

ROBERT DE VISÉE'S CORPUS: A STYLISTIC TUTOR

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Robert de Visée's legacy to us is a unique and fascinating corpus of 186 very stylistically consistent pieces. More than half of the pieces were already written before 1686, the year his second guitar book was printed. Thirty years later, in 1716, he resumed his work by publishing "*Pieces de Théorbe et de Luth mises en partition, dessus et basse*", a set of eighty-six compositions in treble and bass clef, "*designed for Harpsichord, Viola da gamba and Violin, instruments on which they have always been performed*". Amongst this collection, twenty-six pieces stem from his two guitar books, but the instrument is not quoted in the title, or anywhere else. In his "*Avertissement*", he mentions that he would give the theorbo and lute tablature versions to anybody asking for them, so we can conclude that they were never printed. The decline of those instruments at the turn of the century may explain why even a famous composer like de Visée would be wise enough to avoid the cost of such a publication that may not attract many customers.

When I call de Visée a famous composer, I of course refer to the well-known facts that he was appreciated by Louis XIV and Louis XV, that he was performing with the best French musicians of his time (Marais, Couperin, Rebel, Forqueray...) and that his name continued to be quoted throughout the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries whereas most of the other plucked string instrument players had fallen into oblivion. But what about his public success? The way to measure it would be to look at the number of books he sold, but lacking this information, we still have such an index of fame: the fact that his music was being copied quite an impressive number of times, mostly in manuscript but sometimes in printed books too. As far as we know, at least forty-two sources include from one to one hundred and five of his pieces in either tablature or treble and bass clef, for guitar, lute, theorbo, violin and *basso continuo*, along with several solo harpsichord and viola da gamba settings. The Gavotte R 5.04¹, one of his "greatest hits" exists in twenty versions and it even bears, in a guitar manuscript, the song-incipit title "*j'aurai beau pleurer, hélas*", that fits perfectly with the opening phrase of the music and reveals that lyrics were sometimes added to his melodies.

De Visée declared having followed "*as much as my poor talent allows me to, Mr. de Lully's unique style*" - and indeed he did remarkably well, so well in fact that his compositions infiltrated the music world the same way as Lully's did: they were being copied, transposed, expressed on different instruments and even sung.

¹ R 5.04, R 0.15 and the like refer to my de Visée *Thematic Index with a Table of Concordance*, published in Lyon, 2000, and currently unavailable. A new, updated version, the first of a three-volume set, is expected in 2020.

Of course, this is not something new: during the preceding and the following centuries, music often "travelled" once composed, and these numerous variations, arrangements, embellishments, transformations, expansions, reductions and re-harmonizations of countless works now offer us an excellent opportunity to expand our understanding of the wide diversity of the musical practice. Examples include the numerous Renaissance dances and songs adapted in lute and guitar tablature, countless *Greensleeves*, *Romanesca* and *Folies* evolving across three centuries, Vieux Gautier's lute pieces spread throughout more than eighty lute, guitar and keyboard sources, the Lully orchestral overtures and dances on solo harpsichord by d'Anglebert, in various tablatures or with added lyrics, the Campion scordatura pieces transformed by Murzia in standard tuning, the Bach suites in lute tablatures: the list would never end and could stretch until now with the piano settings of guitar pieces by de Falla or Villa-Lobos, and the many jazz, pop and classical renditions of George Gershwin's music or Beatles' songs.

The following statistics will describe more clearly the situation of the 186 original De Visée pieces that we know:

- 11 pieces have a unique official source.
- 8 pieces have multiple official sources (up to 3)
- 135 pieces have both official and manuscript sources (up to 19)
- 20 pieces have multiple manuscript sources (up to 8)
- 12 pieces have a unique manuscript source.

