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From Sor to Bartolotti: An Interview with Lex Eisenhardt

Arash Ahmadzadeh

Lex Eisenhardt (b.1952, Netherlands) is a distinguished performer, researcher, and recording artist specializing in early plucked instruments, including the vihuela, baroque guitar, and nineteenth-century romantic guitar. He studied guitar and lute at the Utrecht Conservatory and served as a professor at the Conservatorium of Amsterdam from 1981 until his retirement in 2018. Eisenhardt is renowned for his pioneering work in Historically Informed Performance (HIP), notably being the first to record Fernando Sor's music on period instruments in the 1980s. His other significant recordings include the world premiere of Angelo Michele Bartolotti's *Secondo Libro* (1993) and collaborations with soprano María-Luz Álvarez on Spanish and Italian renaissance and baroque music. In addition to several articles published in journals such as *Early Music* and *The Lute,* his 2015 monograph, *Italian Guitar Music of the Seventeenth Century: Battuto and Pizzicato*, reflects his extensive research on the baroque guitar. Eisenhardt's influence continues through his teaching, performances, and groundbreaking recordings in early music.I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Lex Eisenhardt for agreeing to do this interview and for his generous cooperation in sharing his insights.

Background

Arash Ahmadzadeh (AA): I haven't been able to find much information about how you began your journey in music—an age-old question, I know, but an important one. Could you share more about your background, especially before you began your studies at the Utrecht Conservatory? Did you come from a musical family?

Lex Eisenhardt (LE): Undoubtedly, it has been beneficial to my professional journey that I grew up in an environment where active music-making was considered one of the things that make life worth living, and I guess you can say that my parents found each other in their love of music. My mother gave piano lessons to my father's little sister, who, the story goes, highly praised the musical abilities of her brother (a student of physics), and so it happened that they met and started playing together, on the violin and piano. In this context, it made perfect sense that at an early age I was going to play the cello, so that we might be able to play Haydn's piano trios at home.

However, as a teenager I discovered a recording of Andrés Segovia in my father's vinyl collection, with even a few dances by Robert de Visée on it, and I instantly felt drawn to the world of plucked-string instruments, as they enable you to play complete music all by yourself, with a melody and bass.

In the 1970s I studied both lute and guitar at the Utrecht Conservatory. Hans Verzijl, my lute teacher, had a defining influence on my musical development, always insisting that I pay the utmost attention to the vocal aspect of each individual melodic line, and shape the phrases, even when playing more articulate, harmonic dance-like music.

AA: What initially drew you to HIP? If I'm correct, your interest in this practice began with Fernando Sor and the romantic guitar. What motivated your shift toward the baroque guitar?

LE: As a student I found myself in a sphere of influence where the early music movement was particularly strong, with the Utrecht Festival just around the corner. The focus of interest for some of the leading performers had shifted to the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Coincidentally, at that very same time I had acquired an original nineteenth century guitar, as a very generous gift. For me, this was a good reason to get more deeply involved with the works of Fernando Sor. I soon found out, however, that the revival of the early guitar was not taken as seriously as that of some other period instruments, such as the baroque violin, the lute, or the pianoforte. So, as an aspiring first-generation researcher-performer I had to explore many primary sources all by myself in order to be as well-informed as possible.

My first steps on the baroque guitar only came later, in the 1980s. One aspect of the five-course instrument, apart from still being a guitar, was that recent research had revealed that some seventeenth-century virtuosi used their right-hand nails, which to me seemed a great advantage, particularly for strumming.

AA: You may have been the first to record Fernando Sor's works on an original instrument from his time and also were the first to record Angelo Michele Bartolotti's *Secondo Libro* (c.1655). Where

does your interest in playing rare and lesser-known music originate? How did you discover these hidden gems?

