

Sylvain Bergeron: Continuo and Celtic Lutenist

LSA: Can you give us some background on how you got started playing the lute and what kinds of lute music interest you the most these days? How do you divide your time between teaching and performing?

SB: I started playing the lute at the age of twenty-four (already forty years ago!), coming from a folk, British progressive rock background. After a short but useful transitional period learning classical guitar at Laval University in Quebec City, the migration from John Renbourn, Jethro Tull, and King Crimson to John Dowland and Henry Purcell came very naturally. Some of my guitar teachers were quite interested in early music, and encouraged me to switch to the lute. I attended a few, very helpful LSA seminars, and later on, spent a couple of weeks in Europe. Most of my training however was done on my own, so I consider myself mostly self taught. I played renaissance and medieval lutes for years, thinking I could do without baroque lute and continuo, which of course was pretty naive. Baroque lute, theorbo, archlute and baroque guitar came after that and have kept me very busy ever since.

Accompaniment on different instruments makes up a large part of my musical activities. I've participated in over eighty recordings, but of them only two are solo CDs. It's the same for concerts—ninety percent are playing in ensembles (groups of singers, consorts, etc.) or orchestras (baroque string ensembles, modern chamber orchestras)—quite a bit of variety!

LSA: How about a few words on which solo repertoire interests you now? With your Doni and Balcarres recordings you have introduced people to some really neglected repertoire. Are you finding any other overlooked gems?

SB: Solo playing for me is like a delicacy that I offer myself a



few times a year, when time allows! Once in a while I like to get back to the basics, just my ten fingers, and concentrate on some lesser-known manuscript. It reconnects me with my childhood dream of becoming an archaeologist. Of course, as years go by, the chances for discovering hidden treasures diminish!

In the last few years, teaching occupies more and more of my time. Currently, I teach about nine hours a week at McGill University in Montreal (lute students, a continuo class for plucked instruments, and early music ensemble coaching). Montreal has a very lively early music scene where former students perform regularly.

LSA: Since you are interested in accompanying other instruments and singers, do you play mostly theorbo and archlute?

SB: I use the archlute a lot because I find it very flexible for all sorts of repertoire, and usually keep the theorbo for Italian and French seventeenth-century music. It is common for singers' recitals to include lute songs in the first half and Purcell in the second half, or early airs de cour (Guédron, Boësset) and composers from the second generation (Lambert, Le Camus, etc.). In both cases archlute works well. Baroque guitar is often useful with this music as well—and by the way, I think baroque guitar is often underestimated as a continuo instrument. Of course its bass register is very limited, although using bourdons on the fourth and fifth courses is a good idea. In an orchestra the guitar really adds to the texture. At the end, the important thing is to feel perfectly at ease with whatever instrument you choose for continuo.

LSA: What are the most important skills for a good accompanist to have? Do you have any advice on how to go about learning to

transpose and improvise? Is it better to start by writing out the continuo part? How important is it for young lute players to be good at continuo now?

SB: Accompanists need multiple skills: technical, musical, and psychological. It is important to understand the role of the accompanist—you must be part of a team. Always be in the moment and support (in both senses) the direction the singer/soloist is leading toward. When I first started to play continuo, I remember being influenced by reading an interview of Steven Stubbs (“Reflections on the Art of Accompaniment from a Through-Bass,” *Lute Society of America Newsletter*, Vol. 22, No. 4, November 1987, pp. 7-9) where the role of the accompanist is clearly described.

Skill No. 1

Learn to read bass and treble clef to start with, but it is also very useful to be able to deal with a modern realization, four-part music, a piano score, etc. You never know what kind of edition you’ll be asked to play from! It will take a little time and effort, but it is certainly worth it. I don’t think it’s necessary to write out continuo parts. Of course, no tab is allowed. Learning to play in all keys, even the worst ones, is also very important. Sooner or later you’ll be asked by a conductor to accompany a long and slow Handel F# minor aria, without keyboard.

Skill No. 2

Show up to the first rehearsal super ready. That means that you have gotten the bass part and score in advance, listened to the works, added your markings, made sure your music was easy to read, etc. When well prepared, continuo players have a real advantage—other musicians usually learn just their own part (which is also often challenging).

Skill No. 3

Manage to be heard. Developing a good continuo sound (different than a solo sound) is very important. For solo music, we tend to look for a sweet, round, and fleshy sound. In ensembles, clarity, articulation, and volume are more important. You don’t want to be just that long thing in the middle that nobody could hear. This means you must learn to develop all the resources of your instrument and of your ten fingers!

Don’t necessarily play everything or play all the time; pick the moments, movements, etc., where you could bring something to the continuo section. Many conductors do not give precise indications for instrumentation, so it’s up to the musicians to make suggestions. Baroque guitar can add that extra rhythmic drive to the picture, a kind of subtext. Bass lines are often too busy to be played as written on the lute, so it is important to develop a sense of what is important to keep, especially when there are already two cellos, a bass, keyboard, etc., playing beside you. It’s better to put the lute in front of the ensemble, and avoid being blocked by some colleagues or a music stand right in front of you.

Skill No. 4

Have fun! Trust your ear and be creative! Once you get the basic skills and confidence, the fun starts. The feeling of being part of a great performance is highly rewarding.

LSA: How do you keep track of guitar, archlute, and theorbo in the different tunings without tab? Any tips on how to learn this? Do you start playing single line melodies to learn the pitches and then add in the chords? This is an important skill for lute players these days and it sounds very difficult, especially when just getting started.

