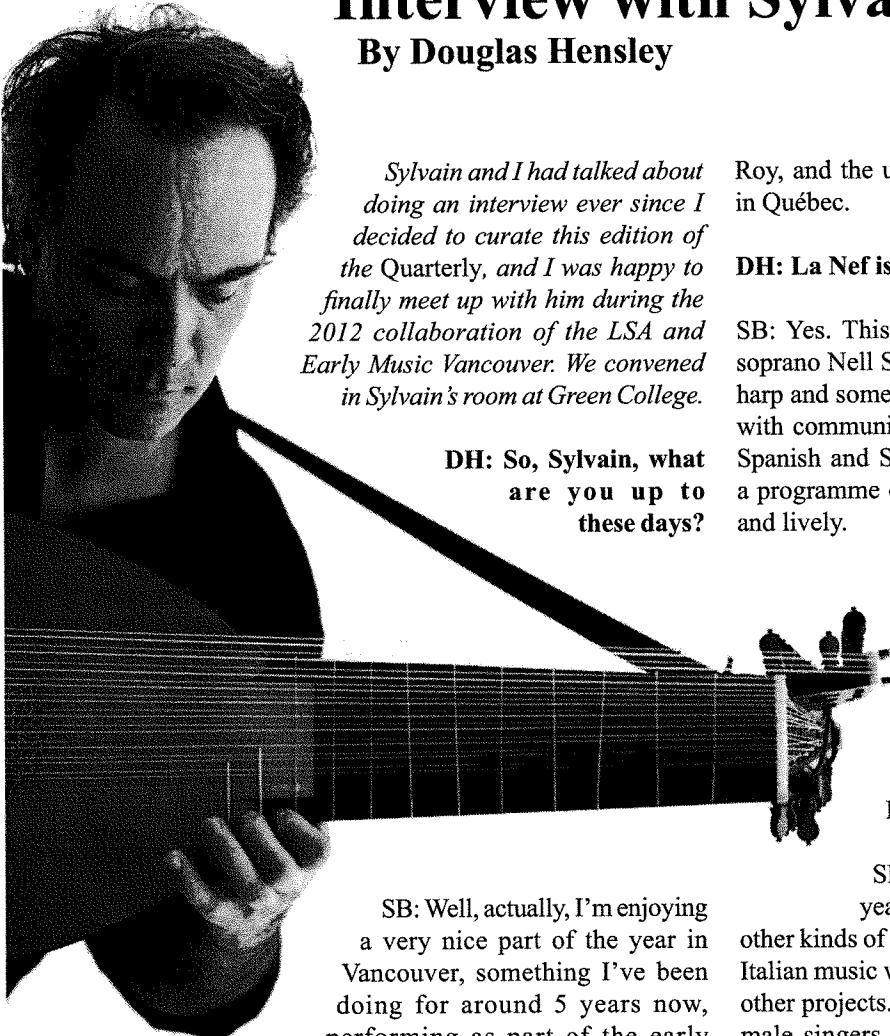


Interview with Sylvain Bergeron

By Douglas Hensley



Sylvain and I had talked about doing an interview ever since I decided to curate this edition of the Quarterly, and I was happy to finally meet up with him during the 2012 collaboration of the LSA and Early Music Vancouver. We convened in Sylvain's room at Green College.

DH: So, Sylvain, what are you up to these days?

SB: Well, actually, I'm enjoying a very nice part of the year in Vancouver, something I've been doing for around 5 years now, performing as part of the early music festival, and this year I am

very happy to be part of the faculty of the lute week that normally happens every two years in Vancouver. I can do both because I'm just back from part of the tour of Les Voix Baroques that we had last week and will continue next week, so for me it's perfect timing.

DS: Tell us about Les Voix Baroques.

SB: It's an ensemble directed by Matthew White and Alex Weimann that brings together singers and instrumentalists from Canada and elsewhere. We usually work with themes, and this week it will be Love and Death in Vienna, which proposes music from different styles but all connected with Vienna. The show is performed by six singers and something like eight instrumentalists playing violins, gamba, lirone, keyboards, cello and archlute. I love working with those people, especially to get a chance to work with Alex Weimann is very interesting. He's an awesome continuo player, and you learn a lot, playing with him is very inspiring.

DH: And after you return to Montreal?

SB: Some teaching and projects with La Nef, Les Violons du

Roy, and the usual activities I'm doing with different ensembles in Québec.