LE: My unconditional devotion to Bartolotti's work emerged quite unexpectedly. The first time I heard a performance of his music was when the late Peter Pieters played some in a concert in Utrecht. I immediately bought the Minkoff edition and, although I soon discovered some truly great pieces in his *Secondo Libro,* it turned out to become a long and sometimes difficult search for the composer's own musical voice, and how to shape it in my own performance. In fact, I have returned to Bartolotti's music ever since that day, and I still continue to discover new aspects to it. For example, I recently started working on what I call The Bartolotti Project, with new videos and an occasional article on the particular style of the composer.[1]

Regarding my interest in obscure sources: lesser known does not always mean inferior. In every book on the history of the guitar, for example, we can read about *Il Furioso* (Giovanni Paolo Foscarini). Despite that, the works of this composer are almost never performed, probably because his tablatures are difficult to decipher, and in particular the rhythm. Yet some of these pieces, however small, are truly exciting, and do not compare unfavorably to lute or theorbo music of the time.[2] This should not surprise us, as Foscarini himself was a well-known lutenist and theorbist.

The music of Domenico Rainer is another hidden gem. It can be found in a manuscript housed in the Santa Cecilia Library in Rome.[3] In fact, I first ordered a copy of this manuscript because I noticed that there is a lot of Bartolotti's music in it, which I wanted to investigate. Only later I realized that Rainer's works actually are very exciting too. I consider his music, presumably dating from the period of decline of the Italian school after Roncalli (around 1700), of paramount importance.

AA: Could you also tell me about the first baroque guitar podcast, "Battuto and Pizzicato," on Concertzender? How is it going so far?

LE: It started with an invitation by the Concertzender, a Dutch classical radio channel, to make a series of programs about the story of the baroque guitar. After those were broadcast, friends and colleagues from abroad asked if I could make English versions, as they liked the music but could not understand a single word of what I said. The staff of the Concertzender kindly agreed to put a permanent link on their web page and presented it as podcasts.[4]

Research

AA: Your 2015 monograph, *Italian Guitar Music of the Seventeenth Century: Battuto and Pizzicato*, has been widely acclaimed. What inspired you to write this book, and what key insights or practical advice do you hope performers will take away from it?

LE: The main objective for writing this book was to contribute to the understanding of how the use of battuto and pizzicato affected the development, performance, and notation of seventeenth-century guitar music. During the many years I studied the history and performance of the baroque guitar, I faced a number of persistent questions: What tuning do you use, and why? How have oral traditions influenced the mainstream—composed—solo repertoire and song accompaniment, and why did the guitarist often deal with music theory in such a casual, primarily very pragmatic way? And in that context, do we have reliable evidence about improvising on the guitar in a melodic style?

I also wanted to find out about the role of the guitar in chamber music and continuo ensembles. For instance, were accompaniments always performed in a boisterous battuto style? And finally, should we assume that the guitar gained a growing prestige, from an instrument of comedians and jokers (according to Praetorius), to the elevated position of the royal guitar in France? It soon became evident to me that at least some of those topics were treated in a markedly simplified and biased manner in much of the secondary literature.

AA: You've mentioned that one of the most frequent questions you receive is about your tuning. Many performers, myself included, often feel uncertain about technical aspects such as appropriate stringing, ornamentation, and tuning, even after studying the works of scholars like Sylvia Murphy, James Tyler, Gary Boye, Monica Hall, and yourself. How do you navigate these uncertainties when interpreting this repertoire, and what guidance would you offer to others facing similar challenges?

LE: The discussion about the tunings (or actually stringing) has been raging since the early seventies, and so I have had to adapt my ideas more than once. At some point I realized that, in order to be able to make well-founded judgments, one should think for oneself, and look into as many of the original sources as possible—with or without information about stringing—and try to plausibly explain any seemingly contradictory views.

Even if we would assume that in the seventeenth century they all had the intention to inform the imaginary reader they had in mind, in the best possible way, this should by no means imply that we should take every historical source at face value, or that they would all be of equal importance.

AA: More specifically let's consider the topic of stringing in Angelo Michele Bartolotti's *Secondo libro di Chitarra*. James Tyler, in his *A Guide to Playing the Baroque Guitar,* interprets it as using "Stringing B" (semi-reentrant tuning, with a bourdon on the fourth course) (Tyler, 2011 72). In contrast, Gary Boye, in *Performance on Lute, Guitar, and Vihuela: Historical Practice and Modern Interpretation,* argues that Bartolotti intended for his music to be played with octave stringing or bourdons on both the fourth and fifth courses (Boye, 189).

