Sarabande* from the *Bach Cello Suite No. 5* :

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Lully' and shows a melody in 3/4 time, G minor, with a simple, stepwise line. The bottom staff is labeled 'Bach' and shows a more complex melody in 3/4 time, G minor, with frequent arpeggios and wide interval leaps.

The harmony that Lully used was simple, so the slightest subtlety in it - a dissonance, a modulation - was quickly noticed. The phrases are usually punctuated by a cadence. The dance character is very evident, even with pieces that do not bear the name of a dance. Thus some airs or entrées are in fact Rigaudons, or Marches, or Sarabandes. Lully wrote very few ornaments. That does not mean they were not to be added ; but he had the best musicians in his orchestra. So why write out what they mastered perfectly ? On the other hand, in guitar tablatures and other settings, we can find ornaments that he had not put into the original orchestral score. This is very interesting from the stylistic point of view.

3 - E.B.: Who adapted Lully's music in guitar tablature ?

G.R.: I just don't know; it is in manuscript and anonymous form. Robert De Visée did some arrangements for theorbo and D'Anglebert included sixteen of Lully's pieces in his harpsichord book. They are magnificent. Compared to it, the guitar versions are quite poor ; and likewise they sound poor when compared to the original orchestral pieces. But one is entitled to do one's own setting, of course, as people were doing then, if one knows the instrument and the music well enough That is what I do, because it would break my heart to play a piece by Lully with an imperfect melody, an incomplete harmony, or even with some missing bars.

4 - E.B.: Was Lully interested in the guitar ?

G.R.: He was taught the guitar in Italy, when he was young - and he became also an excellent violinist, and he could dance. Later, his contemporary Lecerf de la Vieville wrote that Lully would sometimes play the guitar "for fun", that he could play "a hundred minuets and courantes on it without ever writing them down". "Thus, it was all lost", complains Lecerf... And so do I ! We also know that Corbetta performed in one of Lully's ballets with several other guitarists, in 1656. There were also eight guitar players performing in Alcidiene in 1658 and, in 1667, in La Pastorale Comique, Lully himself joined the guitar ensemble. On some engravings we can see the necks of lutes or theorbos coming out of the orchestra pit, and we can assume that the guitar was present in the orchestra, because theorbo players, as Grenerin, Bartolotti, Campion or De Visée, used to play guitar too. [note : more on this subject in the article "Lully guitariste" - in French.]

5 - E.B.: Can you explain this ?

G.R.: This was probably because of the tuning. Although the theorbo has almost three times as many strings as the guitar, the five main strings that were played by both hands were the same as the five guitar strings. (The bass strings on the theorbo were only played as open strings.) Francois Campion said that the guitar "is contained in the theorbo", and that is quite true. Also both instruments used the "re-entrant tuning" system, but in opposite ways : the baroque guitar had high strings on the right hand thumb side, whereas the theorbo had low strings on the right hand finger side.

6 - E.B.: The baroque guitar is often considered as a poor relation to the lute, or as a guitar with only five strings. Is it also your viewpoint ?

G.R.: It would be more exact to consider the Renaissance guitar, with its four pairs of strings, as the poor relation to the lute or to the vihuela, which had six or seven courses, because the same kind of music was played, and the same kind of technique was used on these three instruments. So, this guitar was thus a kind of small lute, or a small vihuela. Anyway there is some excellent music to play on it, and the expression "poor relation" is somewhat too derogatory. Could the same question be asked about the recorder in relation to the flute, or the virginal in relation with the harpsichord, simply because they can play fewer note ? It is not the instrument in itself that makes the music, it is the player, and the composer.

Now, as to the five-course "Baroque" guitar, it is much more difficult to relate it to the lute because its technical and expressive possibilities are quite different. Corbetta, for example, pointed out that very clearly: in "La Guitarre Royale" he said that he could not play anything on the lute, and that his style ("*maniere*") was "*so different from lute playing*". Rémy Médard, too, insisted upon the very peculiar character of the guitar and said, with some exaggeration I think, that "*with its five strings it could imitate every instrument, but that no other instrument could imitate it*"!

7 - E.B.: But the guitar had only five pairs of strings whereas the lute had thirteen, fourteen...