DH: La Nef is your own ensemble?

SB: Yes. This fall I'm going to do a Spanish programme with soprano Nell Snaidas from New York and Christa Patton on triple harp and some others. It's going to be fun because Nell is so good with communication with the public. She's especially good with Spanish and South American colonial music. We're going to do a programme of interesting stuff from that period, very rhythmic and lively.

DH: What time period?

SB: 17th century, mostly, a little bit from the 16th century.

DH: To me, La Nef was more of a medieval ensemble. I guess I'm thinking of the Cathar and Perceval programmes.

SB: Yes, that was years ago, and eventually over the years it kind of changed or developed a little bit towards other kinds of repertoire. The most recent recording is 17th century Italian music with Suzie LeBlanc, which is very different from our other projects. The one before that was with a group of traditional male singers from Québec called Les Charbonniers de l'enfer. We did something very special, taking as a departure point songs from the sailors and traditional pieces from France and Québec but arranged in an early music manner. Before that, we recorded Robbie Burns' music with soprano Meredith Hall. Each project leads you to some other place.

DS: And you had also done some Beatles with Les Boréades?

SB: Yes, we have recorded three CDs and given many performances in different places. This is an interesting project that Francis Colpron and Eric Milnes put together. Eric Milnes is a big Beatles fan and knows every note of every song by memory. He put together very precise scores with instrumentation and so on, early instruments without voices, very faithful to the Beatles' versions. It's interesting to see the number of people that really love that kind of project. After the concerts people of all different ages come up to you to say how much they loved it. They sang, they danced; it's funny because you don't see that much in the concert halls.

DH: What instruments are you using most these days?

SB: Recently I got an archlute, which allows me to do a lot of things that before were like a nightmare, Bach's music, for instance. Bach

is very hard to play on the theorbo, and it doesn't really make any sense at all to use it for obbligato parts like the St John Passion. You really need a higher instrument like the archlute. It modulates so much, the harmonies are so rich, a lot of suspensions, a lot of things the theorbo doesn't like much. Theorbo works better for 17th century music where the harmony is more straightforward. Recently I spent lots of time on the archlute and the Doni lute manuscript from 17th century Italy, because I wanted to see how well I could put together a programme for a recording project from just one book. It includes different composers, and I think it's valuable. I've also done that Balcarres Lutebook CD on baroque lute. I have a slow rhythm of recording solos, maybe every few years.

DH: Because you're so busy with continuo work.

SB: Yes, it's a totally different kind of work. When I'm able to isolate myself for a period of time on a solo project, I'm very happy, because you're just in front of yourself, there are no schedules to deal with, or diva sopranos or diva countertenors [laughs], you just deal with your own person and your own fingers, your own instrument. I need to do that just as an artistic statement: this is the project I am doing, I'm free to do what I want, I'm doing it this way, and this is what I'm doing. Every few years I need to do that.

DH: Other recording projects?

SB: Well, you know, we're still recording quite a lot in Québec with different companies. Groups record a lot; in a normal year I could easily do eight or ten recordings with different groups. That means a lot of weeks of rehearsals, doing concerts, and then recording, and I love that. Now recording has become like a second nature, it's not difficult anymore, it's not something like "Oh my god!", you know, and you learn how to use your energy and keep concentration. It's very fun, so I want to keep that.

DH: And teaching?

SB: I would love to teach more and more. It always depends on who shows up, there's not a big crowd of lute students in Montréal, but it's coming, and the ones who study with me are now moving to places like Barcelona, or thinking of going to Europe, to continue their studies there, so something is happening.

DH: Where do you teach?

SB: At McGill University and Université de Montréal. I also do some coaching, like medieval music or early renaissance, small early music ensembles, plus some private students as well.

DH: You used to play with Ensemble Anonymous.

SB: That was a long time ago, eh?

DH: Do you miss playing medieval music?

SB: Not really. I loved it, and for me it was a nice connection with what I was doing before, which was folk music or progressive rock,

British groups, you know.

DH: On guitar.

SB: On folk guitar, yeah, acoustic guitar. A group like Jethro Tull, for instance, for me was like a door opening to renaissance and medieval music, it led me there, and I remember the transition came very naturally from Jethro Tull to Thomas Binkley in those old Studio der frühen Musik recordings and the Telefunken troubadour recordings. What I loved, what attracted me to medieval music at that time, was some kind of freedom, you know, all those guys were improvising and making preludes, and I thought "that's really interesting!" It's more fun to play that style of music than classical guitar.

