Rolf Lislevand La Mascarade

ECM NEW SERIES

La Mascarade

Robert de Visée
(ca.1655–1732/3)

Francesco Corbetta
(ca.1615–1681)

Rolf Lislevand
Baroque guitar, theorbo

Robert de Visée

1	Prélude en ré mineur	1:15
2	Passacaille en ré mineur	2:41
3	Les Sylvains de Mr. Couperin	4:00

Francesco Corbetta

4–5	Intro (Rolf Lislevand)	1:20
	Passacaille en sol mineur	2:38

Robert de Visée

6	Prélude en la mineur	1:31
7	La Mascarade, Rondeau	1:30

Francesco Corbetta

8	Partie de Chaconne en ut majeur	2:38
9	Sarabanda per la B	2:20

Robert de Visée

10	Chaconne en la mineur	2:40

	Francesco Corbetta	
11	Caprice de Chaconne	4 : 38
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12	Chaconne en sol majeur	6 : 57
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La Mascarade

I woke up this morning in my hotel room with a magnificent view of the chateau of Versailles.

I arrived yesterday evening, and will be staying a few days to give a master course on playing the theorbo and Baroque guitar. The students will be bringing a repertory including pieces by Francesco Corbetta and Robert de Visée, both of them guitarist-composers who worked here at the court of Louis XIV, the *roi soleil*. De Visée was also guitar teacher to the king's great-grandson and eventual successor.

The magnificent palace strikes me in all its majestic beauty, but reminds me also of the sacrifice the French people made to offer a very few individuals their privileges.

I make my approach, first heading towards the gardens. The music of *Les Sylvains de Mr. Couperin* is worming away in my ear, and I look for the sylvans, these elves, in the trees, and try to imagine how the sound of a lute, a guitar, or a theorbo once whispered through these gardens, and how these same instruments in their silence were woven into the tapestries of this divinely dimensioned royal residence.

There is something fascinating about proportions, how in the intimate music of a theorbo or guitar of the seventeenth century may be found the same architectural ratios as in the Versailles palace and its gardens, a complete universe in the one case of sound, in the other of space.

I headed off to meet my students after a *redoubtable* French coffee…

As a young musician myself, I studied with a great master of the lute who could make the instrument speak and tell stories. I had been reading scholarly essays on rhetoric in Baroque music, but it all remained empty words and academic ideas until I heard my master's teaching and playing.

I realized how a very few notes could be a gesture more gracious than any movement of a human body, more figurative than a whole landscape in a painting, and more articulate than the most perfected poetry.

I realized that a piece of seventeenth-century Baroque music is a speech to be understood, whereas later Classical and Romantic music consists of paintings to be perceived emotionally.

I then became familiar with the tablatures of Saizenay: manuscripts and prints of early lute and guitar notation containing music by de Visée as well as Corbetta's book *Guitarre Royalle*. I tried to identify with their music, understanding the phrases, their interrelation, and their rhetorical speech. Their music is transparent and multidimensional; it seemed almost too simple on the surface.

The aesthetic ideals of a historical period have always had an inverse relationship with the prevailing conditions of human life. This may come about because artists will often seek out some imperfection in nature that may be cultivated and revalued in the act of creating a work. A defect becomes a sign of style, inspiring and exciting our creativity. It is the mole on the face of a beautiful actress, or it is a worn-out pair of jeans, enlivening the mind tired of functionality and perfection.

The *style à la française* of seventeenth-century music implies the art of nurturing ornamental and aesthetic aspects in what might seem a superficial manner, through emphasizing the less important elements in the music. It implies the subtle art of avoiding projecting the obvious direction of a phrase, rerouting its natural inclination. Through the performer's attention to dynamic shape and timing, the energy of a phrase may be made to decay rather than increase, its directionality to withdraw towards the end rather than move to affirm the climax.

La Mascarade: an appearance is not the true face. Any statement is to be understood on a second level. Nothing is to be taken literally. Everything is a game of masks, a masquerade, a parade of characters hiding their real identities. The music and the music's characters do not have real faces, only masks. If an identity is in danger of being revealed through too close a contact, the masked face withdraws in order to maintain its secret.