The four official sources for de Visée's music offer 218 pieces, and the forty-two non-official ones (mostly manuscripts) contain 602² pieces - including eighty-two which are currently out of reach. In this last corpus, we can find pieces strictly similar to the de Visée printed books, as well as a wide array of arrangements that sometimes use only half of a piece or even less, or some excerpts quoted here and there. De Visée probably knew about this as he declared, in his 1716 *Avertissement*: "*some of my pieces, which were stolen from me, are spread all over the world but in such an incorrect and defaced way that I cannot but reject them*". Fortunately, we also find versions of his pieces that, although displaying a variable number of departures from the printed sources (where these are available), are quite reliable.

Nowadays, there are still musicians who "faithfully" perform early music from a single version, despite where other versions exist and they are even so "respectful" of the version they use, that they perform and record any written rhythmic notation flub it contains and even a *Romanesca* variation with an obviously missing bar. At the other extreme, some players propose extravagant extrapolations which - as long as they are inspired and do not claim to be interpretative standards - are quite welcome. As to de Visée, the 1682 and 1686 printed guitar tablatures and the Vaudry de Saizenay lute and theorbo settings seem to be considered as *the* reliable basis. But are they? And if not, which version should be considered as a reliable basis in this music? The answer might come from de Visée himself: when he delivers a second or third version of one of his pieces, he very seldom does it note for note. The three printed sources of his "*Allemande grave/Tombeau de Mr. Francisque Corbet*" - a piece chosen at random - display many kinds of variants, as you can see in

² The original article stated 593 but, meanwhile, more concordances have been discovered.

these few examples (see first music example below). Are we to understand, for example, that in measure 4 the guitar is to make an appoggiatura on the E flat, but not the flute or violin, and that in 1716 the style had evolved so as to need a dotted rhythm on the two quavers? Probably not, especially when we observe that these notation variants between tablature and stave version already showed up many times in the 1682 and 1686 publications. Obviously de Visée did not write these three scores simultaneously, yet each time he wrote basically the same melodic and harmonic structure, probably from memory, and the resulting divergences reveal the implied flexibility hidden behind the inflexible music notation. Of course, when a melodic phrase ends with a descending third, a *coulé* is played as is common practice. What's the difference whether this is written in or not? (bar 3) Of course there are sometimes different ways to render the expression of a passage, according to the inspiration of the moment, as we can see in bars 9, 19 or 24. Of course there is a void to fill, especially with a bass line, to link the end of a section to its repeat and so the composer just gave three different examples that came to his mind at the time (bar16). And if we also look at this "Tombeau de Corbet" in manuscript form, we will observe even more of these: added ornamentation, arpeggiated chords, different rhythmic notation, alternative instrumental settings etc. The manuscript may have been written from memory, copied from an already "altered" source, or notated as such as a reminder of personal ideas, but as long as it does not display any real mistake or stylistic departure, it can surely be considered as a valid and interesting source. Thus there is no reference version, each one is a "vision", a snapshot of one of the ways it might have been rendered at the precise moment it was encoded into tablature or stave. Each one is valid but is not meant to be played in exactly the same way each time.

Tombeau de Mr francisque Corbet / Allemande grave [R 1.05]

Sources : 1682 guitar tablature (1) 1682 Treble and bass version (2) 1716 Treble and bass edition (3)

a) - excerpts from the treble part :

b) - excerpts from the bass line :

The image shows a musical score for a bass line, consisting of two systems of three staves each. The first system covers measures 3, 7, 9, 12, and 16. The second system covers measures 22, 24, and 34. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and fingerings. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 6, 7, 8, and 7. Some measures have bracketed numbers like [6] and [4]. A copyright notice '© G. Rebours 2012' is located at the bottom right of the score.

