

Liner Notes for *La belle voilée: 17th-Century French Lute Music by Jacques Gallot and others*. Catherine Liddell, lute (Centaur CRC 2359)

The Veiled Lady

The *Duchesse de la Valliere*, named in the first piece of this CD, is not the only one behind a veil. Inner feelings in 17th-century France were also veiled behind ritual and rules of conduct and comportment. The music of that period sought to express emotions, but reflecting court society, did so through corresponding veils of musical style. That's why, to some people, the music seems so impenetrable. But it is not. Understanding the makeup of the musical veil helps us see through it and experience the music in its wholeness.

French Style: What it isn't

The musical veil has caused many people to perceive the music in terms what it lacks rather than what it offers. Ernst Gottlieb Baron in his *Historisch-Theoretisch und Practische Untersuchung des Instruments der Lauten* (Nurnberg, 1727) judges French music in these harsh terms: "But the French...seldom have free and ingenious melodies in their lute pieces. They brush chords with their fingers as if they were scratching and have stood by their French taste without any other instruction."¹ Elsewhere he writes, "With regard to the characteristics of the French, they too often change voices, so that one cannot even recognize the melody, and, as already mentioned, there is little *cantabile* to be found, particularly because they regard it as very fashionable to brush back chords on the lute with the right hand, just as on the guitar; a constant hopping around is required to give spirit and life to the pieces. I have also observed that they consider it delicate to use the deep basses very little, preferring instead the middle range. This is to say nothing of the simple melodies I often hear."² Given Baron's dates, 1696-1760, and the fact that he lived and worked primarily east of Berlin, this is definitely a view from the outside looking in. Today's perceptions are no different. Many people think that 17th-century French music lacks energy, is without passion and is rhythmically vague. They still describe the music by what it is not.

French Lute Style Unveiled

Imagine three horizontal strands or layers, one strand in each register, treble, middle and bass. In other national styles of composition, there might be two or three strands of music flowing simultaneously. There might be more notes in one strand than in another, but within a strand, the notes are connected in a very predictable way and are synchronized with the notes in the other strands. Italian music of this period and German music of the 18th century adhere to this description.

Now imagine that the notes within each strand become "vertically unglued" from one another, without shifting position, and lie as individual notes on a tray you are holding. Imagine further that you gently shake the tray from side to side. The notes stay in their respective strands but many (not all!) of the simultaneities shift apart. There is no predictable pattern any more as to whether a note from the bass, middle or treble strand will sound next. This technique has the effect of placing a light veil over what would have been a fairly straightforward presentation of a dance, complete with bass, melody and harmony. The harmonic rhythm (the length of time a given harmony lasts) is still very much intact and what one would expect for a given dance.

Spreading the notes of a chord out over time lets them ring into one another and is one of the ways composer/players took advantage of the resonance of the instrument. The result is not chaos, but subtly and elegantly displaced voices. And it is a fairly good picture of much of 17-century French lute writing. This texture was not something newly created. The written out breaking of chords occurs in earlier repertoires but usually only briefly within a piece, not as the governing texture for an entire piece.

In order to keep this kind of writing from sounding chaotic, the performer must be aware of how the strands were or might have been before "the tray was shaken." The performer must remember that, almost without exception, the French lutenist/composers wrote dance music, which the listeners expected to have a regular pulse. And since the dance movements were current and had meaning to the listeners, no confusion could have arisen between a Prelude and an Allemande or between a Courante and a Menuet. In short, the performer must guard against committing one of the errors and abuses against the lute described by the tutor of Miss Mary Burwell, an English student of the lute, sometime during the late 1660s: "the greatest error that is in playing upon the lute is to play too fast, and not to keep the time."³

What to listen for

The first thing one usually notices when listening to 17th-century French music is the presence of many ornaments. They were used to underscore passionate moments in a piece, to reinforce rhythmic groupings in faster dances, and generally to contribute to the spirit of the pieces. The listener should keep in mind that Gallot did not provide precise descriptions of how these ornaments should be performed. In these circumstances, I found it helpful to consult other lute sources as well as contemporary descriptions of ornaments for voice and for viola da gamba.