Hence the art of suggestion, or the anxiety of losing elegance or being predictable. The very grace of a gesture is created by interrupting its movement before it is fulfilled: how wonderfully decadent! (No wonder this mentality led to a revolution…)

A phrase out of an imagined French seventeenth century was tormenting me: "Every note must end in dying" (*Toute note doit finir en mourant*). How could I produce such a sound on a plucked seventeenth-century style instrument? How could a sound contain a whole life, a single note come to be born and so die? Would such a sound speak? Would it do so more than the flattering and indulging sounds of a modern classical instrument?

French music of the seventeenth century is intimately connected to the French language. The dominant linguistic elements of French are all there: the length of the musical syllables, the accents, created artificially by the ornaments, and above all the short, gestural, interleaved phrases constructed in a very clear rhetorical logic.

The musical phrases seem to form a real discussion through a classical pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis: *teramteram-teramteram-teramteramteramteram*. The stress of the first *teram* should be on the second syllable, that of the second on the first. (Stress on syllables seems an inappropriate term for the only European language not making use of tonic accents. French musicians adapted to Italian style in the seventeenth century by using ornaments like the *porte de voix*, *accent*, and *appuyé*. They thus "translated" the hierarchy of articulation and accent in Italian music, which was based on the Italian language.)

I headed for the Paris métro and it struck me that people in our own time act in a quotidian masquerade, putting on sunglasses and headset. We experience music in our own virtual chateau as we pass through the Gare d'Austerlitz…

The music on this album was composed and played by a great guitarist, Francesco Corbetta, and his student, Robert de Visée, who became the Sun King's guitar and theorbo player.

Francesco Corbetta was born in Italy but became a celebrated virtuoso of the guitar outside his native country. Before settling in France, he was in the employ of Charles II in London, and left a whole court strumming on small Baroque guitars. Pepys heard him play "most admirably," adding laconically: "So well as I was mightily troubled that all that pains should have been taken upon so bad an instrument."

Robert de Visée was one of the king's composers, and played his own music at court, occasionally in the king's bedroom while the monarch was taking supper. On request, he would play his guitar walking two steps behind the king during the daily royal promenade of the gardens of Versailles – the first Walkman or iPod in musical history.

I wonder how I would compose to please a king. I would surely practice to perfection, not the least from wanting to keep my head on my shoulders. Try to imagine how music would have evolved if composers had always had to perform their works the same evening for a despotic music lover…

In hardly any period of music's history was the acoustic ambience considered as carefully as it was in the Baroque era; the very instruments were constructed in accordance with the architecture within which they would be played.

Present-day concert conditions, with their particular rituals and their halls holding very many more than a dozen people, cannot come near reproducing the effect of listening to these musical masterworks in a royal chamber in intimate proximity to the player's instrument – and to his or her body odour and wine-flavored breath.

Thanks to recording technology, the physical, sensual experience of the sound of a theorbo or Baroque guitar has become available to all in

the twenty-first century; through this technology we can manipulate proportions and regain intimacy of sound.

The Swiss Italian radio studio in Lugano became my chateau. By means of the magic of recording, we enter the halls of Versailles, having simulated their acoustics so that the sounds of theorbo and Baroque guitar may be heard as if in their original environment.

The two instruments played on this album produce the most contrasting sounds you could ever find among the plucked instruments of centuries.

The seventeenth-century guitar has a much smaller body than its modern counterpart and has five pairs of strings, tuned in unisons and octaves. It has no bass register and is fundamentally unsuited to polyphony or complex textures.

Musicians of four centuries ago had already developed this instrument's playing style to explore all the possibilities of surprising strummed rhythms and harmonies, often very modern-sounding to our ears. Moreover, the instrument's many different tunings prefigure the experimental tunings used by improvising musicians today; they invite us to play games, and to find new seductive sounds that escape the whole logic of compositional rules written down in the period.

