

"It was striking that although playing with fingernails he produced a clear but round tone on his bright sounding instrument."

With, or Without Nails?

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Please note that the French version of this article has been revised in depth and extended in 2020.

This extract of a concert review, written in the Dutch Lute Society Newsletter (Amsterdam, 1985), is actually flattering, but it also denotes that the idea of playing without nails is the only guarantee of authenticity, is almost unanimously accepted with regard to plucked early instruments.

In fact, declarations such as those by Fuenllana (Orphenica Lyra, 1554), Mace (Musick's Monument, 1676) or the Mary Burwell Lute Tutor seem to indicate a clear preference for fingertip playing. But since the former declares that playing with nails "*es imperfección*", it is probably because people were playing like this at the time and it wasn't to his taste! This is what the latter reveals (p.73) in saying, "*...take notice, that you Strike not your Strings with your Nails, as some do, who maintain it the Best way of Play, but I do not, and for this reason ; because the Nail cannot draw so sweet a sound from a Lute, as the nibble end of the Flesh can do*". But Mace does admit that playing with the nails is good for ensemble music, although the instrument loses its better qualities, and comes to a philosophical conclusion, "*However (This being my Opinion) let Others do, as seems Best to Themselves*"¹.

Piccinini evokes using nails in his *Intavolatura di Liuto et di Chitarrone* of 1623 (p. 2), even giving details on their form and length. Weiss, in a letter to Mattheson, indicates that if the lute is usually played with the fingertips, the theorbo and the chitarrone are more often played with the nails².

The English lutenist Nigel North, questioned by Guitar International magazine on this matter (January 1980) made a very pertinent remark: "*In France theorbo players and guitarists seem to be of the same breed*"³. *Many theorbo players probably played with their nails for extra volume. And perhaps that justifies to some extent playing with the nails.*"

In answer to the question "*Are there still lutenists who play with their nails ?*", Hopkinson Smith replies : "*Of course, but certain early lute-players also did it; it is not at all the only criteria. The same goes for gut or nylon stringing: the world is not divided into two groups, on one side the good guys, on the other the bad guys! There are musical criteria which are much more important than these specific aspects. I prefer a beautiful sound with nails than a bad one with fingertips. A good interpretation of lute music on the harpsichord or even the piano is better than a bad one on the lute. My own personal world of sound has pushed me more towards the early style, but I am still fascinated by every possibility.*" (Les Cahiers de la Guitare, n°27)

As for Paul O'Dette, when Pascale Boquet asks him "*What can one say about using nails during the lute's era?*" he shows himself to be just as open-minded, and well-read : "*It's certain that they were used. In Mace, Weiss and elsewhere, the texts show that it is preferable to have nails for ensemble music because it gave a greater rather than less pretty sound. I think therefore that in general, ensemble musicians played with their nails and soloists without. We know by iconography that Pellegrini, for example, had long ones to play the guitar. Furthermore I prefer the sound of the baroque guitar with nails. If I do a tour or I practice mainly that instrument, I let them grow.*" (Les Cahiers de la Guitare, n°66)

And José Miguel Moreno who was also questioned on the subject, replies, "*I have recorded my first six records using fingertips, now I let a bit of nail grow. In fact you can play with or without nails, what is important is playing from the heart*". A clever reply which cuts short any controversy. The fundamental question should be, "*Do you play with or without feeling ?*" (Guitare Classique, n°10, summer 2001) But Jakob Lindberg (Classical Guitar, Sept. 2003) is somewhat less openminded on the subject : "*Diana Poulton, being very well informed on the subject, pointed out that if you really want to play the lute*

¹ In El dilema del sonido en la guitarra (Ricordi B.A., 1960) E. Pujol leaves out this important part of T. Mace's argument

² cf. James Tyler, The Early Guitar, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 81.

³ Grenerin, Visée, Campion, for example, and Italian-born Bartolotti.

authentically, if you want to make the original sound of the period, you have to make sure you keep the nails short". Because, according to him, the nail *"is a dead surface unlike the flesh, which can give spirit to the sound"*. Yes indeed, anyone have noticed the absence of spirit in Manuel Barrueco's or Julian Bream's sound, not to speak of the plectrum addicted, B.B. King, Pat Metheny, Bill Frisell, the oriental plucked string players...And Mr Lindberg, with his Poulton certified authentic sound, to record music by Corbetta the Italian guitarist who, *"having had the bad fortune of breaking a nail, was unable to play at the Festival with his consort"*⁴ From the very first track of this CD (Bis-CD-799) we can hear very authentic interpretative elements such as rubato, heavy strummed chords, and perfectly even quavers.

I also heard another famous player tell the public about his authentic flesh playing on gut strings, and then proceed to perform... Corbetta's music - or at least 1/4 of one of his chaconnes, replacing the missing part by endless repeat of two variations that were just excellent for a virtuosity showcase.

Where the guitar is directly concerned, we also read, in *Introducción de Musica sobre la guitarra* by Gaspar Sanz (1674), the licenciado S. Alfonso declare : *"There are some who play with the nails, who ravish the senses, and others who grate the nerves"*⁵. As for pictorial evidence, one can refer to the [portrait of Domenico Pellegrini](#) engraved in the copy of his *Armonioso Concerti* (1650) kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris⁶, on which there is no doubt about the presence of right hand fingernails.

