

The 21st-century lute

Whether he's commissioning the first ever concerto for theorbo or exploring methods of amplification, **Matthew Wadsworth** is determined to make the lute an instrument for our time, finds **Martin Cullingford**

Ever since its origins sometime in the 16th century, its unique shape has remained pretty much untouched – a piece of half-millennial old musical craftsmanship, integral to today's musical life, mastered by leading virtuosos in their thousands (and played by millions more), inspiring the world's greatest composers to heights of creativity with its extraordinary sound world ... I refer to the violin. But why can this be said of the ubiquitous fiddle and not the theorbo, or even its more recognisable and even older family member, the lute? Of course there are differences – in the case of the theorbo, its role was mainly in accompaniment, and as for portability ... But such are the vagaries of fate. Matthew Wadsworth, however, one of today's leading lute virtuosos, is having none of it. 'When people, who are less acquainted with the lute, think of it', he says, 'they might think of Elizabethan music, or Shakespeare, and indeed there is wonderful music from that period. But the lute, it can just do so much more.'

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Over the past two decades, Wadsworth has been quietly but consistently exploring the lute's potential. Of his eight releases, three have earned Editor's Choices (under three different editors no less). The first of them, '14 Silver Strings' in 2003, was a theorbo recital of two early Baroque Italian pioneers of the instrument, Alessandro Piccinini and Giovanni Girolamo Kapsberger. For his 2006 'Masters of the Lute' recording, those composers' music was joined by works from Robert de Visée, Dowland and Biber – and the theorbo by an eight-course lute and 13-course Baroque lute (a course being a string or pair of identically-tuned strings). So far, so in keeping with the lute's existing reputation as a historic instrument. Wadsworth's third Editor's Choice, however, reviewed in August 2017, broke new ground. 'Late Night Lute' wrapped pieces by some of the names already mentioned around *The Miller's Tale*, a new suite for theorbo by contemporary composer Stephen Goss. This was no pastiche piece: from the deep, resonant opening notes onwards, we were greeted with a work whose use of the theorbo's idiomatic tuning managed both to somehow reference its Baroque origins yet feel mysteriously modern, even perhaps global, in its searching sense of unfamiliarity. It drew beautifully on the instrument's combination of delicate intimacy and capacity for strength – a poignant balance Wadsworth entrancingly captures across its repertoire.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. What happened in those intervening centuries? The lute, Wadsworth points out, was once 'really the most popular instrument that there was – certainly in the 17th century, when lutes were everywhere; they were in barbers' shops, people's homes ...' So what went wrong? 'Somehow it got too complicated for its own good. You went from the six-course lute to the 13-course Baroque lute, which is a complex animal. It was a victim of its own success.' The theorbo, meanwhile, complicated matters further, adding an extended neck and second peg box, its 14 courses and six-foot length offering more power when accompanying violins and singers and allowing for the deep bass strings that are so much a part of its distinctive voice. And as the centuries moved on, the development of keyboard instruments as the primary choice for accompaniment (and in some ways the evolution of the guitar) only increased the lute's decline. By the 19th century, the instrument had all but vanished.

And yet today, whether in the concert hall or in the pages of *Gramophone*, the lute is no longer an unfamiliar sight – for which much credit is owed to the early music movement, as well as some key advocates. 'It made a big comeback in the 20th century – the timing was somehow right,' recalls Wadsworth, citing the guitarist Julian Bream whose dual passion for the lute doubtless brought it to the attention of substantial numbers of his vast guitar audience. 'And then others followed – Nigel North, Paul O'Dette – who did wonderful things for the lute.'

There were two major hurdles to the instrument's full rehabilitation – the first being the lute's volume. 'How do you bring what is essentially a living-room instrument to audiences? I think there are two ways to do it. One is that you play in living rooms – and I do some of that, I do a lot of house concerts and thoroughly enjoy it. I think it really takes me back to what the lute's all about, just 30 people in a room.' Wadsworth builds such performances around a big concert or festival appearance, and they clearly inspire strong audience engagement – the lutenist says that around 70 per cent of attendees will buy a CD or an album stored on a flash drive. 'You're there with people who can talk to you, and it's very, very rewarding. So that's one way to do it.'

The other way, of course, is by embracing technology – just as guitarists have done (indeed, John Williams was instrumental in advising Wadsworth in this area). 'The vast improvement in amplification technology means you don't have to sound like an



MATTHEW WADSWORTH

in a folk group. I've worked with a Scottish fiddler, and it just lends itself really well because there's so much crossover between Baroque and folk music anyway. It's all down to not restricting our imagination. The 21st century is a really exciting time to be involved with the lute.'