It seems that guitar players of the seventeenth century did exactly what guitar players have done ever since: compose music with the guitar on their knees by listening to the exciting new sounds that unexpectedly occurred when they put their fingers on new and unusual places on the fingerboard. De Visée says in the preface to his first guitar book: "If my inventions may seem strange or even to violate the common rules of harmony, I beg you to be patient; it is because the instrument itself calls for it."

With its crystal-clear, airy sound, the Baroque guitar contrasts utterly with the dark and earthy bass sonorities of its contemporary counterpart, the theorbo. Together these instruments create a *chiaroscuro* in music, an image in sound of the Baroque theory of that magic tension that exists between light and darkness.

The theorbo came about as a young, vital, and curious stage of life in the story of the lute family. A completely new aesthetic of sound, arising in Italy in the first decades of the seventeenth century, led to the development of a a bass lute called the "big guitar," or "chittarrone," a synonym for the theorbo.

This is undoubtedly the king of the lutes. Unusually numerous string pairs, fourteen in all, run along an impressive extension of the fingerboard and neck, making the instrument the lute family's symbol of the Baroque aesthetic: a form striving to exceed its own limitations.

The theorbo and the Baroque guitar disappeared in the first half of the eighteenth century, falling into a beauty sleep that lasted more than two hundred years.

A Norwegian philosopher, Peter Wessel Zapffe, noted for his pessimistic, fatalistic philosophy, refers to a race of deer that developed increasingly amazing antlers, until after generations they exterminated

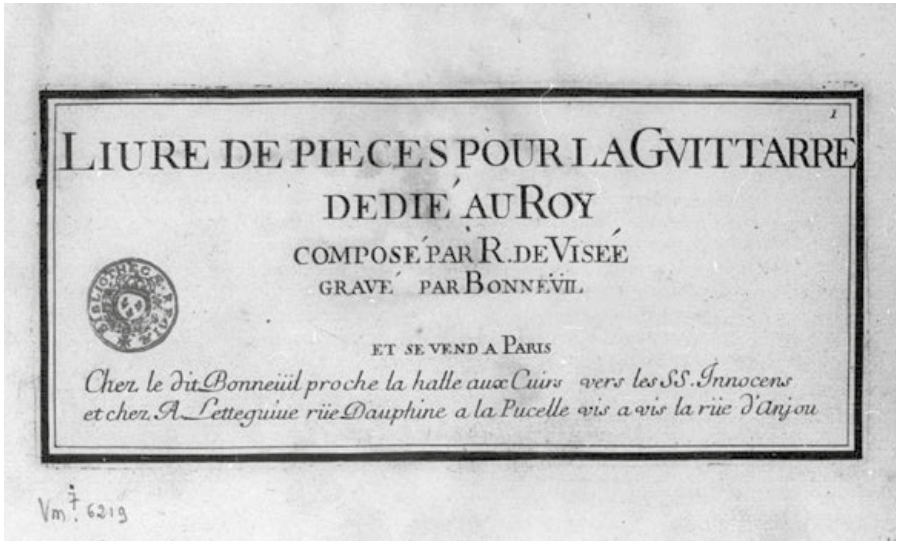
themselves, their necks breaking under the weight of their headgear.

Perhaps such a process doomed the theorbo and its ilk. In a spirit of vanity, such instruments gained more strings and supplementary necks until the point came when a technical mastery of the instrument became impractical – a case of instrumental suicide.

Returning to my hotel room in Versailles, I have a glass of excellent French red wine and play the Sarabande in B minor on the theorbo before I go to sleep.

Fais de beaux rêves mon luth. Sweet dreams my lute.

Rolf Lislevand



Sources

Robert de Visée

Manuscrit Vaudry de Saizenay (1699)
1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14

Livre de pièces pour la guittarre (1686)
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Francesco Corbetta

La Guitarre Royalle,
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5, 13

Varii Scherzi di Sonate per la Chitarra Spagnola,
Libro Quarto (1648)
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