

LUTE MUSIC IN THE 20th AND 21st CENTURY

When we think of lute music, we involuntarily think of music from the 16th to the 18th century. However, from the first half of the 20th century the interest in the lute and other old instruments revived with Arnold Dolmetsch and later with Diane Poulton. In this section I want to pay attention to contemporary lute composers, their works and their interpreters. With contemporary lute music I refer to music from the 20th and 21st century. These composers combine a melodic, harmonic and rhythmic language with the special features and specific possibilities of the instrument.

Hereby an interview with one of the pioneers of the lute in Belgium. Pedagogue, composer and performer **Lieven Miscchaert**.



Lieven Misschaert studied guitar and chamber music at the Kon. Conservatory of Brussels. During this period he became interested in Early Music and soon he decided to dedicate himself to playing the lute and delving into the lute repertoire.

Lieven studied the lute in Cologne with Michael Schaeffer and in Amsterdam with Anthony Bailes and followed courses on interpretation and interplay in many European countries.

Until some time ago he taught lute and ensemble in the Conservatory of Bruges. He was regularly invited as a guest lecturer for these disciplines at numerous international workshops Early Music Summer Schools.

As a composer, he tries to integrate the lute into the contemporary music repertoire. He composed several works for lute and ensemble.

Some of his compositions :

'Concerto Jodoco', a work for 2 lutes and string ensemble, based on chansons by Josquin Des Prés.

Lute solo works, duets and trios.

Lute songs on poems by Flemish poets and a cycle of Portuguese songs on poems by Fernando Pessoa.

He performed with Meander ensemble, of which he was also artistic leader. Gilbert Isbin was a group member and co-composer.

He also performed as a lute soloist and was guest musician with the Orchester de Chambre Royal de Wallonie led by Georges Octors and the Collegium Instrumentale Burgense o.l.v. Patrick Peire

How did you get to composing for the lute?

As an adolescent I was fascinated in the sixties by the music of Shönberg, Bartok, Ligeti. This interest was the reason, without much thought, to compose in a contemporary style for the lute. Why should I write in the style of Josquin Des Prez or Dowland. In the 1960s it was, more than now, obvious that modern works were performed for the lute. For example, I remember a work with a lute part by Paul Hindemith and a Sonata by Johann Nepomuk David that I performed with great acclaim at that time. Chris Wilson also played modern lute works, e.g. a composition by Stephen Dodgson, 'Sketchbook For Two Lutes'. Dodgson had written this exclusively for Chris and Tom Finucane. The work only exists in manuscript. Fortunately I was very good friends with Chris and he sent me the score.

Do you use other composition techniques when writing a lute composition?

You can use for example a polyphonic approach, but the language is totally different than in the Renaissance. But as you know the instrument so well, you have a clear idea what sounds good and is technically playable. So you create works that perfectly match what a lute composition can be. You do not have to compose in the style of Stravinsky on the lute of course.

Does it make sense to write new works, there are still so many works from the Renaissance and Baroque to discover?

Why did Bartok write new piano music? There was already so much beautiful piano music from the romantic period. He also had to endure criticism when he composed a violin concerto, for example. Nobody wanted to perform it because it was not composed in the romantic style. The same happened to Beethoven when he published a work for cello and piano because it was written in the 18th century music style. He was criticized of having strange ideas, critics were not fond of this work at all. On the other hand, I have the impression that the best music from the previous centuries has already been discovered.

Can the new melodic, harmonic and rhythmic language really use and transmit the special features of the lute?

There are certainly good composers who can do that (laughs). But let the skeptics perhaps listen to the repertoire for recorder. Beautiful new music is written for this instrument and, for example, in Bruges the teacher pays a lot of attention to it. In fact, it's matter of opening your mind without prejudices.

Why is there so little new lute music written now, in contrast to the 16th, 17th, 18th century?

The lute now occupies a different place in our society than in those centuries. E.g. in the 19th century there was nothing written for the lute at all. It depends on many

factors. There are not many lute concerts and they do not attract a mass audience. It is a difficult period.

Until the 80s and 90s it was no problem at all to perform. There were a lot of grants for classical and new music so it was easier to perform in, for example, Cultural Centers. A today's composer may wonder, even though this is not the right way of thinking - why should I write for the lute, you put so much work into it and the chance that it will be performed is very small.

There is also very little attention paid in the music training to composing and improvising. This was slightly different in those centuries. For example in the renaissance it was commonplace to improvise on a bass line or a theme. A real professional usually played his own works. And if he ever played something from someone else, it was meant to be a kind of praise. If you play your own compositions now, people sometimes feel uncomfortable. Even in the early romantic period, a repetition was never re-enacted in the same way. The musical approach was a bit like in jazz music. The theme is never literally replayed and there is an improvisational approach on the chord progressions or around the theme.

Now we live in a restless and violent time. Can the new lute music get a place in that?

In those days there were also wars, massacres, rebellion. In the 19th century, a particularly turbulent century, Chopin often wrote very serene, peaceful music. And even now, despite all the senseless violence, attacks, the culture of fear, etc., many works have been composed for various instruments in which silence, serenity, he poetry, spirituality, are essential elements. It is a matter of, as I said, opening your mind and listening without prejudices.

How do you build up your compositions?

That depends on the medium I write for.

For a solo lute composition my approach is mostly intuitively. When I write a song I first read the poem a number of times and then focus on the content and atmosphere. Then a melody or an idea might come across my mind. This melody may or may not follow the structure of the text.

You have written the 'Concerto Jodoco'. Tell something more about it.

This is a work for 2 lutes and string ensemble, based on chansons by Josquin Des Prés written in a contemporary style.

For the first part I used the melody of La Bernardina as a theme, but I approached the introduction for strings and lutes very rhythmically. Then the lutes suggest the theme.

It sounds polyphonic but not like Josquin. The second part I based on Milles Regretz, but with a different harmonic and polyphonic accompaniment and the intro is played by the viola. The theme of the third movement was the melody of Scaramella, a mischievous song, in which the lute starts with the theme. The second lute then plays the same theme in sixths, which creates a very beautiful, intriguing kind of two-part structure. This was then followed by a third new theme from the string ensemble. This work was, with much acclaim, performed a number of times in different concert

places such as the Bruges City Theater. It was also recorded by the RTBF, Radio Namur, with a performance in their studio.

About Gilbert Isbin

Gilbert isbin composed some 200 works for lute (s) and 'lutesongs', published by the UK Lute Society and on Amazon.com. His book 'The Improvising Lutenist' will be published next year by Mel Bay, one of the world's largest American publishers. An English translation of this interview can be found at <https://gilbertisbin.com/press/>

Websites about contemporary lute music:

http://www.modernludemusic.com/Home_Page.html

<http://contemporaryandmodernludemusic.doomby.com/> Silvia Amato wrote a very interesting thesis about the contemporary lute. 'La Musica Moderna E Contemporanea Per Liuto '. An interview with Silvia will be published in the next Geluit