The next thing you might notice is strumming. More often associated with the guitar than with the lute, strums bring a variety of colors to the music depending on how they are performed: with either the index finger (upward and downward strums) or the thumb (downward strums). The tone color differences among the strumming techniques are quite distinct, especially when combined with variations in the speed of the strum (how fast the finger or thumb actually passes through the strings). The strumming that comes in a deliberate piece such as the *Tombeau de Mr. Le Prince de Condé* creates a very different effect than the brisk strums heard in the *Canaries les Castagnettes*. The *Folies d'Espagne* provides a veritable strumming feast, often combining the strums with ornaments for an extravagant effect. The strumming orgy continues in the *Cascades* by de Launay, only this time they are applied to chords lying low in the instrument and spiced with inner dissonances for an intoxicating and lulling effect.

Another thing to listen for is the subtle change in resonance achieved by plying a melody high or low on the instrument. The most common way to compose for the lute is to use the lowest frets (closest to the peg end of the fingerboard) first, and move up the neck on the upper courses as necessary. Playing on the low frets retains the longest vibrating string length for the pitch and results in a bright resonant tone. Another way is to play high on the frets, particularly on the lower strings, thereby producing a darker, less resonant, more veiled tone. Gallot found this effect particularly useful in his lamenting Allemandes-- for example *L'Amant Malheureux*-- and his *tombeaux*. An exquisite use of this effect is heard at the end of the *Tombeau du Mareschal de Turenne*; also in the opening of the *Tombeau de Mr. Le Prince de*

Condé. A third way concentrates the melody in the lowest strings. The ending phrase of *Le petit seraille chaconne* achieves its rich darkness through this approach. The opening piece on this disc also has a short section that lies incredibly low on the instrument and is very dark indeed.

The French love of sound colors also shows itself in the harmony and here is where Gallot, who had an uncommon gift for harmonic color, really shines. *Le petit seraille chaconne* is an example: The piece begins in the minor mode. A third of the way through the piece, the mode changes abruptly to major - a wonderful surprise. After five major-mode sections of chaconne comes a phrase where the mode switches back and forth between major and minor. The final phrases return to the minor mode and gradually work their way to the lowest pitches on the instrument with harmonies so rich they send shivers down one's spine. For another example, listen carefully to the opening phrase of *Le Comete Chaconne*. The very first chord has the dissonance of a 7th in it, and every chord in the phrase, except for the last chord, is dissonant, making for quite a daring display of harmonic color.

Passion is a word we rarely hear today in connection with 17-century French music. It is as if the French cared only about strums, ornaments and harmonic color while the Italians had a monopoly on expressing the emotions. Yet, in Mary Burwell's lute book, her tutor writes, "The lute is a modest interpreter of our thoughts and passions to those that understand the language...We may express upon it choler, pity, hatred, scorn, love, grief, joy; we may give hope and despair."⁴ Just as court behavior and customs served as a hiding place behind which feelings and passions could bubble, choosing to compose dance movements and applying the compositional techniques we have discussed above place an intentional veil between the inner feelings being expressed and the listener. The passions and emotions were all there, but subtly and delicately expressed and not "in your face" as we would say today.

Jacques Gallot

Scholars have come to a variety of conclusions about which of three possible lute-playing Gallots could be the composer of *Pieces de luth composé sur differens Modes par Jacques de Gallot*, the only printed source. Birth and death dates of this Jacques de Gallot are unknown, as is the precise publication date. What is known is that, of the three Gallots associated with the lute in the 17th century, one is referred to as *vieux Gallot*, *vieux Gallot de Paris* or simply Gallot; another is called *vieux Gallot d'Angers* and the third is called *Gallot le jeune*. The compiler of one manuscript, a certain René Milleran, a student of Charles Mouton, says that the two *vieux Gallots* were brothers. He also says that *Gallot le jeune* was the son of *vieux Gallot d'Angers*. Most recently it has been assumed that the music in *Pieces* was composed by *Gallot le jeune*.⁵ To my mind that is not plausible, since many of these pieces also appear in manuscripts where they are attributed to *vieux Gallot*. We can probably rule out *vieux Gallot d'Angers* as the composer of the music in *Pieces* because, according to some scholars, he worked primarily in Poland.⁶ François Leseur, editor of the Minkoff edition of *Pieces*, assumes that since *Pieces* is dedicated to a person considerably younger than *vieux Gallot*, the music must have been composed by *Gallot le jeune*. However, using dates to establish which Gallot composed the pieces may not tell the whole story. If *vieux Gallot* was not alive when the book was published, he could still have composed the pieces and they could have been assembled and published by his nephew.

