

## THE MEDIEVAL LUTE

*The lute is a musical instrument which significantly differs from the others for the delicacy of its tone. Its concave body takes the place of the human chest; the rose of the mouth; the neck is similar to the trachea and the fingers, running on it, play the function of the epiglottis; the plucking of the strings is similar to the compression of the lungs that brings out the voice, but the gut of the strings is like the tongue by which sounds articulate. The lute player is the intelligence that produces the singing. [...]*<sup>1</sup>



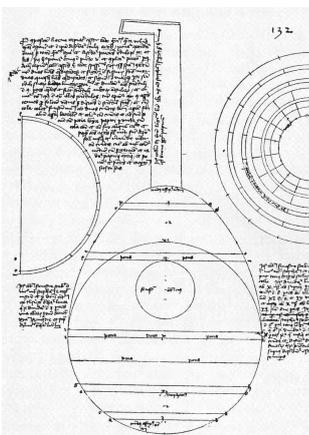
The western lute (It. *leuto*, *liuto*; Ger. *laute*; Sp. *laúd*; Fr. *luth*; owes its existence and its name to the Arabic *al'úd* (which in Arabic literally means “the wood”).

The Arabs adopted the Persian *barbat* starting from the sixth century A.C. and introduced it in Spain and Sicily in the ninth century and extending everywhere in Europe during the fourteenth century.

The distinctive features of the Arabic, medieval and

renaissance lute are: a neck shorter than the body; a vaulted body not carved from one piece of wood but constructed from a number of separate ribs, bent and glued together; a pegbox nearly at right angle to the neck and a bridge glued to the lower end of the soundboard. Varying the ratio between the width and the length of the top, the shape of the bowl could be more round or lengthened as well as the transversal and longitudinal section of the bowl could be more round and deep or shallow.

The medieval lute was a fretless four-double-course instrument always played with a plectrum (made from a quill or bird's feather) at least until the fourteenth century. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the number of courses became five and gut frets were tied across the neck and the fingerboard in order to play polyphonic repertoire, consequently adopting a mixed technique of plectrum and fingertips.<sup>2</sup>



The scholar Johannes Tinctoris describes the lute as made from *a concave wood like that of a tortoiseshell with an opening situated in the centre and a long neck upon which are tensioned the strings in a regular way from the lower part, near the opening, up to the upper part [of the neck]. The player not only supports it with the left hand but at the same time presses and raises the strings with the pressure of the fingers [of the left hand]. The other hand, both with the fingers as with the plectrum also strikes the same strings [...]* the use of the lute usually happens among us at the feasts, banquets and private parties [...].

<sup>1</sup> Paulus Paulirinus, *Liber Viginti Artium*, Praga (circa 1460).

<sup>2</sup> [...] *altera vero, aut digitis ejus aut plectro, cordas ipsas percutit.* Translation: the other [hand (the right one)] strikes the strings with the fingers and with the plectrum).



tuning. The most common size was the tenor-lute tuned in G or A, with a string length not longer than 60 cm and tuned with symmetrical intervals of fourths with a major third in the middle.

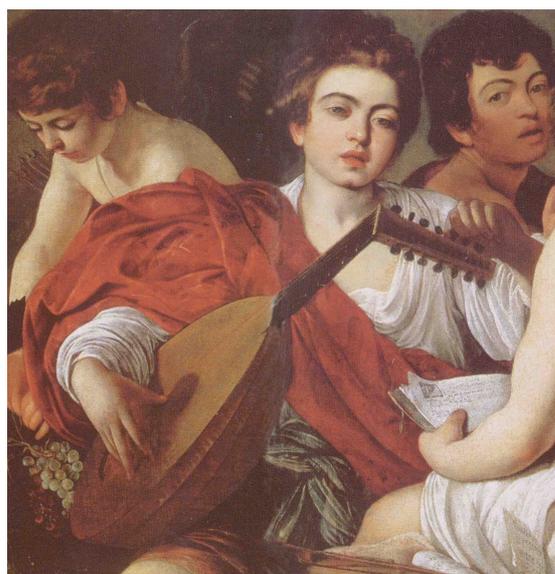
Italian iconography shows that seven, eight, nine and ten-course lute were used during the late sixteenth century even though by that time *archlutes* and *chitarroni* already existed. The extra-bass strings that were added were tuned diatonically with the possibility of “scordatura” using sharps or flats according to the key and extension of the piece.

