

A Few Thoughts on Teaching (and Being a Student) at a Recent LSA Seminar

By Sylvain Bergeron

Last August I had the pleasure of teaching at the LSA West Fest in Victoria, British Columbia. During this intense and rewarding week I observed a few specific issues that I'd like to point out. I hope this fresh perspective—my most recent seat on the faculty since 2012—will help lutenists reevaluate their playing techniques and habits.

Among the themes presented in my class were posture, sound production, left hand, chords as well as some hints for preparing for a performance. Each class started with a short series of warmups, exercises, and some improv and I often referred to Ronn MacFarlane's excellent "Beyond the Basics."

Here are a few basic concepts we addressed in my classes I'd like to share:

1. Check your posture. It all starts here. I noticed many who would benefit from better posture. Sitting on a low chair and using an adjustable strap will help keep your back straight and chin up. The height of the chair is very important as it has consequences for your whole body position. Putting the music stand a little to the left will keep your left hand close to your line of vision and not block your sound production. Avoid any obstacle between you and the audience. Lutes are beautiful instruments that people want to see as much as they want to hear.

2. Develop the technique for both hands equally. For many of us, left-hand technique needs some kind of boost. Left-hand fingering is notably neglected on lute instruments. With a few exceptions (Robinson and Vallet), tablatures show where to put your hands on the fingerboard but not which fingers to use. Choose your left-hand fingerings meticulously. Don't automatically take the easiest solution; take the one that makes sense musically and prepares for what's coming. Phrasing and articulation will depend on your choices. Mark your left-hand fingerings clearly into the tab, preferably above it, and with a different color to avoid coincident tablature ciphers.

There have been many, many discussions about right-hand position—thumb in or out, pinky location, nails or not—which is normal since it is the hand that produces the sound. [At this point I'd like to remind readers of our excellent interview with Pat O'Brien in the most recent *LSA Journal!*—Ed.] In the

long quest for the ultimate right-hand position, observing period paintings has been a good start. It has its limitations, however, since there are so many factors to be considered. At the end of the day, your ears will be the best judge. The kind of sound you aim for also depends on your performance space: do you play in a concert hall with a large group or in your living room for your cat?

Yet I found many players sounding thin and unfocused who consistently hit only one string of the pair, despite their best intentions and confidence. Why bother buying and playing so many strings when you play only half? Make sure your attack actually touches both strings of the pair and on the top—not the side. A light rest stroke with the thumb will give voice to both octave and fundamental strings where they will be heard in balance. A practice of slow and deliberate right-hand movements is the key to developing a consistent good tone. Sometimes just a slight change in your angle of attack can drastically improve your sound. When you find that angle, go back and practice those hand movements deliberately and be sure to note it so you start specifically with that in your next session. Be economical in your movement and remember that any body movement without reason is wasted energy.

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3. Pick your stick. For many, including myself, a good part of the reason we came to the lute is its many choices: medieval, renaissance, baroque lutes, long neck lutes, continuo instruments: all beautiful—though expensive—new toys. But the reality comes along and one quickly realizes one can't do justice to all the repertoires. Unless this is your full-time job or you have to teach all of them, you should stay focused on one or two, say, a solo instrument and/or an ensemble instrument. It's better to play one top-quality instrument than 4 or 5 "just ok" ones. Looking outside the lute world, the most musicians start at an early age and struggle for years on just one instrument. A typical classical violinist may start at age 4 and play for 40 years concentrating on just 4 strings. Meanwhile, in the lute world the complexity of the repertoires, time periods, instruments, and techniques justify a lifetime of study.

4. Develop a good practice regimen. Use your time judiciously. Many people in the lute world are enlightened amateurs. The time spent here is far less than the university student with professional



goals. Because of that, it is of prime interest to use your time efficiently. Suppose you have one hour: working the first 45 minutes on technique and the remainder on music is more profitable than the opposite. Amateurs who underestimate the importance of thought-out practice are susceptible to habits that lead to injury and may even prevent them from playing at all. Playing slowly, being relaxed, breathing properly, and enjoying the sound and resonance of your instrument is a very good warmup in itself. Improvisation will come naturally from that state of mind. Practicing scales, working with a metronome, using a music stand—like all musicians do—is not forbidden on the lute. The audio and video recording device on your laptop or smart phone is immensely helpful. Even a low-tech, humble mirror coupled with a few memorized passages can teach you a lot and is available to anyone. You'll learn a lot, and it's particularly useful if you don't get regular lessons.

5. Read [mensural notation] music. Get away from the tablature comfort zone. Remember that an "a" is a note as well as a string. Suppose that, having played for one hour, you want to keep on working a bit, but not necessarily intense playing, my advice would be to do some sight reading. Simple, easy dances or polyphonic pieces in treble and bass clef. Understanding the basics of theory and harmony will help you in your playing of any reper-

toire—not just the baroque or continuo. Remember, this is the only way to communicate with other musicians and will open the door to a larger world of ensemble playing.

6. Annotate your music. I see many players playing from beautiful facsimiles who hesitate to write anything down as though it was a Louvre original or a holy relic. Left-hand fingerings, nuances, breathings, sections, etc. are all essential elements in preparation to a performance that should be incorporated into your tablature. Scan your facsimile, enlarge it, clean it up, and crop it so that there is room for these additions. Alternatively, print your own editions with tablature software. Preparing a clean performance edition in which your brain focuses on musical or technical elements can make a difference. Use a different color for left-hand fingerings in Italian tab. All of this will help you build your repertoire and will be especially helpful when you get back to a piece after some time away.

7. Art is not dogma. There are certainly many different ways to approach the lute. Make sure you pick the works that work best for you. Of course it will be different person to person, depending on their concept of sound, shape, length of finger, skin texture, and so many things. If you're not satisfied with your playing, don't hesitate to change a habit or many. Adjusting one's technique is usually a better solution than buying a new lute!

It is always a pleasure to see that in 2018 people, old and young, are still attracted by the beauty of the instrument and its repertoire. Lute seminars are offering lutenists excellent opportunities to play in front of colleagues and develop confidence. Make sure to carefully choose the repertoire you want to work up for your private lesson or master class. Since for many people this is the one occasion of the year to get advice, it's important to be well prepared, and I truly believe these ideas will serve you equally well over the long run.

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