SB: My advice would be to pick just a couple of instruments: one for solos, one for continuo, and stick to them. Of course, my own story was somewhat different. I started on the renaissance lute, quickly learned to read staff notation along with the different kinds of tablatures because I was doing ensemble work. G lute first, then D tuning (bass and soprano lutes). I kept the G tuning on the theorbo for many years simply because I found it more convenient, then added the guitar in E and a bit of d minor baroque lute later on. I got a new theorbo a few years ago and only then decided to tune it in A. I avoid mixing two similar instruments (like archlute and theorbo) in the same program, but can easily mix two very different ones (like archlute and baroque guitar).

So, through the years my brain had to adapt to about five different tunings, which I suppose proves it is possible!

LSA: Tell us about the advantages of continuo playing, and accompaniment in general.

SB: Although playing in ensembles leaves little time for solo projects, I really believe playing with others has a very positive effect on solo playing. You learn so much from good soloist, singers, and conductor—phrasing, breathing, articulation, contrast, drama, etc)—all elements you can integrate into your own solo playing. Developing continuo skills not only opens job opportunities, but really acts as an eye-opener about the performance and interpretation of early music. And the quality of the repertoire improves, of course.

LSA: You have recorded a CD called *Dowland in Dublin* with La Nef. What drew you to this Celtic lute music?

SB: I think it’s a natural return to my folk roots! I got the idea for *Dowland in Dublin* after having read an old article, “Irish Ancestry of Garland, Dowland, Campion and Purcell” (W. H. Grattan Flood, *Music & Letters* Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan., 1922), pp. 59-65). Of course, this is pure fantasy, but it is fun to imagine Dowland in a pub!

La Nef and Michael Slattery went even further with another project based on Purcell, called *The People’s Purcell*. <https://www.atmaclassique.com/en/albums/albuminfo.aspx?albumid=1595>, (See below for other Celtic CDs.)

LSA: You have recorded two solo CDs: *The Balcarres Lute Book*, and *Livre de Luth de Giosepe Antonio Doni* (for more information about this see Konstantin Bozhinov, “Q and A with Sylvain Bergeron,” *LSA Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 5-7) Do you have plans for another solo CD?

SB: I have two programs in the works; renaissance lute fantasias and dances from Besard’s *Thesaurus Harmonicus* (1603) and a seventeenth-century Bolognese music program on baroque guitar

(Granata, Pellegrini) and theorbo (Piccinini). I have played these programs a number of times but have not yet found time to record them.

LSA: In addition to playing continuo for others you also have your own group La Nef. What kinds of projects is La Nef doing now? Many of your earlier La Nef recordings are of medieval music. Are you still playing this earlier repertoire?

SB: Since its beginning in 1991, La Nef (The Nave) has explored all sort of music from different periods, different countries, sometimes theatrical, and always with a touch of creativity and a free approach. The current season shows this eclecticism: seventeenth-century Bolognese music on baroque guitar and theorbo; Crystal Tears—British progressive rock composers of the 1970s, and English composers of the seventeenth century; Cancionero de Upsala—a Christmas program with ten singers and instrumentalists; O’Carolan’s welcome to Sweden—with five stringed instruments, a children’s show, etc.

In the last few years I’ve been passing the torch to one of our musicians, Sean Dhager, also excellent arranger and leader.

LSA: What projects are you working on (or trying to find time to work on) for the future?

SB: At the moment I’m working hard to try to fit in my concert schedule around a growing number of teaching commitments. Even if the teaching is only two days a week, it is a challenge. The continuo class for pluckers is something I really want to develop and is quite demanding. I really love teaching and want to give it the time it deserves!

CDs on Atma Classique with a Celtic flavor:

Robert Burns: My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose (with soprano Meredith Hall) <https://www.atmaclassique.com/en/albums/albuminfo.aspx?albumid=187>

The Battle of Killiecrankie (with soprano Meredith Hall and counter tenor Matthew White) <https://www.atmaclassique.com/Fr/Albums/AlbumInfo.aspx?AlbumID=325>

Dowland in Dublin (with Michael Slattery and La Nef) <https://www.atmaclassique.com/En/Albums/AlbumInfo.aspx?AlbumID=1440>



The Montreal/Boreal Lute Gatherings



I started these gatherings in 2008 trying to bring together people interested in early plucked-stringed instruments. All kinds of lutes, early, romantic, and classical guitars, triple harp, and singers have also shown up over the years.

Beginners especially need this kind of encouragement and support. Here in Montreal we are fortunate to have an excellent luthier, Claude Guibord, who is always willing to help with maintenance issues. As time passed, these gatherings focused more on giving students and colleagues an opportunity to showcase a recital or exam program. We now get together twice a year (early May and early December), typically in the afternoon. About twenty people is the maximum we can hold in my house. Everyone brings something to eat and drink. Those who want to perform can play for about ten-twelve minutes and receive comments and praise from colleagues. An improvisation session on a ground bass usually finishes the afternoon.

Sylvain Bergeron

I came to Montreal it coincided with a lute gathering of roughly a dozen musicians, many of whom are his students. Not all are lute players—some are guitar students who are interested in the lute and the baroque guitar. Five or six people perform for the others in the intimate setting of Sylvain’s home. Following each performance, Sylvain comments on the performance, giving valuable guidance on better presentation skills or important insights into the music itself. While sharing something in common with the master class format, these playing sessions are never labeled as such, and therefore there is a nice fluid and informal aspect to them. It has been rewarding for me to get to know everyone.

Kenneth Bé