

Talitha Witmer Master Research Project

Research Title (provisional as of Nov. 16. 2016): "Questioning the string tensions used on early Italian theorbos today." Or "Exploring different possibly historical sounds and right-hand techniques for Theorbos."

Research question: "When treatises explain about plucking around the bridge, did they mean double-strung theorbos or single-strung? Could it be that single-strung theorbo had more tension than double-strung theorbo? Is it historical to play single-strung theorbos with the little finger lying close to the bridge, or over the bridge? Could applying silk strings instead of gut strings be an answer to playing around the bridge? "

Description:

Today, lutenists often play theorbos with following elements. 1) Reduced size of 70cm – 80cm, 2) plucked around the rose, 3) thumb-in (a term for RH technique) 4) with nylon strings, and 5) single-strung. One often hears that historically we should be playing a theorbo 1) gigantic as 85-100cm 2) plucked around the bridge 4) with gut strings 5) double strung. There is also a FAQ about the right-hand technique applied on the theorbo. It is a known fact that Thumb-out was the technique applied most commonly for theorbo playing. Yet, very few performers adopt this thumb-out technique today. If they do, they pluck around the rose. In paintings and treatises we see the combination of A) Thumb-out + "around the bridge" and B) Thumb-out + "around the rose," the former more often. Until now, I haven't found any modern performer playing the theorbo in combination-A. No wonder - it is simply impossible to play so on a modern theorbo, because the string tension is simply too high for it.

Methodology:

I believe strings tensions on theorbos might have been lower than today, because of the following reasons. The answer can only be speculation, yet I hope through this research it will be more than groundless opinion. 1) Theorbos didn't have frets in the higher register (though they do today.) Only with low string tension it becomes possible to play high registers without frets. 2) Treatises and paintings suggest to pluck around the bridge (which with low string tension this becomes possible.) 3) Low tension reduces stress on Left-hand playing, which enables playing gigantic theorbos. 4) String-holes on surviving instruments are small, which indicates thin strings = low tension. 5) With high/modern strings tension, when strung with gut strings (which few theorbo players do today,) strings get too thick and don't make sound, and will touch the frets and buzz. To answer 1) and 4) I will collect every prints of surviving theorbos, chart them into double or single-strung, with or without higher frets, and size of string-holes. To answer 2) I will collect every theorbo paintings and chart the same (contact Andreas Schlegel and Klaus Martius. To answer 5) I will experiment with gut strings and silk strings from several string makers to find out what strings would make sense both historically and technically.

Chosen format of documentation: Research paper and presentaion