"They were trying to write down the music they played", the late French researcher and harpsichord player Antoine Geoffroy-Dechaume once said to me, thus summarizing the situation of a large field of early music: its notation is fixed, set, unidimensional, but the rendering of it is not. Putting on paper a piece of music that can admit some degree of improvisation forces the choice of only one option, and conceals its inherent versatility which the existence of multiple versions fortunately sheds light upon. Is that a puzzling or blessed situation? Personally, I would say it is a blessing. It allows the player to have choices and make decisions. There are empty fields to fill in with one's own voice and the chance to express so much more beyond mere phrasing and nuance.

Back in the XVIth century, we have treatises like Diego Ortiz' *Tratado de Glosas* in which the basic notation - consisting of generic samples from virtually any piece of music, such as two notes or a simple cadence - is followed by the "unnotation", a long list of examples showing the potential transformations of the original written symbols. It means, in a certain way, that the musician must not play what is written, but what is not written!

By the end of the XVIIth century, we find treatises of a different kind, more oriented toward music theory and interpretative codes (such as tempi, notes inégales, graces), but the Ortiz style, catalogue-like kind of tutoring can find an echo in the huge amount of data we can accumulate by comparing and analysing the evidence, as shown by these few excerpts from the *Tombeau de Corbet*, that are just a drop in the sea of the whole corpus.

If a parallel with jazz comes easily to mind, the more stylistically limited art of French accordion players around the 1950's seems more relevant: particularly when playing the dominant dance *Valse Musette*, they were sticking to a written melody while at the same time introducing ornaments, passing notes, small melodic detours, and using a wide variety of - also not written - articulation and notes inégales. Each player did that with varying density and at different level of subtlety, some wisely, others more daringly, but the basic attitude was the same, while the *valse* remained a *valse* and could still be danced. This is easy to check by listening to their recordings, pure stylistic lessons

that appear to be the counterpart of the various written sources of the same music pieces, as we find in early music.

So, if carefully studied in the broader concept of alternative notation, the magnificent de Visée corpus can unveil another dimension constituting a stylistic tutor for this style of music, in which we could look at most of the written signs - note, note value, ornament, fingering - as representing just one possibility amongst other unwritten ones.

De Visée's work mainly tackles the usual baroque dances, in which the structure is quite fixed, and it also includes a set of twenty-four preludes: twelve for the guitar (a couple of them having a staff notation version), twelve for the theorbo, and none for the lute. The thirty-three manuscript versions of the twelve theorbo preludes offer an even wider field of alternate notations, thus they bring a deeper insight on this music, and expand our knowledge of those elements that can be implied or written, optional, switched, expressed differently, etc, without basically altering the music.

For a better grasp of the situation, several categories of discrepancies amongst versions can be outlined, and illustrated by these few examples (p.6) :

- **A**: Alternate notation for the same result: the symbols are different, but their meaning is the same. Examples A1 and A3 apply to graces, example A2 to the rhythm notation. One must not forget, nevertheless, that rhythms of dotted quarter- eighth, as well as graces, are already variable entities.

- **B**: Alternate proposition for a similar result: these are in fact usual alternatives that can come quite spontaneously when performing a piece with a stylistic knowledge. One can fill a chord more or less, change a fingering, and choose some other string combination - as guitar and theorbo offer some choice. Graces can come and go (B3) and *tremblements* can have alternate endings (B4). Other changing characteristics can be the speed and number of *battements*, the transference of the bass part into a different octave (by instrumental necessity, or by choice as in B2) and that an *allemande* anacrusis is not mandatorily a quaver (B1), etc.

- **C**: a small variant that gives a temporary change of expression, color, mood: it can apply to a few melodic notes (C1), to the rhythm (C2, C4), to the bass line and the harmony (C3, C5), amongst the most common examples.

- **D**: a more radical change in the development of a whole section (D1), a different beginning (D2), a run with a variable number of notes, or with different note values, simple or expanded cadences, an added *couplet* in a *chaconne*, a real structural difference as an added or missing, or even displaced part.

There are also changes required by the instrument itself (as in the guitar versions with more vertical content and less low notes), and there are also real mistakes, a fact not taken into account here. Shortcomings may sometimes appear here and there, which the study of the various versions of a piece can help to sort out.

