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LUTE LESSONS FOR FIFTEENTH-CENTURY AMATEURS

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Relatively little is known about the nature of lute lessons taken by amateur dilettanti before the advent of the polyphonic manner of lute playing and the publication of treatises on intabulation, lute tutors, and lute books with rudiments and instructions on notation and playing techniques. A few documents from this period, however, may provide some valuable insights into the kind of lessons on plucked-string instruments the fifteenth-century amateur could expect: the contract drawn up for one Mosse of Lisbon and a certain Anthonius Girardi at Avignon in 1449; the contract made between Pietrobono de Burzelli and Girolamo Bondi at Ferrara in 1465; and an account book of personal expenses of an English merchant George Cely during his stay at Calais in 1474 and 1475.1

The professional credentials of instructors with whom amateurs studied will have varied. The student no doubt sought out a teacher according to his own technical ability on the instrument as well as his financial situation. Pietrobono de Burzelli, for example, was one of the most famous virtuoso instrumentalists of the fifteenth century and was a court musician for the house of d'Este in Ferrara.2 Girolamo Bondi seems to have been a man of ample means in order to be able to hire such a famous musician, his choice no doubt affecting the cost of tuition for the lessons. Their contract specifies that Pietrobono was to teach Bondi 'the art of music on the cytharino' and that the lessons must take place at Bondi's residence.3 In his account book George Cely styled his teacher Thomas Rede a 'harper', possibly a professional minstrel and dancing master whose education was most probably attained through a system of master-apprenticeship resulting eventually in membership of a guild. Cely was a wool merchant, a successful one judging from his personal expenses, which included costs for his mistres. He learned to play the harp and the lute as well as taking dancing and singing lessons. Mosse of Lisbon was called a 'dyer' in his contract.4 Anthonius Girardi was a student at the University of Avignon,5 who wished to learn a number of songs and dances on the 'Citara sive arpa'.6

Fees seem to have been prepaid and to have been determined by the number of pieces the student was to learn. The tuition fee Bondi promised to pay was one gold ducat and six yards of black cloth.7 The first entry for Cely's lute lessons, dated 1 November 1474, tells us that Cely paid the sum of four shillings ten pence for learning fifteen pieces. Thus, each lute piece cost Cely a little less than four pence. It almost equals the sum Cely paid to learn twenty dances on the harp the previous week: he paid seven shillings in total (each piece costing him a little over four pence.)

The following repertory for fifteenth-century amateur instrumentalists appears to have included vocal and dance music, and the pieces the student was to learn had often been specified before the actual lessons began. Cely was to learn fourteen dances and
a hornpipe on the lute; Giraldi specified the chansons and dances he wished to learn; Pietrobono was to teach Bondi 'seven cantilenas, well and properly'.

For most of the fifteenth century, the instructors may have showed their students the fingerings and orally explained the necessary information to play the pieces without using any kind of written instruction. The students learned the pieces by rote, until they had mastered them. There is no indication that Mosse or Pietrobono used any written instructions or taught their students to read music notation. Mosse and Pietrobono may not have needed any written notation if they taught just the monophonic style of instrumental playing.

The use of written instructions or musical notation, rather, is hinted at in the second entry on 14 November 1474 for Cely's lute lessons. This entry records that Cely paid 1s. 6d. for a 'byll' from Rede 'a paper of instructions for tuning the lute ('a byll for to lerne to rewe the levie'). That the 'byll', a written or printed document, must be some kind of instruction may be assumed from the fact that Cely also paid for a 'byll off fatoryng' ('bill of dancing') and a 'byll off fatoryng off ba3 davansys' ('bill of dancing of basse danses'). These may have contained some instructions and the choreography of the dances he had learned from Rede, in a format perhaps similar to one in Michel de Toulouse's Sensez l'art et instruction de bien danser (late fifteenth century), which includes instructions for dancing and choreography with monophonic melodies.

The sum of three shillings and six pence that Cely paid for instruction on lute tuning was equal to a week's board and lodging at Calais, and far more than he paid for the 'byll' on dancing which cost him four pence. This suggests that Cely's tuning instruction was not similar in format with the brief description of the tuning for a five-course lute headed 'To sette a lute' preserved in a contemporary English commonplace book. Cely's tuning instruction might have contained other materials; for example, some rudimentary information on the technical aspects of playing the lute or even instructions on how to read tablature as well as some lute pieces in tablature, such as the fourteen dances and hornpipe he had learned during his first lute lesson.

