

Q&A with Sylvain Bergeron

Interviewed by Konstantin Bozhinov



Didier Bertrand

KB: Tell us about the origins of this project. When did the idea of a solo archlute recording of the Doni Book first arise?

SB: I knew a few pieces from the manuscript for a while and had played them on a 10 course lute. When I got my archlute, an awesome 14-course arciliuto, after Venere (Padua, 1592), built by Andreas von Holst (Munich, 2010), I really began in-depth work on the book. I discovered music that spoke to me and a repertoire that suited my archlute very well. I played a lot of solo recitals in the following months, then decided to record it in May 2014.

KB: You haven't chosen to include other contemporary archlute repertoire, such as the music of Piccinini and Kapsberger. How does their repertoire compare to the works in the Doni book?

SB: I thought there would be enough interesting material in the Doni book. It's both a book of a pedagogical nature and a nice snapshot of lute playing of the time in Northern Italy. The dances have some freshness and candor and most of the anonymous toccatas are musically interesting and present some technical challenge. I would say that compared to Piccinini and Kapsberger, Doni is more accessible.

KB: How and why did you assemble the pieces in groups by key? How do they appear in the Doni book? If that grouping is different, why do you think that is and why have you/have you not kept it?

SB: My idea to group them by tonality was simply to make the listening more natural. There's no apparent grouping in the manuscript; with one or two exceptions, pieces are not grouped by key. Exercises are interspersed between Toccatas, Correntes, Gagliardas, Chiaconnas, etc. There's also some baroque guitar stuff and a few later style compositions from a second and third hand here and there that I rejected.

KB: Toccatas of this early-baroque style are often a challenge for performers. We have published the *Toccata in F* (track 1 on the CD). What was your approach to its phrasing and rhythmic interpretation?

SB: The toccatas are certainly the most interesting part of the manuscript. The one in F is really straightforward; it is more Renaissance than Baroque in style and shares many similarities with a Fantasia from the Siena MS (Siena 71v). Along with the two Toccatas by Kapsberger, there are a lot of beautiful, but sketchy ones that call for some creative approaches from the performer. For those you really have to rely on your improvisatory instinct in order to reorganize what looks a bit chaotic and try make sense out of it (not always obvious...).

KB: The F minor *Corrente del Falconieri* is remarkably melodic and has a very wide range on the instrument. Is this seen in any of the other correntes in the manuscript? Is there something else that makes this one unique?

SB: Falconieri is mentioned 4 times in the manuscript and probably taught Doni. He was a lute virtuoso and also a vocal composer. And it shows. There are other examples of lyrical triple time pieces that seem to be inspired by vocal music.

KB: The Toccata by Archangelo Lori is a fascinating piece. Are you aware of any other works of his? What drew you to record this work, instead of choosing another toccata by Falconieri?

SB: Indeed, this is a great piece, very well constructed, with many runs in the bass and a beautiful chromatic middle section. I'm not aware of any other compositions by Achangelo Lori. Perhaps some of the other toccatas in the Doni book are also by him? Or by Falconieri? Hard to say!

KB: What was the biggest challenge you faced in interpreting these pieces and preparing the project? Was it perhaps the vague notation of the toccatas, or the technical challenges of some of the odd keys?

SB: First, the vast majority of the pieces have no title (and no composer) so it takes a little while to figure out what is what. Dinko Fabris's preface to the facsimile (by SPES) and Victor Coehlo's exhaustive "Manuscript Sources of 17th-century Italian Lute Music" helped for sure. The manuscript is readable most of time and doesn't seem to include many mistakes. When preparing for a CD, you have to find a good balance of tonalities and styles (otherwise you end up with too many pieces in Gm!). For instance, there are a few beautiful Corrente Francese that clearly show a French influence that I wanted to include on the album. Technically, I find the majority of the pieces very well written for the 14-course archlute. They tend to explore the full register of the instrument. Giuseppe Doni must have been an advanced amateur and Falconieri an excellent teacher!

KB: In the last paragraph of the CD booklet you mention that you play a single-strung archlute, tuned to quarter-comma meantone and you use short nails. Is this the recipe for achieving the unique, beautiful, and clear tone that we hear in this album?

SB: Well, this is the recipe that seems to work for me, at least. So let's talk about each ingredient and the reason I choose it:

Single-stringing: for some reason, my instrument sounds twice as good with single strings. Other players playing Holst's archlutes, like David Tayler and Andreas Martin, also confirmed that. I miss the octaves sometimes, but not much. All the advantages (articulation, clarity of tone, projection, etc) compensate largely. The instrument speaks exactly the way I want and (almost) every note on the CD is shaped the way I had in mind. Having said this, I don't advocate single strings on lutes in general, only on that specific instrument.

Quarter-comma meantone: I think it's part of the music and really creates beautiful harmonies, tension and resolution. It takes a little while to get a good and precise fret placement with *tastini* but in a recording context it's really worth it.

Use of short nails: another personal preference that seems to work for me. It comes from the fact that 90% of my activities are in an ensemble situation in which I think nails could help. It gives that extra bite possibility in the attack, important when you're part of a continuo section. Having said that, I don't advocate the use of nails for solo playing and most of the students I had in the last 10 years are playing without them.

KB: Being familiar with your previous solo recording of music from the Balcarres Lute book, listeners will definitely be able to identify a very personal and unique approach to music-making. Do you have plans for a third solo album and what are they?

SB: I consider myself primarily an ensemble musician. The required abilities are different than those for solo playing but at the same time all the things you learn from working with top rate singers and conductors definitively helps for the solo. I used to congratulate myself about every 5-6 years with a solo disc. As I just turned 60, I guess the next one will be sooner than that! At the moment, I'm thinking of doing something with my new theorbo, also by Holst; not necessarily the usual repertoire, but something else that I still need to figure out...

KB: In the last issue of the Quarterly several players were asked about the future of the lute in the 21st century. What are your thoughts on the subject?

SB: Well, this is an interesting topic that could apply to Early Music in general. Two important things come to my mind. There have been very positive developments in the lute world in the last 20 years and the internet has played an important role in that. People are more aware of the instrument and its beauty thanks to streaming sites like YouTube. But at the same time there are a series of down sides: we become a bit lazy, sometimes self-indulgent and too critical (or not enough?).

There's also the collector's syndrome: You have all the lute music in pdf in your computer but none of it you really learn and play properly! Social network could be very good for music and musicians but can also be a trap as one could lose a lot of time in endless discussions (instead of practicing). I admire musicians like Jakob Lindberg who keep away from all this.

Another important issue is the perenity of the lute and it starts with instrument availability. It is still very difficult for youngsters to put their hands on an instrument, try it for a bit, and see if they like it. I think every attempt to improve the accessibility of lutes (building student lutes, renting, etc) like the Lute Society does, is paramount. Lute players should go to primary schools, high schools, and colleges to show their instrument, talk about the music, and share their passion. Classical guitarists should also be encouraged to try the lute, with or without nails, it doesn't matter. Dogma is our number one enemy.

If lutes remain accessible only to people who have money, I don't think the future is good and sooner or later lute makers, as well as lute teachers will loose their clients! A lot of work has to be done to avoid a second lute extinction like the dinosaurs!