A quite important number of sixteenth century lutes are housed in public and private collections, but most of them were converted to baroque lutes in the following centuries with a new neck, pegbox, bridge, belly and bars. Among the very few true renaissance lutes survived, part of them consists of bass lutes, which probably survived because were not very popular.



The lutes built from the beginning of the seventeenth century up to 1680, show a great variety in terms of shape, dimensions, string length, neck, pegbox and number of strings. Interestingly enough, very few lutes still exist from this period in comparison with both preceding and following. This is probably due to the fact that lute makers were mainly busy in converting old lutes into theorboes and archlutes, rather than building new ones<sup>6</sup>. In general one finds a lower calibre of handwork and a

decline in aesthetic judgement because most of the principles of lute-making established during the previous two hundred years were forgotten or ignored. When a large number of new instruments were built again in large quantity, (after 1680) their construction was conceived with completely new principles no longer linked to the tradition.



<sup>6</sup> Robert Lundberg, *Historical lute construction*, The Guild of American Luthiers 2002, p. 10 -11

## THE LIUTO ATTIORBATO AND ARCHLUTE



The liuto attiorbato was a fourteenth-course instrument (all double included the top string); seven or eight double courses of stopped strings with six or seven double courses of unstopped “diapasons” (or “bourdons”) outside the fingerboard. It was used principally for the solo repertoire because the extra- bass strings tuned in octaves were not ideal for continuo playing. The term archlute is nowadays used to describe a lute with a long neck extension between the first and second pegbox, where the ratio between the string length of the bourdons and the one of the stopped strings is about 2, 2. The archlute is a thirteenth or fourteenth course lute of which six stopped double courses and seven or eight single bass strings, ideal to provide continuo, with the top string tuned in G or A according to the different pitches in use.

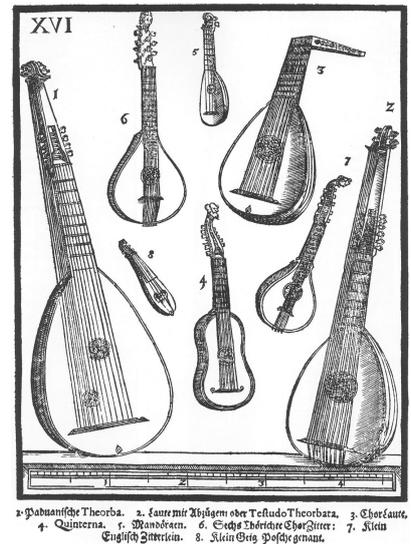
## CHITARRONE & THEORBO

[...] *It was in the past very popular to play the Lute, but after the Theorbo was introduced this instrument is now almost left abandoned because, being [the theorbo] more suitable for singing even simply and with a bad voice, it has been accepted generally, to avoid the great difficulties needed to play well the lute. [...]*<sup>7</sup>. With these words Vincenzo Giustiniani, in 1628 – complained about the neglecting of the lute for the theorbo. On the contrary Agostino Agazzari praised the theorbo as the ideal instrument to accompany the singing:



[...] *The theorbo with its full and sweet consonances, very much increases the melody, striking again and walking delicately on his bourdons - which is a peculiar excellence of that instrument - with trills and mute accents made with the lower hand [left hand]*<sup>8</sup>.

Alessandro Piccinini in his preface of his “First Book of lute and chitarrone tablature”, very well and clearly summarizes the evolution that from the Bass-Lute led to the invention of the Chitarrone with the neck extension. The restrung bass lutes were often originally six, seven or eight-course instruments, at first converted to a ten-course lute. Later, between the end of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth, the number of strings increased up to thirteenth or fourteenth by



XVI  
1. Halbmanliche Theorba. 2. Laute mit Zuhgen oder Tullado-Theorbar. 3. Oberlaute.  
4. Quinterna. 5. Mandorren. 6. Sechse Theorische Chitarron. 7. Klein Englische Zitterra. 8. Klein Org Postige gemant.