That some kind of music notation, either mensural notation or lute tablature, was known to Cely is suggested by the third entry for his lute lessons, possibly made after October 1475, which is the record of a payment for 'a lytell fyngr hyng [o]n the lewe' ('little fingering on the lute'). Cely used the word 'fyngryng' twice in his entries for the harp. He paid for 'vy davansys and myne fyngryng on the harp' ('six dances and my fingering on the harp') on 14 June 1474 and for 'myne fyngryng and ffor myne tastynge off the harpe and ffor myne harpe lute and Offreschs fluor ij whayys' ('my fingering and for my tasting of the harp and for Mine Heart's Lust and O Freshest Flower in two ways') on 17 December 1474. The specific use of the word 'fyngryng' in these instances indicates that it denotes a memorandum of the actual fingerings he learned. After mastering the pieces by rote, Cely may have needed some references for them, fearing that he may in future forget the notes or the frets. Since several forms
of lute tablature already existed in the late fifteenth century, it is highly probable that what Cely purchased were some lute pieces notated in a tablature form.16

The lessons taken by Anthonius Girardi, Girolamo Bondi and George Cely were likely in accordance with the tradition of education and recreation of middle-class society in the fifteenth century. The degree of competence in their knowledge of music and in their technical ability of playing an instrument (such as the lute and harp) before their lessons had begun can only be a matter for speculation. Girardi appears to have been familiar with the melodies of the songs and dances current at the time. Cely must have been an enthusiastic dilettante in music to take lessons not only in two different instruments but also in singing and dancing as well. Bondi must have been a quite competent player (or extremely wealthy) to ask a renowned virtuoso like Pietrobono to teach him. Their lessons perhaps ended when they memorized the pieces they wanted to learn and mastered the necessary techniques to play them. Alas, no documents survive to testify whether these amateurs continued to cultivate the instruments throughout their lives.

Notes

I am indebted to Denys Stephens for his invaluable comments on this paper.


3 The identification of the 'chitarino', whether it is the lute or the medieval gittern, has not been clarified. The term chitarino almost exclusively appears in fifteenth-century Ferrarese documents, suggesting that it was a local designation specifically used in Ferrara and that other Italian courts called it by some other name. An exception is a document that concerns a banquet offered by Cardinal Pietro Riario in Rome in 1473 where the song 'O Rosa bella' was sung to a chitarino. On the documents, see Nino Pirrona, Music and Culture in Italy from the Middle Ages to the Baroque: A Collection of Essays, Studies in the History of Music, no. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 156. The medieval gittern was called chitarra in Italy. On the terms such as cithara, chitarra and cithara, see Laurence Wright, 'The Medieval Gittern and Citole: A Case of Mistaken Identity',

4 Dying may have been his (or his family's) principal occupation while teaching musical instruments may have been his extra source of income (or the other way around). The Flemish theorist and composer Johannes Tinctoris's family occupation must have been dying, although there is no documentary evidence to suggest that he also followed the family tradition.


6 The citara sive arpa mentioned in the contract is hard to identify. A case of denoting one instrument by two different names is found in the letter of Marco Negro, Isabella d'Este's agent, who came to Brescia to receive three viol he was having made there. Negro called the instrument violce in one instance and viole over lira in another; the document is transcribed in William F. Ripley, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia, "Master-Instrument-Maker", Early Music History 2 (1982), pp. 163–4. If this is the case for Giraldi, the instrument he learned was the harp. If two different instruments were involved, they could have been the lute and harp. Paulus Paulinus, in his Liber versiarii ariarm, written in Prague between 1458 and 1463, designates the 'cithara' as the lute and 'arpa' as the harp; see Standley Howell, Paulus Paulinus of Prague on Musical Instruments', Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society 5–6 (1979–80), pp. 16, 19.

7 See also Lockwood, Music in Renaissance Ferrara, p. 107.

8 See also ibid., p. 166.

9 Galeazzo Maria Sforza is reported to have learned chansons one by one; see Howard Mayer Brown, A Florentine Chansonnier from the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent: Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale MS Banco Rari 229, Monumenta of Renaissance Music 7 (Chicago and London, 1983), pp. 68–49, n. 36.


11 The volume is listed and described in Howard Mayer Brown, Instrumental Music Printed before 1600: A Bibliography (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), as item 1489/1.

12 See Hanham, 'The Musical Studies', p. 273. The entry for the bill for basse dancers includes other matters, which makes it unable to calculate the exact sum Cely paid for them.

14 The specification 'ij whys' may have meant either that the songs were arranged for the harp in two different tunings or in two different arrangements (one in a simple arrangement and another with elaborate ornaments). 'Taste' may have been interpreted to mean "to feel, handle" applied to the playing of a musical instrument"; see Hanham, 'The Musical Studies', p. 271 n 3. On this word used in musical situations, see H. Colin Slim, 'The Keyboard Ricercar and Fantasia in Italy c.1500–1550 with Reference to Parallel Forms in European Lute Music of the Same Period', (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1960), vol. 1, Appendix II.

15 Cely paid nine shillings for six dances and the 'fyngryng' on the harp. If the cost to learn one harp piece was about 4.2 pence, the cost for the harp 'fyngryng' must have been about seven shillings. The sum for the lute 'fyngryng', on the other hand, is sixteen pence. This suggests that the lute 'fyngryng' did not contain much.