DH: Did you play classical guitar?

SB: I played classical guitar when I started to study music. I learned a few things through the classical guitar experience, like reading music, but very quickly I discovered that early music was what I wanted to do, and switched from guitar to lute.

DH: So folk music preceded classical guitar, and classical guitar led to lute?

SB: Yes, classical guitar was just a short cushion between the two, and I really don't miss anything from that period of time. I probably did it for one year. I was always playing lute pieces on the guitar, and the teacher would say "why don't you do those nice pieces by Aguado and Carulli"—I hated that music so much, I wanted to play Adrian Le Roy and, you know, Robert Johnson, those anonymous pieces like Kemp's Jig, all that stuff, so the lute was the perfect instrument. I had a teacher at Laval, Paul Gerrits, who was Dutch, and when he moved to Québec he had a few good instruments, a good background in early music ensembles, and a lot of music. He showed me the basics of lute, even if he was playing with guitar position. I learned some things, good things to start with, and I had a chance to buy one of his instruments, a nice 10-course by Rubio, a light type of lute that sounded very well. In fact, I always thought that a complete renaissance lute is something like a 10-course. The 6-course, for me, well, I never had a 6-course. Now I know all the good things you can do on one, but when I started, the 6-course was not interesting for builders, I think people were building bigger instruments. Recently I bought a 10-course by Andy Rutherford; I like to play on a 10-course instrument.

DH: That's the instrument you were playing in class this afternoon?

SB: Yes. For about 20 years I played an 8-course by Richard Berg, which I sold recently because I wanted a 10-course. I have a 13-course baroque lute from the same maker, Richard Berg. But for baroque lute you really need to find a period of time to concentrate on it and develop all the right reflexes. Even if you read from tablature, it's a lot of adaptation; all the basses are in different spots. The lute is an interesting instrument, because if you look at the whole history, from the medieval instruments to the last pieces in the 18th century, a lute is so many different things. It's really hard to play all the lutes,

so I think at some point it's important to focus and decide "this is it, now I'm concentrating on this and this"—maybe two things, maybe three, but more than that...

DH: For continuo you had been playing a theorbo in G, with the first course reentered?

SB: Yes.

DH: Do you plan to use that anymore, or is it replaced by the archlute?

SB: Well, I think it is amply replaced by the archlute in many ways. First of all, I have never been interested in playing solo theorbo music.

DH: And for that English theorbo tuning...

SB: Well, for that tuning there's almost nothing, unless you do your own things, which I had to do a few times. But the reason I kept it in G with the high second string was just a matter of laziness [laughs], because when I got this instrument, in the first couple of weeks I had stuff to do like 3-, 4-flat keys, like the Pergolesi *Stabat Mater* with all those lovely B flat minor chords, the worst keys you can have on an instrument tuned in A. So when I got the music and got the instrument around the same time and the rehearsals were starting in a few days, I thought "Oh my god, what am I going to do?" I thought, "those keys work well on an instrument in G, so I'll keep it in G." So I retuned it, changed a few strings, found the right gauge that makes it sound okay, and I can even tune it at high pitch, like 442 for Les Violons du Roy, for instance. I did that for years, and I think it always worked well and sounded good. But then because things go so fast, then you get into your next gig right after, and it's still those flat keys, I think it was the year of Purcell's anniversary, lots of Purcell going around, and it's all G minor and B flat and E flat, things you really love doing on a G instrument. So basically what I did at that time was try to use the theorbo like an archlute. But it's awfully long, and as I said, Bach is a nightmare. So I decided to look for a shorter instrument that could play 18th century music. The archlutes I had heard before, I didn't really fall in love with. The first ones I really loved to listen to were on YouTube, excerpts from David Tayler from San Francisco and Andreas Martin from Germany. That's what I was looking for, the instrument seemed so easy to play, sounded great, but at the same time, it's hard to tell, because it's on YouTube, right? Could be arranged or tricked, a lot of reverb, I don't know. So I contacted directly David and Andreas and said "look, I really liked the extracts of the Bach suite you did, or the Scottish piece, can you tell me about your instruments?" Andreas Martin recorded Bach's music on this instrument, lovely, very good sense of tone, clarity, very nice player. And David Tayler, an excellent American lutenist, is doing a lot of continuo, and looking at him playing on YouTube, he seems so relaxed, this instrument seems like a joy to play. And it turns out that both were actually using single strings on instruments made by the same luthier, Andreas v. Holst, from Munich.

