On The Semibreve: Time Is Money

by Hiroyuki Minamino

Who is afraid of Hans Newsidler's compositions containing extravagant ornaments in small note values? Modern transcriptions of these pieces look like a bunch of tadpole lining up for a conga. German instrumentalists of Newsidler's day used lush ornaments in their instrumental compositions and arrangements of polyphonic vocal music. "Colorists" as we musicologists categorize them is a vivid name, but does not help the modern performers understand them much. One may wonder whether we modern players have fewer technical skills to cope with the heavily ornamented pieces, or if the tempo moved slower in the sixteenth century? Before the invention and wide use of the metronome, composers did not specify the exact tempo of a composition. How did Newsidler and his contemporaries count time?

Controlling the duration of a string once it is plucked is an impossibility on any plucked stringed instruments. Once the note comes out, let it be its master. As a member of plucked stringed instrument family, the lute also suffered from this drawback. Indeed, the limitation of sustaining power on the lute was a major concern for sixteenth-century lutenists. Adrian Le Roy in his lute intabulation treatise, A briefe and plaine Instruction (London, 1574), f. 4, points out that the lute and stringed keyboard instruments lack sustaining power because the production of the sound on these instruments "dependeth altogether by touch of the fingers." He compared the lute's dying sound to the organ's capacity to sustain the value of a maxima or even "longer by means of the wind continued by the bellows." Vincenzo Galilei in his lute intabulation treatise, Fronimo (Venice, 1584), p. 51, remarked that the nature of the lute is not like the organ; it cannot hold a note long as the player wishes. It is a small wonder that nobody ever dared try to invent a mechanism that can help sustain the sound on the lute. Indeed, Galilei reports such an "invention." There was an optimist who thought he had discovered a way to install a pedal on the lute, as on the organ. Can that be done? Galilei's reaction to this was: "Ha, ha, ha!" I suspect that cynical Galilei invented the story.

Calculating the standard duration of a string once it is plucked is also an impossibility, for the duration of a sound depends on the size of the instrument, the material of the strings, the technical capability of the player, the temperature, and the acoustical environment of the performance. However, once the polyphonic manner of lute-playing and the notation of the arrangements of polyphonic vocal music in tablature became standard practices in the sixteenth century, lutenists had to decide which is theoretically the longest sustainable note value on the lute. Lute instructions tell us how sixteenth-century lutenists regarded the limitation of sustaining power on the lute. They agree that the semibreve is the longest note that can be sustained. As early as 1529, a specific description of the matter was given in the instructions published by Pierre Attainant in his lute anthology, Tres breue familiere introduction (Paris, 1529), f. 1v, which says that the lute tablature does not use the rhythmic signs for the maxima, longa, and breve because the string cannot produce notes longer than the semibreve.

The theoretical acceptance of the semibreve as the longest sustainable note on the lute may have been determined or born out by actual practice. The earliest indication for tempo may be found in the instructions included in Ottaviano Petrucci's six lute books published between 1507 and 1511. It specifies that the rhythmic sign I (which denotes an equivalent to a semibreve in other instructions) should be played slowly so that the notes in smaller note values can comfortably be performed. But how slow should a semibreve be? Some sixteenth-century theorists considered that a tactus corresponded to the time value of a semibreve of normal length (integer valor notarium). A tactus may be equated with the "pulse beat of a quietly breathing man." If we translate this to the metronome, the tempo of a semibreve in integer value was MM c. 60-70.

In the sixteenth century, tactus was sometimes measured by a lowering and raising of the hand, called positio and elevatio (or thesis and arsis). Instrumentalists may have followed the same theory but used a different method. Lutenists must have had a hard time counting with hands, since they needed both hands to play. According to the instructions in Pierre Phalèse's anthology of lute music, Des chansons reduciz en tablature de lut (Louvain, 1545), f. 3v, some lutenists counted the tactus by tapping a foot, an understandable practice. Hans Newsidler had a different method for establishing the tactus. He instructs in his lute book, Ein neugeordnet kunstlich Lautenbuch (Nuremberg, 1536), f. b3, that the rhythmic sign for the semibreve should be played with the same tempo as the striking of the hour or bells on a tower, or when one counts money nice and gently while saying "one, two, three, four."

A miser may count money slow. A spendthrift may count money fast. Newsidler had to count money "nice and gently" for good reasons. He lived in a city that was struggling for its economic growth and had an occupation that offered no financial stability and prosperity. During the period of 1500-1550, "more than half the inhabitants [of Nuremberg] were artisans who lived a more or less precarious existence, continually threatened by unemployment and inflation."

Newsidler indeed complained about his
financial difficulties. He had to raise 13 children (4 more after his second marriage). One time Newsidler “was forced to appeal to the city council for help and eventually to sell his house.”