LE: An important issue. Perhaps the most influential contributor to this discussion has been James Tyler who, with his book *The Early Guitar* (1980), to some extent has shaped the thinking of a whole generation of players. In his list of works he indicated which tunings were most likely intended to be used for each source. He supposed that, also for most Italian sources of solo music in the mixed battuto-pizzicato style, the so-called French tuning was used, or even the tuning with no bourdons at all (i.e., fully reentrant stringing). Unfortunately, many of those indications were based on little more than speculation, departing from a misguided idea about the

predominance—especially in Italy—of reentrant tunings (both French and fully reentrant). On a personal level, when preparing my 1993 Bartolotti recording, Tyler's (then) undisputed authority led me to make use of the French tuning, with no bourdon on the fifth course. This is something I still regret, as with this tuning occasionally a true bass will be sorely missed.

The late James Tyler has put forward these ill-conceived theories in his influential handbooks,[5] as well as in *Grove Music Online*. Thus, an idealized image was created of a pure and pristine instrument with a unique reentrant tuning, unspoiled by "Segovian" booming basses. Out of a desire not to let this fallacy pass unchallenged I wrote an article with the title "A String of Confusion," in which I observed: "In any case, the French tuning. . .with one bourdon, is the one that is used the most today [also for the works of Italian composers], even though it is never clearly described in sources from Italy [the country that was the cradle of the hugely important mixed battuto-pizzicato style]." The reason for this is obvious: even those who are skeptical about bourdon tuning find it hard to believe that leading composers such as Granata, Pellegrini, Corbetta, and Bartolotti for their works had the fully reentrant tuning in mind.[6]

Monica Hall however, in her search for Bartolotti's tuning(s), states that: "Bartolotti himself makes no mention of the method of stringing he preferred—if indeed he had any preferences. The music works well with different methods of stringing and it is really a matter of personal taste which method is used today."[7] To suggest that a composer-performer of Bartolotti's stature may not have had a clear preference for any method of stringing is disappointing. By implying that considerations of music theory did not matter to him, she has paved the way for the idea that for him the music would work well with any of the methods of stringing known at that time.

As said, it is highly unlikely that the fully reentrant tuning was considered a useful option. Thus, only two possibilities remain: conventional and French tuning. That the latter would have been used is by no means self-evident, as there are no sources at all from before 1670 showing that this tuning was known and used, and no seventeenth-century sources from Italy support it. Therefore, it is quite plausible that Bartolotti used the tuning with two bourdons.

Hall's argument is largely based on the assumption that Bartolotti primarily applied his *lettere tagliate* notation to allow for the fingering of melodic notes (four-three suspensions among others).[8] This is in stark contrast to the explanation given by Gary Boye about avoiding chords in six-four position, a method that at the same time would serve the voice-leading of the bass.

Boye's article on the two Italian guitar schools, one making use of conventional tuning ("Foscarini's tuning") and the other of reentrant tuning ("Valdambrini's tuning') (Boye, 183), offered a welcome foundation for my own line of thought, still evolving, with regard to the prevalent tunings in Italy. I felt encouraged to make a CD recording with works from Corbetta's 1671 book (2003, self-published), simply making use of the conventional method of stringing, and not the French, without any concern for whatever views were prevailing at that time (respectfully disregarding Boye's conclusion that "Corbetta only dropped the lowest bourdon from his instrument" (Boye, 190). After all, the conventional tuning was widely used, in Italy and abroad, so this certainly must have been a historical possibility. We should keep in mind that Corbetta had used this tuning before, and that he may have kept using it himself, at least for accompaniment, but possibly also for solo music.[9]

A: You argue that Italian solo works for the five-course guitar remain underperformed today. What steps do you think should be taken to bring this repertoire to a broader audience, and what specific pieces do you believe have the greatest potential to captivate modern listeners?