<sup>7</sup> [...] *Era anche per il passato molto in uso suonare di Liuto, ma questo stromento resta quasi abbandonato affatto, doppoichè s'introdusse l'uso della Tiorba, la quale essendo più atta al cantare anche mediocrementemente e con cattiva voce, è stata accettata volentieri generalmente, per schivare la gran difficoltà, che ricerca il saper suonare bene il Liuto [...]. Vincenzo Giustiniani, *Discorso sopra la musica de' suoi tempi*, Roma 1628. This manuscript - written as a letter to Teodoro Almyden – is housed at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana with the title: *Delle fabbriche*. Another copy is kept at the Archivio di Stato, Lucca. The most recent printed edition (which includes other works written by Giustiniani) was edited by Anna Banti and published by Sansoni (Florence, 1981).*

<sup>8</sup> [...] *la tiorba poi, co le sue piene, e dolci consonanze, accresce molto melodia, ripercotendo, e passeggiando leggiadramente i suoi bordoni, particolar excellenza di quello stromento, con trilli, et accenti muti, fatti con la mano di sotto [la sinistra]* Agostino Agazzari, *del sonare sopra 'l basso con tutti li stromenti*, p. 6, Siena, D. Falcini, 1607.

adding a neck extension - on which was placed a second pegbox - that allowed a longer string length of the bourdons. Because of the long string length of the bass-lutes from which the theorbos were made, the top two courses had to be lowered an octave.

It must be stated precisely that the terms *chitarrone* and *theorbo* are synonymous. Among the many quotations from extant treatises and printed books we may remember Emilio de' Cavalieri who refers to *a chitarrone or theorbo as it is called*, Agostino Agazzari and Bartolomeo Barbarino who wrote in 1607: *chitarrone o theorbo as we like to say*.

These were instruments which only by the end of the sixteenth century and beginning of the following were always huge, but later, between the second half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth, were normally smaller.

## THE BAROQUE LUTE IN FRANCE AND GERMANY

In France during the very first years of the seventeenth century new tunings were experimented (*accordes nouveau*) on ten and eleven-course lutes (with quite long string lengths) which were the conversion of the rather big lutes that used to be built in Bologna in the Sixteenth century.

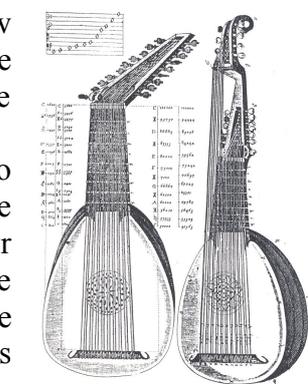
In the eighteenth century the interest for the lute moved from France to Germany and Bohemia where, during the first quarter of the century, the last attempts to avoid the decline of the lute were made. The D minor French lute – which the Germans mainly built and played during the second half of the seventeenth century – remained in use until at least the half of the eighteenth century even though the thirteenth-course lute was already played in the second quarter of the century. As for the eleven-course lute, the first two strings were single, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> were double and tuned in unison and from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> double with octave tuning. The number of the stopped courses could be eight, nine or ten according to the type of neck and peg boxes.

The majority of the survived German baroque lutes are conversions of old Italian renaissance lutes, archlutes or theorbos. The German makers were in fact mainly occupied in rebuilding the lutes made in the sixteenth century by their ancestors from Füssen, as were Frei and Maler.



The thirteenth-course German lute represents the last evolution in the history of the western lute<sup>9</sup>. In the Low Countries was in use the twelve-course lute (eight stopped on the main pegbox and four unstopped on a second pegbox) whose main feature was the adoption of two peg-boxes placed at a right angle one from the other.

In Germany the introduction of the thirteenth-course lute starting from 1718 - is probably due to collaboration between the great virtuoso Silvius Leopold Weiss and the lute maker Thomas Edlinger II, who worked in Prague.



Davide Rebuffa

<sup>9</sup> Although a few fourteenth-course German lutes survived - which, according to Robert Lundberg, should be considered original. - as in the case of the lute by Johann Christian Hoffmann, Leipzig 1720.