G.R.: Yes, but this does not mean it is three times easier. It may even be the contrary ! Thomas Mace, the English lutenist of the end of the XVIIth century, explains in a chapter of his treatise *Musick's Monument* that the lute became easier because of the increasing number of strings. To give you a similar example, let us take the beginning of the Concierto de Aranjuez cadenza, with the low G sharp that returns all the time, as a pedal, obliging the player to use the barré, or to stop the sixth string on the fourth fret with one finger whereas the three others have successions of thirds to play; it can be somewhat awkward. Now, if you play the same passage on the ten string guitar, the problem disappears, because this low G sharp can be more easily

played on the eighth open string. The more strings you have, the easier the playing ! That is exactly what Thomas Mace meant, and that is exactly the case with the baroque guitar, compared to the lute or theorbo. Of course, one has to master the right hand quite well in order to pluck the right string amongst the great number of those available. As I have just begun to practise on the chitarrone, I know what it means ! But one does not have to play three times as many notes on the lute or theorbo as on the guitar. If we compare the same pieces, such as De Visée's, in their various versions, we will notice that the guitar plays as many notes, or voices, as the lute and theorbo, and sometimes more...With their great number of strings and their low range, and all the harmonics that are naturally developed out of it, the lute and theorbo have no problem in rendering a clear musical texture, and a gorgeous sonority. On the guitar, with its five courses and its narrower range, one has to develop much more skill to express the same music, and to clearly do so. As the two basic voices, the melody and the bass, are getting closer on the guitar, they sometimes even cross each other, so you have to be very precise in your playing if you want the audience to follow it clearly. Sometimes they do not cross each other, but they must be played with what we could call a crossed fingering. For example, in this succession of thirds, A/C and G/Bflat, the first two notes will be played on the third and second courses as usual, but the two others will be played on the third and fifth courses, the highest note being now played by the thumb ! And there are these strummed chords that fill in the musical texture, but that must not be played loud all the time as the hand has the tendency to do, but must be performed with a wide dynamic range so as to always go with the musical context. Last, but not least, there is the octave course (or courses) problem: very often it brings confusion in the voices because one can clearly hear the two notes, one octave apart, that it produces when only one of the two notes is in fact needed. So I use what could be called the string selection. It is not an invention of mine, but only a few authors (Mouton, Corette, the Mary Burwell lute tutor) mentioned it. Although the two strings of an octave course are only 3mm apart, I only pluck the one that is musically needed : the low, or the high one, and I must miss it on no account ! And when there is an ornament on that course, I have to damp the string I just avoided, otherwise its sound comes back during the trill or the mordent. And as it is sometimes necessary to pluck two adjacent courses at the same time, I finally have four different thumb actions : playing one half, one, one and a half, and two courses. Damping notes techniques are also necessary if one wants to get rid of those unwanted chord inversions that easily happen on the baroque guitar, and seldom on the lute. So, you see that one has to develop quite a lot of tricks in order to make the baroque guitar music sound as acceptable as any other. Otherwise it will just be considered as "charming" for five minutes, quite boring after ten minutes and even unbearable after fifteen minutes! And frankly, do you think that the guitar could have become the instrument "a la mode" in the XVIIth century, the favourite instrument of kings and princes, who were in touch with the very best in everything, if it was indeed just a foolishly limited instrument, a poor relation to the lute ?

However, in the XVIIIth century, after the baroque era, we come to the galant style, the rococo, the preclassical composers such as Giacomo Merchi or Nathanael Diesel who were using the guitar in a much more simple way. It became then, as you said, "a guitar with only five strings". Merchi, by the way, advocated the use of single strings, and the six string guitar appeared some decades later. That proves that they had absolutely given up some typically baroque refinements as, for example, the campanellas.

8 - E.B.: Can you explain what the campanellas were?

G.R.: It could also be called the "harp effect". It means that a series of diatonic notes are played on as many different strings as possible, the right hand using in this way a somewhat arpeggio technique instead of the scale technique. For example, you can play the ascending notes A,B,C,D,E on five different strings of the baroque guitar, including four open ones. This is due to its stringing peculiarity. Fewer strings than the lute, but more expressive resources. One can achieve this campanella effect, but on a much more restricted basis, on the classical guitar. It is used, for example, at the beginning of La Espiral Eterna, by Leo Brouwer, or in a Guido Santorsola Preludio. And I have noticed that in the classical guitar setting of the famous Sanz Pavanas, the last part is currently missing, simply because it consists of a whole campanella section, quite impossible to adapt as such on our modern instrument.

9 - E.B.: By explaining your approach, it seems to me that you somewhat extrapolate, instead of plainly following the given instructions.