LE: What first comes to mind is that we should learn to master "the Art of Strumming." Directly connected to this there is the issue of how to integrate the battuto chords in the performance of music in the mixed battuto-pizzicato style. The importance of this last point has not yet been broadly recognized. Inadequate right-hand technique can be one reason that music for the baroque guitar often sounds chaotic, because displaced battuto accents in a pizzicato context can potentially ruin the phrasing. The music will sound incoherent, as if the accented chords—often on unstressed beats—are not part of the same composition. It might well be, however, that a well-balanced and more fluent performance of works by composers such as Foscarini, Bartolotti, Corbetta, de Visée, and Campion, to name a few, can change our opinion on battuto-pizzicato music in general, making it more accessible to wider audiences. It could make a good starting point for an in-depth exploration of the repertoire.

Baroque Guitar Transcriptions

AA: From your perspective, what are the main challenges in tran-

scribing baroque guitar music for modern classical guitar? How do you balance the goal of maintaining historical authenticity with the pracalities of playability?

LE: Being faithful to our history probably doesn't depend all that much on whether or not we transpose the music—which is something de Visée himself often did to be able to play his guitar compositions on other instruments such as the theorbo. Also adding notes that are below the range of the five-course guitar—in order to achieve better voice leading and a proper position of the bass—seems perfectly justifiable.

In the end "historical authenticity," clearly a subjective concept, in the first place may depend on the musical universe a player is able to evoke. With a graceful, well-articulated, and dance-like style of playing, combined with a good understanding of the inequality of the notes, depending on their (harmonic) function, it should be possible to make a credible, eloquent musical statement, also on the classical guitar.

That said the fact remains that the acoustical features of the two instruments differ greatly, and there is no point in ignoring that the much thicker strings that became in use later in the eighteenth century— with a considerably higher string tension—inevitably affect the ambience of the performance.

Two notable differences deserve our special attention. First, on a baroque guitar four- and five-note chords are often strummed (battuto), while in transcriptions for the classical guitar they are usually plucked using multiple fingers (pizzicato), which affects both the sound and the rhythm. Moreover, many of the strummed chords will be in six-four position, which may sometimes be undesirable, and yet very often this may not have been perceived as a problem. The explanation for this lies in the unique nature of the strumming technique.[10] A subtle touch, resulting in a less focused, more ambiguous sound, can have the effect of masking the position of the chord.[11] The question is whether a similar effect could be achieved on the classical guitar, and whether that would improve the performance. It might seem worth trying.

And then there of course is the issue of the campanelle. For a transcription of certain pieces by Bartolotti, for example, we may have to uncomfortably force ourselves, while in other cases, such as with some of the works of Corbetta or Visée, who were more reluctant with writing campanelle, this need not always be a problem. We could consider to actually play the right notes, but not as campanelle, as occasionally it could work better to apply different left-hand fingerings, or to make use of slurs to compensate for the absence on the modern guitar of re-entrant strings on the fourth and fifth courses. In any case, I would recommend choosing your repertoire carefully, keeping these problems in mind.

After all, idiomatic instrumental effects—such as campanelle, but also chord strumming—were an integral feature of seventeenth-century guitar style. So should we assume that imitating these effects on a modern instrument will sound as natural, and still enable us to convey an image of sprezzatura? Or would we be better off without?

AA: What are some of the most common mistakes you notice in transcriptions of baroque guitar music for the classical guitar?

LE: Adding too many notes to obtain a more sumptuous harmony, which easily would make it sound like an anachronism, as "romantic" fingerings will do, higher up on the neck. Moreover, I often hear a very explicit flamenco style of strumming, applying rhythms that seem to be outside the scope of what the musical context and the tablatures imply.

AA: Do you think the baroque guitar remains relatively underrepresented in classical guitar education? What factors do you believe contribute to this?

LE: I'm not too sure about that; after all, the characters of the instruments are quite different. I would think that playing sixteenth-century polyphony on the lute or vihuela, for example, is more doable on a modern instrument (and would sound more natural) than the very particular mixed battuto-pizzicato style of the baroque guitar, which often would need major adjustments. Contrastingly, much of the Spanish baroque repertoire of Sanz, Guerau, and Murcia, predominantly punteado (pizzicato), may be more convenient to transcribe.

