



The Lute Forum

Comments from Lute Teachers

The Lute Forum is a column where you will be seeing comments from lute teachers about various aspects of playing the lute and other historical plucked stringed instruments. Contact column curator Douglas Hensley (douglasshensley@shaw.ca) if you have questions or comments for future columns.

Meantone Tuning Doug Hensley asked this question:

How important is meantone (or any other non equal) temperament on the lute? Can I train my ear to hear those micro differences if I don't hear them now? How do I do that?

Sylvain Bergeron:



Meantone Temperaments on Lutes: Holy Grail or Pandora's Box?

I'll start by quoting David Dolata in the introduction of his excellent book, *Meantone Temperaments on Lutes and Viols*:

Tuning can be among the most vexing, frustrating, and time-consuming aspects of playing the lute or viol... Yet there are few adjustments a fretted instruments player can make that require so little effort but return such dramatic rewards, including more stable consonances, colourful dissonances, and better resonances....What is the point of having movable frets if you don't move them?

Early keyboard players use temperaments all the time. Baroque harpists commonly use meantone with great success and viola de gamba players have well-integrated fret adjustments in their tuning routines. What about lute players? There still seems to be some resistance and misunderstanding in the lute world. Is it because we have so many strings to tune and don't want to add tuning frets to the task? Could it be because so many of us origi-

nally came from the guitar world? Or, maybe we're just too lazy and prefer to quote Vincenzo Galilei to justify the use of equal temperament?

I'd like to share a few ideas based on my own experience and to prepare the ground for those who are tempted to explore temperaments. Whatever you choose, remember the importance of tuning well; for many of us, tuning is wrongly confused with warming up. Above all, avoid moving the slacks frets toward the body to keep them in place, as many do—this won't help!

Personally, I have always found the approach to temperaments delicate, complex, intriguing, and scary. Among the numerous articles on the subject, many looked rather esoteric to me, reserved for the initiated; pages and pages of numbers, columns, equations, formulas and cabalistic diagrams. Indeed, many of them are focusing on the theoretical and acoustical side of it and very few address fretted string instruments specifically. If you, like me, are more interested in the musical result than the mathematics, look for documents that offer guidance for the players and focus on the practical aspects. For that purpose, a few suggestions are given at the end of this column.

Once you have passed over the first obstacle, there's a good chance you'll want to keep going. Those of us who became familiar with the use of meantone temperament on the lute will say that, when well done, it creates richer harmonies, the instruments produce more and better sound, and the music becomes more interesting. In comparison, equal temperament usually sounds rather tame.

Before Starting

As in many good things, it takes some effort. Plan ahead—make sure your strings, frets, and pegs are in pretty good shape. If your strings are old, if you have sticky pegs, and slipping frets, this won't work. With the help of today's smartphone apps, experimenting with temperaments becomes much more accessible. However, even with these new tools, it is important to keep in mind that this process takes time and patience, so make sure there's enough time to experiment. You don't want to come to a first rehearsal with loose frets and buzzing problems caused by your tastini!

Temperaments: Which one to pick?

There are numerous temperaments designed through the centuries, often conceived by keyboardists (mainly organists) and theoreticians. Not so many of them work well on the lute, and in

practice only two or three are important to know about. The ones used most often are:

Mesotonic (Meantone) Temperament

1/4 comma meantone (or Aaron) is common for 16th- and early 17th-century music. It is very colorful but rather extreme, and it's limited to particular keys. 1/6 comma (also called Silbermann) is more convenient and fits nicely in the common keys of renaissance and baroque ensemble repertoire.

Meantone temperaments are based on the thirds as consonances, unlike Pythagorean, which promotes the fifth. With meantone, the idea is to keep the major thirds low (B, F#, G#, C#) and the minor thirds high (C, F, G, Bb, Eb, Ab). That creates substantial differences of color from major to minor, making first inversion chords (6th) much more interesting, and making dissonant chords (like 4-3 suspensions) richer.

Irregular temperaments

Vallotti and Derivatives

Also known is a variant called "Tartini-Vallotti." For some reason, it is still the most frequently used temperament for baroque ensembles, so lute players should know about it. It is relatively easy for string players to adapt, but it is more convenient than interesting and sounds rather tame. Like other irregular temperaments, it is very hard to reproduce on the lute, so you should look for variants. I personally use a nice variant of it, conceived by Montreal Harpsichordist Jonathan Addleman, that allows a large number of flat and sharp keys without having to retune.

Other irregular temperaments, like Werckmeister III, Kirnberger, etc. are sometimes used. Of course, equal temperament is definitively the best choice for a lot of later music that goes in all the keys (Handel oratorios and operas, most of Bach's music, etc.).

Conclusion

If you have just a limited time to spend with your instrument, you should probably keep on with equal temperament. Just feel free to adjust slightly some frets you feel sound too low (like the first and third fret) or too high (like the fourth one).

On the other hand, if you play with other instruments (or plan to), and if you're eager to learn new things and want to develop the resources of your instrument, it's certainly worthwhile to experiment with temperaments. 1/6 comma meantone is a very good choice for instruments tuned in fourths: renaissance lute, vihuela, theorbo, archlute, etc. Baroque lute and baroque guitar, in my opinion, are somewhat different. A subsequent column will give you directions to achieve a good meantone temperament on the renaissance lute.

Further Reading

Dolata, David. "Lute Tuning with Meantone Temperaments," *Lute Society of America Quarterly*, Vol. 28 No.1, February 1993, pp. 12-16.

Dolata, David. *Meantone Temperaments on Lutes and Viols* (Indiana University Press, 2016) http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/product_info.php?products_id=807989.

Duffin, Ross. "Baroque Ensemble Tuning Introduction in Extended 1/6 Syntonic Comma Meantone" (2018). <http://casfaculty.case.edu/ross-duffin/baroque-ensemble-tuning/>.

Kolb, Richard, "What do Lute Players Really Need to Know About Temperaments?" *Lute Society of America Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Spring, 2009, pp. 15-20.

Lewis, Pierre, "Understanding Temperaments" (1998), <https://leware.net/temper/temper.htm>.

Lindley, Mark. *Lutes, Viols, and Temperaments* (Cambridge University Press, 1984)

van Ooijen, David. "Mean-tone Temperament for Lute" (2001). <https://davidvanooijen.wordpress.com/mean-tone-temperament-for-lute/>.

Lucas Harris:



Playing Mean(ton)e With Others

Like most lutenists who work as continuo players, I spend most of my life playing in unequal tuning systems, especially different kinds of meantone temperaments. Just as a good violinist who works hard to match her intonation to that of her stand partner, I put much effort into getting my lute in tune with ensembles, and in particular with the baroque keyboard instruments I'm partnered with in continuo sections. But even when I play solos, I usually keep my lute in some flavor of meantone. I feel that my instruments are louder and more resonant, and that the meantone interval sizes create a more pleasing harmony (whereas equal-tempered thirds now "give me the heebie-jeebies," as I heard Paul O'Dette once say).