G.R.: Yes, I do. You know, the instructions given at the beginning of the books (sometimes a long section, sometimes just one or two pages) were always elementary, although useful elements. Do you know a tutor who explains all the playing subtleties of a professional ? These instructions were for beginners, for amateurs; explaining which symbol meant a "*tremblement*", and that when there was one dot under a letter you had to use your index finger, and so on. Of course, one must be aware of these rules, but one should go further, extrapolate when it is needed - from some small detail or remark, sometimes in order to match the high musical standards of the period. Finally, it is the result that must guide you. And the same could be said about the use of notes inégales, articulate silences, ornamentation... I do integrate these stylistic elements in my playing, but not systematically. One must always be attentive to the result : is it more beautiful, more exciting, more enlightening, or not ? The rules looked firm, in the books, but we know it was more flexible in practice. It is this flexibility which is hard to lay down in rules today, but it was easy to observe directly at that time. As an analogy imagine in 2287 someone who wanted to accompany a Simon and Garfunkel song on the "early" 12 string guitar, at a time when only a few stringless original instruments remained, and no recording had survived. A lot of preoccupations and questions would arise. But nowadays you just have to put the record on, or listen to a street singer. And when you buy the guitar, it is already strung the right way !

10 - E.B.: So the baroque guitar is far from being an incomplete instrument?

G.R.: It is only so when the player is an incomplete musician. Otherwise, excellent and original solo pieces can be performed on it. And the fact that it had many expressive resources (contrapunctal playing, slurs, arpeggios, strummed chords, campanellas ...) made it easy for the composer to feature these different elements according to their personality, or taste. There is the Italian style, with a lot of campanellas, and a somewhat fleeting counterpoint. Sanz used strummed chords in whole sections only, most of the time, except when he plagiarised foreign pieces. And in the De Visee suites you will notice that the preludes deal only with arpeggio and counterpoint, that the gagues use few strummed chords, whereas the sarabandes display the contrary, and so on. It must also be said that the guitar can accompany any music, alone or in combination with other instruments. It fits the voice very well, as Campion said, and can play every chord. It was used on stage, and it is very effective for dancing.

11 - E.B.: Have you ever played for a baroque comedy with dancers ?

G.R.: Yes I have, about twenty-five times, in four or five different shows. [2020 note: and much more now!] It is very different from concert playing, because I was most of the time part of the action, playing and moving around at the same time, having to begin exactly when the dancers are ready, being dressed up in a costume and wig. There is no time to look at one's fingers ; it is very demanding, but it is a lot of fun !

12 - E.B.: Can you dance, too ?

G.R.: Yes I can, but not on stage ! I attended baroque and renaissance dance classes for more than two years now, but it is not enough to make a good dancer out of me ! And baroque dancing is a very refined art, very difficult to master. Anyway, I know the basic steps, it helps me when I play baroque dance music, which is the bulk of the repertoire, and I can perform it to students so as to teach them the right tempo and character of a dance piece.

13 - E.B.: You told me you play the continuo, or thorough bass accompaniment, in ensembles: doesn't this become too easily a routine, compared to solo playing ?

G.R.: Not at all. It cannot become a routine because there is a wide variety of musical contexts to which you must adapt your accompaniment. Of course, one could just follow the elementary rules we find in guitar books and put a full chord on each bass note, or on each beat. But, once again this is for the beginner, who does not know the basic harmony principles, and it is most insufficient for a refined accompaniment part. If you accompany this way, it will become boring for everybody - the other musicians, the audience and yourself. If you look for example, at the accompaniment part written by Boesset, you can realize how

beautiful, although simple and effective, this art can be. Also you obviously cannot play the same way if you are accompanying a single voice, or two, or a five part string orchestra, and you must adapt your playing according to the number of continuo instruments : guitar alone, or with viol, lute, theorbo, harpsichord...

14 - E.B.: Can the baroque guitar and the harpsichord play together ?

G.R.: Yes, indeed. Roger North said that Matteis, author of a thorough-bass tutor for guitar, "*had the force upon it to stand in consort against an harpsichord*". According to my experience the guitar adds sweetness to the harpsichord sound when it plays a softly arpeggiated or contrapuntal accompaniment, and rhythmical impact when it plays strummed chords. This effect can easily be noticed in the recent recordings of Lully's opera *Atys* by "*Les Arts Florissants*", who use two harpsichords, two lutes, one theorbo and one guitar in the continuo section.

15 - E.B.: Are you the player ?

G.R.: No, it is one of my friends, Peter Pieters, from Belgium. He and I are the only ones to have graduated in baroque guitar at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris. [October 2000 note: it is still true today, and we have been very sad to know that Peter passed away in 1999.]

16 - E.B.: Does it mean that it is extremely difficult ?

G.R.: No, not more than any other instrument. It means, overall, that very few people are interested in playing the baroque guitar. And, as there are only a handful of excellent players, the opportunity to hear good concerts and records are rare. So people do not know about the instrument, and therefore they will not undertake playing it. [March 2020 note: it is less true today, fortunately.]

17 - E.B.: I can see you use right hand fingernails, Do you play with the classical guitar technique ?