Apart from very specific elements such as campanelle and battuto sections, also the pursuit of a lighter sound, which could make an essential contribution to the desired atmosphere, may require a quite drastic adaptation of the standard right-hand technique of the classical guitar.

Final Thoughts

AA: As a pioneer in Historically Informed Performance for early plucked instruments, how have you seen the field evolve since the start of your career? Looking forward, what do you envision for the future of instruments like the lute and baroque guitar? Are there any trends or developments in the field that you find particularly exciting or concerning?

LE: The general level of playing on the lute has improved substantially, which makes some of the younger players a pleasure to listen to. Besides, a whole new generation of classical guitarists has emerged, who can do true wonders. Sadly, I cannot observe a similar trend with the five-course guitar. It is concerning to see that much of the core repertoire, like the interesting suites by composers such as Bartolotti, Corbetta, and Visée—apart from a few well-known top hits—are rarely performed. Instead all kinds of arrangements are played, including some of music for other instruments, which barely allow the instrument to display its true nature, while on the other hand virtuosic improvisations are presented, often with the apparent intention of displaying the performer's dexterity.

In my opinion, the premise that there is only one single "correct" tuning that should be used for all the works of a specific composer often does not seem to be based on a well-considered, critical assessment of all relevant factors, such as existing traditions with respect to stringing, the appearance of the tuning charts, as well as considerations with regard to music theory. Today, many seem to solely rely on the tuning instructions, and take these as a guideline in the most restrictive way. As a result, we might sense a paralyzing fear of using conventional tuning, even in the absence of any indisputable evidence that the composer himself would

have preferred another method of stringing. Occasionally, this can have unfortunate consequences.[12]

For the sake of the guitar's acceptance as a serious musical instrument, one would hope that scholars/performers will stay as close as possible to the historical information at our disposal by clearly distinguishing between fashionable modern popular styles and a more "scholarly" approach to what we know for certain about the way the instrument was used. Only thus can the general public achieve a well-informed opinion, based on both historical consciousness and plausible performances, without being swayed by the delusion of the day.

Notes

[1] https://www.academia.edu/128257218

[2] Listen to: https://tinyurl.com/577sfyk3

[3] I-Rama-A-Ms. 4912. See https://tinyurl.com/5ctybvdz You can find my 2019 recording of it on Brilliant Classics 95866.

[4] https://tinyurl.com/mvukensj

[5] Tyler 1980. Tyler and Sparks 2002.

[6] https://www.academia.edu/33410471

[7] https://tinyurl.com/222sr3ax p. 80.

[8] *Lettere tagliate* (cut letters) represent alfabeto chords (originally in five parts) of which the fifth course is omitted. Thus the note on the fourth course will be the lowest sounding note of a guitar in conventional tuning, e.g., the bass.

[9] See my article "The Guitar in the Sixteen-Seventies," https://tinyurl.com/4sdujk8c

[10] Compare James Tyler and Paul Sparks 2002, 40: "when the chords are played on a guitar without bourdons, any inversions are virtually inaudible. Even on a Baroque guitar strung with bourdons, the effect is still one of nearly inversion-free block harmonies." This still applies for battuto chords in music from later times.

[11] As argued in note 33 from my article "The Guitar in the Sixteen-Seventies" (see the link in note 9, above): "In his accompaniments in mixed battuto-pizzicato style [Corbetta] distinguished clearly between strumming and plucking. While the strummed four- and five-part harmonies (mostly former alfabeto chords, written out in tablature) can probably be perceived as 'inversion-free harmonic sonorities' [as Tyler had noted] in which the position of the bass generally is not an issue, this would be different when harmonies are plucked. With conventional stringing the vast majority of the bass notes of pizzicato chords . . . will be the same as the ones from the figured bass in staff notation, and even more if we would make use of the possibility to only play the treble string on the fifth course, for the 'middle voices,' whereas with French tuning the position of many bass notes on the fifth course will be 'incorrect.'"

[12] As demonstrated in my article "Robert de Visée and the French Tuning," in the section "Bourdons and Counterpoint," https://tinyurl.com/58685924 pp. 3-5, 2023.

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