Less obvious, and less reliable but interesting to see, fingernail on the thumb can be observed in [two Watteau paintings](#), and on the 1636 [guitarist portrait by Jean Daret](#). Further investigations on iconography may be needed, but no fingernail usually appear on the right-hand fingers of plucked strings instruments players. Later in the 18th century, the guitar still has 5 courses, but not for long. Merchi writes, *"Make sure you do not pluck with the nails; they produce a dry and ungraceful sound"* (*Traité des agréments de la musique*, Paris, 1777, p. 5), whereas in *Escuela para tocar con perfeccion la guitarra de cinco o seis ordenes* (1799) by Antonio Abreu and Victor Prieto, playing with nails is recommended, on condition that they are "of moderate size, very clean and well cut, round rather than pointed, and they do not scratch the strings". Fingertip playing is compared to playing the violin with an oiled bow... *"Oh! Infinitus est numerus stultorum"*⁷implacably shows the authors' position (8).

It seems therefore impossible to draw a conclusion. Even an exhaustive study of the subject - which remains to be done - would probably not enable us to do so. For as Hopkinson Smith remarked, there are not just two sounds of with or without nails, but an infinity of possible sounds which each actual interpreter would have to choose, to my mind, without a priori but rather according to personal taste and his or her own possibilities.

There are good and bad nails, soft and rough fingertips, and in both cases, good and bad days...

By the way, one of these "good days", a friend of mine came with a professional lutenist to one of my performance. This lutenist did not know me and, after the concert, I had a drink with my friend and her. Then she suddenly stared at my right hand : *"but... you play with fingernails ?? !!"* "Yes, didn't you hear it ?" ...
"Not at all !"

However, one thing is certain : not one singer, dancer or flautist whom I have accompanied, not one gambler or harpsichordist whom I have teamed up with, has brought any attention to the fact that I do or don't use my nails to pluck single and double courses. It was only ever a question of music, style, movements, nuances, etc. And I have even been asked to play with a less round, and more "harpsichord-like" sound! Objectively, I am completely charmed by the beautiful soft, clear and strong sound that many lute and theorbo players obtain. I recognise the disadvantage of the nail which wears away at the gut strings, which needs to be at the right length to produce the right sound, with the right shape (which doesn't last longer than three days and which sometimes doesn't come out right), which must always be well polished, and any breakages are a catastrophe ! But it also has many advantages, for the baroque guitar, of producing a good homogenous strumming sound, and easily enabling the player to choose one of two strings in octave-apart

⁴ Mémoires de Adam Ebert, 1723, cf. Tyler op, cit., p. 81 and Monica Hall, *Francesco Corbetta - The Best of All*, p. 21/22

⁵ "Unos ay que tañen con uñas, que roban los sentidos, y otros que los arañan"

⁶ This portrait does not appear in the copy held in the Museo Civico Bibliografico Musicale in Bologna reproduced in fac-simile by S.P.E.S. editions. To my knowledge, Dominique Daigremont must credited with remarking this important detail.

⁷ "Oh, there is an infinite number of fools". Thanks go to Rafael Andia for having brought this reference to my attention.

courses, an authentic technique enabling clarity in the musical texture. Perhaps it's a fluke, a coincidence, but the same shaped nails enable me to play with their respective techniques the classical and baroque guitar, and even the renaissance guitar with the thumb under technique.

However it is not just playing with the nail, but with the combination of fingertip and nail which touches the string. So the state of the fingertip (cold, sticky, dry, smooth, worn, etc.) also impacts upon the quality of the sound.

...Two problems instead of one, then.

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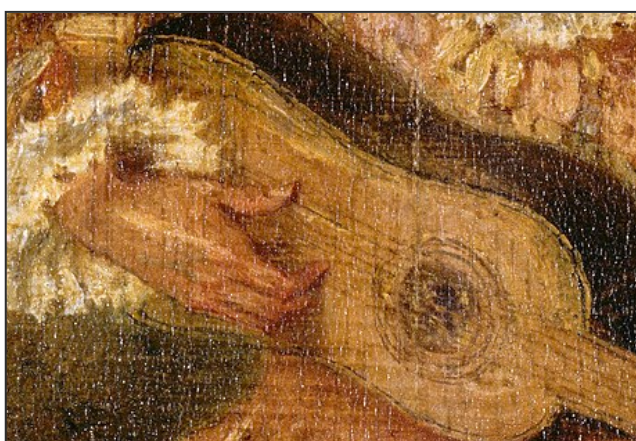


Domenico Pellegrini portrait and right hand details



Watteau, *La gamme d'amour*.

In the second painting of this character, fingernails seem quite long on the left-hand fingers too.



Watteau, *Le donneur de sérénade*. (detail)

The thumb have a long fingernail, but the index fingers seems to have a short one.



Jean Daret, Guitarist portait (1636).

Granet Museum, Aix-en-Provence.

The detail of the right hand thumb looks like something being glued on the fingernail.