The French Lute Unveiled

For the performer to bring out, and the listener to appreciate, all the subtleties of this wonderful music the right lute must be used. The lute played on this recording was built by Michael Lowe in Wootton-by-Woodstock, Oxford, England in 1990. It is a copy of the Hans Frei lute in the Warwick County Museum. It should come as no surprise that the Frei lute works so well for this repertoire. Hans Frei worked during the 16th century in Bologna. His instruments were very highly prized well into the next century as one can see in this passage from Alessandro Piccinini's *Intavolatura di Liuto e di Chitarrone...*, *Libro Primo* of 1623: "For many years now lutes of excellent quality have been made in Bologna, either through being made in a long shape like a pear or through having wide ribs, the one of which makes for sweetness, the other for harmoniousness; it is enough that for their quality they were greatly prized, particularly by the French who came especially to Bologna to take some back to France, paying anything that was asked for them, so that now very few of them are to be found."⁷ According to Lowe, "The long shape of the Bologna lutes...favors a tone rich in upper partials which is a great advantage in solo music employing a low tessitura."⁸ The clarity of tone this lute possesses makes it ideal for performing 17th-century French music, which does often lie in the middle and lower registers. French music sounds best if the lute's tone is even and clear throughout the range: the basses should be present in tone without dominating, the middle should speak clearly and the treble should be warm and clear without grabbing attention.

Stringing is also important toward this balance: the lute I am using is strung entirely in gut. For the low basses, I have used the so-called "loaded" gut strings made by Aquila String Makers in Vicenza, Italy. These strings produce more sound definition than twisted bass strings (catlines), yet the sound does not ring as long as even the best overspun strings made today. Even though the technology for making wound strings was available around 1650, which would have made the use of wound strings for the basses entirely appropriate for the repertoire on this recording, the wound strings we have today are not the best option: they ring too long and their tone tends to be too bright and prominent. This is fine when the bass line has its own "voice" as it does in the later German music, but in 17th-century French lute music, where the bass rarely has its own "tune," it is better not to draw so much attention to it with bright stringing. At this point in our reconstruction of past technologies, I prefer the results from the loaded gut bases.

Of Wainscot Rooms and CDs

The optimal way to listen to this music is live and in a small room. Miss Burwell's tutor says, "You will do well to play in a wainscot room where there is no furniture, if you can; let not the company exceed the number three or four for the noise of a mouse is a hindrance to that music."⁹ the tutor is not merely addressing acoustics. As we have discussed, the French way of writing for the lute is so rich with subtle nuance arising from fingering, ornaments and numerous other special effects that a listener sitting more than a few feet away from the player is likely to miss something essential about the music. Unfortunately, this intimacy of proximity cannot be captured in today's concert halls even with the world's most sophisticated electronic enhancement. Since one rarely has the opportunity to attend concerts in small wainscot rooms, the CD format becomes the best way to experience this exquisite repertoire. It is even better if the listener imagines him-or herself as royalty. "It [the lute] is used commonly at the going to bed of the Kings of France..."

Catherine Liddell

NOTES

¹ Ernst Gottlieb Baron, *Historisch- theoretisch und Practische Untersuchung des Instruments der Lauten (Study of the Lute)*, (Nurnberg 1727), trans. by Douglas Alton Smith (Redondo Beach, California: Instrumenta Antique Publications, 1976), pg. 89.

² Ibid, pg. 77

³ Dart, thurston. *Miss Mary Burwell's Instruction Book for the Lute*, The Galpin Society Journal. Number XI (May 1958), pg. 62.

⁴ Ibid., pg. 48.

⁵ Jacques de Gallot, *Pieces de luth composée sur differens Modes*, Paris, n.d. with Intruduction by François Lesure (Geneva: Minkoff Reprint, 1978).

⁶ Michel Brenet, *Notes sur l'histoire du lute en France*, Rivista Musicale italiana, VI, 1899, pg. 25, cited in Hans Radke, *Bemerkungen aur Lautenistenfamilie Gallot*, in die Musikforschung, 1960, pg. 54.

⁷ Michael Lowe, *the Historical Development of the Lute in the 17th Century*, in The Galpin Society Journal, Number XXIX (May 1979), pg. 15.

⁸ Ibid., pg. 16.

⁹ Dart, *Burwell's Instruction Book*, pg. 45.

¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 62.

Recorded May 1996 in Bigelow Chapel, Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Produced by Patrick O'Brien. Engineered and Edited by Brad Michel. Executive Producer: Victor Sachse. Cover Painting: Jean-Baptiste Santere" *The Veiled Lady*. Photograph: Michael Dertouzos.