DH: Single-strung all the way across?

SB: All the way across, without knowing each other. So I said, "what's the idea there, is it something this maker is proposing?" and they said "well, no, it's something we all love, the maker loves it, too, but he'd be happy to put extra pegs if you want to experiment with doubles." And they said Andreas [the luthier] is working very seriously—when he says something, it's there, so if he says it will be ready in eight months, it's going to be true. So, I ordered one, and eventually, when I opened the case (and I received it exactly eight months after, like they said), I thought "oh, this is it!" The sound is there, just waiting for you. You don't work hard to hold the instrument, because of the size, you don't work hard carrying it, or tuning it. It's for me like a revelation.

DH: How does the volume compare with the theorbo?

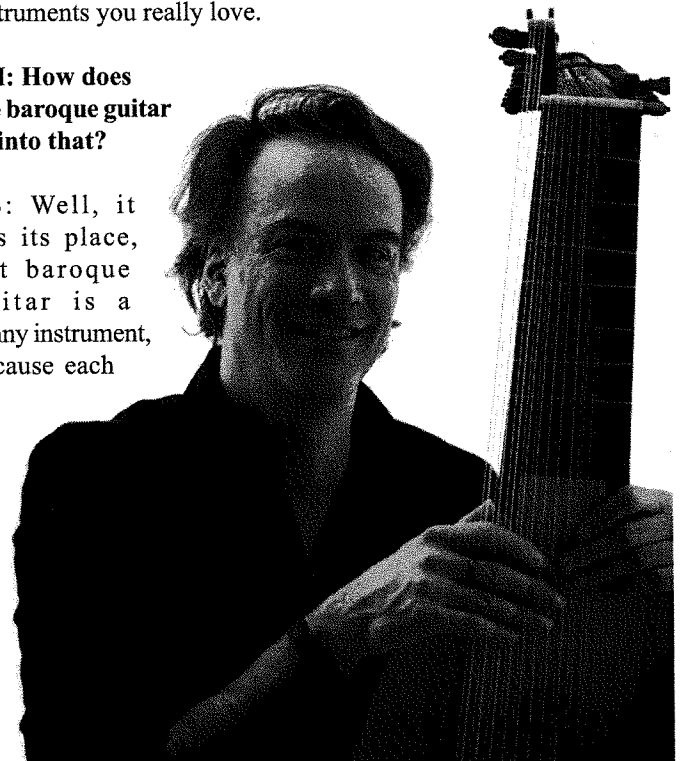
SB: Well, I always thought that my theorbo was an okay instrument, and I developed a way to make it work well, you know, really go into the strings and use everything you could do to make sound. But since I've had the archlute, everybody's like "oh my god, you're in good shape," or some people notice that it's a new instrument; people notice the difference for sure. The treble register speaks so well. It's not thin anymore. For Vivaldi, what instrument do you use to play the D major concerto? I did it on baroque lute and soprano lute, and now I discover that on the archlute, like mine, it's so fun.

DH: It makes sense, too.

SB: Totally, and you can be part of the continuo when you're not playing solo, and the treble is enough, it's very clear and present, so I think it's the perfect instrument for what I was looking for, exactly. So the theorbo is there, but for me, I can't imagine playing on it anymore, because it's too big. I'll keep it for a while, but eventually I'll sell it. I like the idea of concentrating on the instruments you really love.

DH: How does the baroque guitar fit into that?

SB: Well, it has its place, but baroque guitar is a funny instrument, because each



time I open the case after a little while, if I don't play it for a couple of weeks or a month and get back to it, it sounds like hell.

DH: It doesn't like being ignored.

SB: No, so for a little while it will be hard, so you really need to "okay, well, I love you," and eventually it makes a nice sound, a fun sound, too. But in terms of repertoire, if there's a good portion of very chordal music, or let's say a full half-programme of Spanish or mostly Spanish music, I'll use the guitar, for sure.

DH: During the last Early Music Vancouver/LSA lute week two years ago, you gave a presentation about a baroque guitar composer you found similar to Kapsberger. Who is that?

SB: Ferdinando Valdambrini, a very interesting composer. [See link below.]

DH: Have you had a chance to explore that music any more?