G.R.: I rest my little finger on the fingerboard while I play. That makes the right hand bend, among other things, and this is very different from the classical guitar approach. The nails were used for playing the guitar, and the lute too, in the early times. There is written evidence, and there is a portrait of the XVIIth century guitar player and composer Pellegrini displaying long, oval right hand fingernails. And of course there is evidence of the contrary. Thomas Mace, once again, in Lully's time, advocated fingertip playing for the "mellowness" it gives to the lute sound, but he admitted that nails were more fitted to ensemble playing ; and said that some maintained it was the best way to play. So he philosophically concluded: "However, let others do as seems best to themselves." And that sounds quite right ; one must decide from one's own experience because nails, fingertips, touch and the concept of beauty as well are different for everyone. I once gave a concert for the Netherlands Lute Society, and they wrote this funny review in their bulletin: "*It was striking that although playing with fingernails he produced a clear but round tone on his bright sounding instrument.*" [more on this subject [in this article](#) or in [the French, revised and extended version](#)]

18 - E.B.: But on the Renaissance guitar you use the lute technique ?

G.R.: Yes I do. It is the plain contrapuntal plucked technique, with a lot of alternate thumb and finger in the fast running passages. It can be achieved with fingernails too. But, in my case, I cannot play with my thumb under my index, as Renaissance players were supposed to do. [October 2000 note : this is no more true today, as I have found my own way to use the "thumb under" technique with fingernails on the renaissance guitar - thanks to lutenist and guitarist Pascale Boquet] And of course the little finger rests on the fingerboard: that help to stabilise the right hand, and the instrument too.

19 - E.B.: I was interested to see modern music of yours appear in some magazines and elsewhere.

G.R.: I do compose when I have enough time to concentrate on it. [see the [Compositions page](#) in this web site], and I am even going to perform some modern chamber music in the forthcoming months.

20 - E.B. So, you were a classical guitarist first ?

G.R.: To be really precise, I should say that the very first instrument I played was the maracas, on which I

would improvise rhythmic patterns while my sister played the accordion! Then I convinced my parents to let me study the guitar instead of the accordion, as did my two brothers and my sister. But at this time - I was eleven - there were no classical guitar teachers anywhere, and we were only able to find an amateur player. He taught me the basic chords and rhythms. Very soon after, I began to play in rock'n' roll bands, in village dance groups, and in holiday clubs to earn my living. Then, at twenty, I discovered the classical guitar (and classical music, that I had never heard before) and I gave up everything else for it. I graduated in music, etc, and I soon became very involved in playing modern and avant-garde music. Early music did not interest me at all, until I heard it played on early instruments. That was during one of the last Emilio Pujol summer courses, more than ten years ago. What happened then is easy to guess.

21 - E.B.: Are you opposed to playing early music on modern instruments ?

G.R.: Of course not, although it seems logical that any music sounds better on the instruments for which it was intended. We are accustomed to hearing early music on the piano or on the modern guitar, but one must understand that playing Debussy piano music on a harpsichord, or Turina guitar pieces on a lute is just the same kind process, and that a piano is not a more advanced instrument than a harpsichord. It is just a different kind of string instrument. But I consider that style is the most important issue. You can play good baroque music on modern instrument if you respect the appropriate style. There is this striking sentence by Marin Marais, viol player at Lully's time: *"The most beautiful pieces lose their grace if they are not played with the appropriate style."* (note that he said "appropriate style", not "appropriate instrument" !...) And this quite true, indeed, for all music : Early, Classic, Flamenco, South American, Bebop... But the pity, overall, is when early music is played boringly, seriously, slowly, pompously. Although the composition can be excellent, treated this way it easily becomes third rate music, because it lacks all of the elements that would reveal its true interest and beauty : the appropriate tempo, the appropriate ornamentation (and not necessarily a lot of), notes inégales, articulation silences, etc. Playing this way becomes very demanding, but playing Lauro's music with the right tempo and rhythm is also demanding. And you must play it well, because people know it and they would laugh at you if you played it twice as slowly, and with extravagant rhythmic liberty. But this is still done in De Visée, Bach, or Weiss, and people do not laugh. They just yawn politely.

22 - E.B.: Finally, you aim at authenticity?

G.R.: Yes, in any music. I love Llobet music played by Llobet, Sambas by Joao Gilberto and "early Rock 'n' roll" by Bill Haley. Authenticity is for me an equally stylistic and artistic quest and not a cold musicological or theoretical approach.

Human nature has not basically changed over the centuries : people in the XVIIth century enjoyed being entertained, moved, and enlightened by music and other art forms, just as they now do. I try to keep this in mind when I play the early guitar. Of course, the word "authenticity" is somewhat laughable, because it cannot be absolutely achieved in early music. Happiness and peace, too, seem impossible absolutes but people do not give up searching. It is not because they seem unattainable that we rush headlong into crime and barbarism.

So, let us be as wise with early music.

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