



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Introduction

With this issue of the *LSA Quarterly* a new column begins, devoted to describing the various elements that go into playing the lute at a high level of artistry. While there has been extensive writing about the scholarly and historical aspects of the lute, there is still fairly little detailed writing about how to play the lute beyond a basic level of instruction.

“A Third and very Considerable Reason is, From the Closenesse of Masters in the Art, who (all along) have been extreme *shie* in revealing the *Occult* and *Hidden Secrets* of the *Lute*.

The *French* (who were generally accounted *Great Masters*) seldom or never would *prick* their *Lessons* as *They Play’d* them, much less *Reveal* any thing (further than of necessity they must) to the thorough understanding of the *Art*, or *Instrument*, which I shall make *manifest* and very *plain*.

Nor was there, nor yet is there *Any Thing* more constantly to be observed among *Masters*, than to be *Very Sparing* in their *Communications* concerning *Openness*, *Plainness*, and *Freeness*; either with *Parting* with their *Lessons*, or *Imparting* much of *Their Skill* to their *Scholars*; more than to shew them the *Ordinary way* how to play such and such *Lessons*.

This hath been, and still is the *Common Humour*, ever since *my Time*.

So that it is no marvel, that it continues *Dark* and *Hidden* to *All*, excepting some *Few*, who make it their *Chief Work* to *Practice*, and *Search* into its *Secrets*.

Which when they have done, and with *Long Pains*, and much *Labour obtained*, **THEY DYE, AND ALL THEIR SKILL AND EXPERIENCE DYES WITH THEM.**

So that the next *Generation* is still to *seek*, and *begin* again *a-New*, for such *Attainments*.”

As Thomas Mace wrote in 1675, describing the reasons why the lute had been difficult in the past: In the spirit of Thomas Mace, I’ll try to describe some of the “Occult and Hidden Secrets” that I have discovered – or learned from others – about the lute. I will focus on those aspects of lute playing (both technical and musical) that are not usually addressed in lute method books or in basic private instruction.

~Ronn McFarlane