SB: I did record one piece that eventually was not included in the CD, that Italian disc of La Nef with Suzie LeBlanc [*Nobil Donna*]. That guitar piece was too hard to fit in, even though it was very interesting. But the guitar I'll keep for sure, and the baroque lute, for sure. And the 10-course, so I'll have four.

DH: Before you got your theorbo, were you playing continuo on your 8-course?

SB: Yeah, I was trying different things. I was for a while using a bass lute, tuned in D, and a baroque lute tuned in renaissance manner, like a 13-course archlute, so I was doing that kind of thing already. But it's true, you know, it came very quickly. People were eager to get more lute in Montréal and Québec.

DH: So it was the right thing in the right place at the right time.

SB: Yes, and honestly, there was not much competition; actually, there was none, at least in the province of Québec. There is more now, but it was kind of natural, I'm 'the one' who plays lute [laughs] in the province of Québec. Now there are younger students or players around that start to do very well, it's just great. I'm looking forward to get more of those [students] because it's hard to do everything myself all the time. Also, people take you for granted, a little bit, if they don't get the chance to play with others. But at the same time I think to get into that continuo business properly takes a while. It's not just playing the bass or the chords. Yes—but, there's all the art of knowing what to do with that bass. How to play the bass and how to fit your bass part with strings, for instance, because when you play with a cello or two, or a gamba, a violin, maybe 10 violins, it's a challenge to fit the lute instruments into the context; well, you know what I mean. And also, to create an accompaniment, how you spread the chords, how you add little things, how you connect to the singer or to the solo instruments, it's all something that can be developed but needs time, no matter how well your teacher tells you what to do or not to do. I'm just now feeling that I know what I'm doing, since I've been doing that for years now.

DH: Did you basically figure that out for yourself? I know as a North American lute student, it's hard to know where to go for instruction.

SB: Yes, well, maybe I wish I could have had more regular training in continuo, in fact, it's almost zero; it's all experience, which is very valuable, for sure. But, you know, sometimes I feel that maybe a little more coaching in my early age would have been profitable and would have helped me. But most serious continuo players will tell you that there's no way to really teach continuo, it's just getting the experience, and I think that's true. You know, you could try to imitate someone, or people can show you examples, but you have to create and make your own realization, and see what your own singer in your own town will do with the same piece; maybe it will be different. It's the reaction that's important, so you cannot really decide what you're going to do, and also you don't want to write down anything but figures and musical signs, breathing, crescendos, that kind of stuff. It's better to develop a sense of "okay, if I have a couple of bars by myself, I can figure out a way to fill them because I trust myself." So you trust yourself doing that more and more each time. If you transcribe or write it down, then you don't trust yourself or learn how to trust yourself.

DH: And it undermines the flexibility you have to have.

SB: That's right. Some people still write out a part in tablature, thinking, "Oh, I'm more confident this way." Great!—But, then you're in your own world that only lutenists can read. And then, often the conductor or singer will ask for a different key, so you've spent all those evenings transposing whatever piece it is, and you did a lot of work for nothing. Also, tablature just tells you where to put your fingers, so you're tied to some system that is the opposite of the basso continuo, which should be a language in itself, the art of accompaniment. That's what I find interesting. Singers like working with me because I'm very sensitive to what I hear and am really connected to them. It's so fascinating because this instrument allows you a proximity to the singer that a keyboard does not. You have your figures as a guide, know where your major and minor chords are (the most important thing), and the rest, you play with. I think that you need to have fun with baroque music, more often than we do – maybe we're too serious sometimes.

DH: Merci bien!

Links

- Les Voix Baroques: <http://lesvoixbaroques.ca/about-les-voix-baroques>
- Les Violons du Roy: <http://www.violonsduroy.com/en>
- La Nef: (in renovation...)
http://la-nef.com/images/nefdepliantsaison2011-2012_eng.pdf
- Les Boréades - The Best of Beatles Baroque (Atma)
<http://www.atmaclassique.com/En/Albums/AlbumInfo.aspx?AlbumID=1369>
- Valdambrini - Toccatas for baroque guitar, edited by Rockford Mjos
http://api.ning.com/files/X6dwV7pR3cIUdzBwMeNBN*hQhg6wwBfUPWDIPoBOt3hKpeEGexM8NC0kwt*Xyqh9yedQsKAmaWjhaGJ4NzhzuNoBJtPUNel2/Vald46_V1_Toccatas_rsm_v113008.pdf
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