Keeping all this in mind, exploring as many versions as possible, absorbing these features in depth and not as a living catalogue, and giving up one's reluctance to play **from** the written symbols instead of just reproducing these symbols as such, one can then reach another level of understanding and of performing the music of Robert de Visée, and the like. In the field of transcription - in which the misunderstandings appear in bright light - this will also help.

S: from staff notation (1682. 1686. 1716 or ms), G, T, L: from guitar, theorbo, or lute tablatures. 1, 2, or 3 indicate different sources. For more clarity, excerpts have been transposed in the same key and octave, and the time and key signatures have been kept minimum.

Source of these examples:
A1, A2: Bourée R7.04, **A3:** Mascarade R10.04
B1: Allemande R1.03, **B2:** Allemande R1.21, **B3:** Gavotte R5.09
B4: Courante R2.05
C1, C2: Gavotte R5.04, **C3, C4:** Menuet R6.12, **C5:** Sarabande R3.04
D1: Prélude R0.15, **D2:** Prélude R0.16

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As a test, I invite you to look again at the *Tombeau de Corbet*, and check in which one of the four above categories each excerpt could fit. And as these observations need a living example, I selected the R 0.15 Am theorbo prelude, which offers a rich development, and can be found in no less than five versions displaying many variants. I also asked Claire Antonini to make a version for the baroque lute (below, p. 7) and, as the printed guitar preludes are stylistically different from this one, I arranged it for the baroque guitar (below, p.8). For keyboard or harp players who might like to play it too, I took the most consistent parts of each version to make a score in standard notation (below, p. 9). Finally, all these versions were recorded and, as you might expect, these performances do not strictly follow the written signs on the paper. [See the video.](#)

Prélude de Mr de Visée [R 0.15]

Baroque Lute version by Claire Antonini

The musical score is presented in seven systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with musical notation and a bass staff with fret positions. The notation includes various note values, rests, and ornaments. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. The bass staff contains a sequence of letters (a, c, e, g, b, d) representing fret positions on the strings. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs.

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Prélude de Mr de Visée [R 0.15]

Baroque Guitar version by Gérard Rebour

First system of musical notation, featuring a treble clef and a single staff with notes and fingerings.

Second system of musical notation, featuring a treble clef and a single staff with notes and fingerings.

Third system of musical notation, featuring a treble clef and a single staff with notes and fingerings.

Fourth system of musical notation, featuring a treble clef and a single staff with notes and fingerings.

Fifth system of musical notation, featuring a treble clef and a single staff with notes and fingerings.

Sixth system of musical notation, featuring a treble clef and a single staff with notes and fingerings.

Seventh system of musical notation, featuring a treble clef and a single staff with notes and fingerings.

NB: in order to express this prelude more faithfully on the guitar, the tuning will be: **aA d'd gg bb e'**. Although not "De Visée's tuning", it was in use then. Indications for the "split course" technique (used by the "good masters", according to Corette) will help making the musical lines more distinct: play only the upper octave when there is a dot below the line, after the letter, and play just the lower octave if the dot is above the line. Otherwise, play both.

Prélude de Mr de Visée [R 0.15]

Compiled by Gérard Rebours, from five manuscript sources : F:Bm, Ms.279.152, p.256 [S1] - F:Pn, Res.1106, f.25r [S2] - F:Pn, Vm7 6265, p.7 [S3] - F:Pn, Res.1820, p.1 [S4] - F: AG Archives communales d'Agen II n°149,p.10 [S5]

The musical score is presented in a single system of bass clef staves. It consists of several systems of notation, each with source labels in brackets: [S3], [S1], [S4], [S3], [S1], [S2], [S1 & S5], and [S4]. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and articulation marks. The piece concludes with a final chord and a copyright notice: © G.Rebours 2012.