Next month will see Wadsworth release the recording of a new theorbo concerto – the first ever written, no Baroque composer having attempted one – by, again, Goss. To his instinctive feel for the sound, tuning and historic resonances of the instrument, Goss adds other musical styles – from orchestral music that alludes to pastoralism in places and feels very modern in others, to rock-style strumming, to even some very bluesy bass ... 'I think this is the hardest thing I've ever learnt!' says Wadsworth. 'Once it's under the fingers, it's beautiful to play – but there's not a single chord shape, or progression, in the piece that I've ever played before. Some of the rhythms, they don't sound that hard, but when they're written down, you think: "What's that?" In Baroque music we don't play neo-soul funk bass ... Stephen has pushed the instrument way beyond where it's gone before, showing how the

electric guitar or a banjo,' laughs Wadsworth. After numerous experiments, he has found his ideal mic placement – 'aligned with the bridge, beneath the top string of the instrument, which seems to pick up all the warmth and all the right sounds' – before putting the signal through a pre-amp and finally into a stereo pair of speakers, which is 'what tricks the ear into thinking the sound is coming from the instrument'. Already we're a long way from the pure simplicity of Renaissance craftsmanship – but why not? The lute can now play to large halls, and even with an orchestra, and still be heard. A problem solved.

But then comes major hurdle number two: modern repertoire. With the lute having fallen out of fashion, no one had really written for it, let alone for theorbo, for a good couple of centuries. 'There's still not a huge amount of contemporary music, and certainly not very much really good music, but I think people are realising that the lute can be used in a lot of different contexts, just as it was in the 17th century. It wasn't just a solo instrument – it accompanied singers, it played in consorts, it played in operas ... And you can do that in the 21st century – it can play with violinists and string players and different groups of singers, and it can actually sound really great

theorbo can lend itself to so many different musical styles.

For instance, in the *passacaglia*, the slow movement, there's a sustained melody line in the theorbo, and I actually use a plectrum to make that happen. He wanted me to use a bottleneck, like on a blues guitar, to slide up and down, and it really sounded rubbish, but I found a way to get the effect that he wanted. But there's nothing gimmicky in the piece at all, it's really sincere, and just so well written.

'What I love about the piece is that it's also such a strong collaboration between the theorbo and the orchestra and also different solo instruments, because that's what the theorbo does: it plays solo, but it's also very much a textural and accompanying instrument.' All this poses challenges for the orchestra too, ones well met on the recording by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra directed by Benjamin Marquise Gilmore. 'Even with the top orchestras it's never taken less than five hours to rehearse it,' says Wadsworth. 'People have really got to be on board, and committed, and you get a much better performance because of that.'

'I've had really great feedback from orchestras and also from audiences – they love it. It changes direction a lot,



'Calmly undaunted': Wadsworth records Goss's Theorbo Concerto – the world's first, no less – with the Scottish CO

so it keeps you engaged – one minute it's a Wagnerian opening, the next minute you've got this bare landscape with the double bass and the theorbo.' The double bass is a key collaborator throughout: 'It's almost a double concerto,' says Wadsworth. That there was potential for a rapport between these two instruments was only discovered by the lutenist by accident. 'I was doing a gig and there was a double bass player there, and we started to improvise, and I thought, "This sounds really cool". So I said to Steven that I wanted a big part for the double bass. Because the theorbo is so busy going up and down the neck we don't use its bass strings that much, so the double bass is doing what these bass strings on the theorbo would do. It's so cleverly written.'

Wadsworth describes working with Goss as 'a very interactive process' in which they would discuss the structure, the texture, and the theorbo's relationship with other instruments. But if Goss's earlier suite saw him develop an instinctive understanding of the theorbo, it appears that the concerto saw him exert his knowledge with robust confidence. He was very specific about the string on which a note should be played, and Wadsworth laughingly recalls that any complaints by him about a section's unplayability were met with Goss telling him, 'Put your headphones on and work it out!' Goss is currently making a string quartet version of the work. And after that? Wadsworth hopes he, or others, can commission more theorbo concertos: 'This piece really shows that it can work.'

Unlike the lute, whose repertoire is so vast that 'you couldn't get through it in 20 lifetimes', there's not a huge amount of theorbo music, if you discount continuo playing. And while Wadsworth enjoys all lutes, it's the theorbo he's drawn to: 'I have an affinity for it – I don't know why.' It was actually the first kind of lute he played. Having played guitar since the age of six – classical, then electric – he was studying at the Royal Academy of Music when a friend putting on a production of Blow's *Venus and Adonis* asked Wadsworth if he could play

theorbo for it. 'I'd been playing Dowland, and similar composers, on the guitar. The Academy had a theorbo, and so I got hold of this enormous instrument and just wrestled with it. I phoned my friend up and said, "I can't do this, it's driving me mad", and he said, "Just come down – even if you just play one number, just come and do it". And I got hooked, and I just thought I could have such a rich life if I swapped over. It was a huge decision, but in my second year at the Academy I just thought "I have got to do this".'

Before he could, though, he had one further major obstacle to clear. Wadsworth is blind, and while he'd taught himself to read braille music notation as a child, there simply wasn't a system of braille lute tablature. So he invented it. 'I was very lucky that the lute scholar Tim Crawford was working at King's College at the time, and he introduced me to a form of notation that he'd developed for computer language, and I was able to adapt that for braille. It's transformed quite a lot since then, but I've got computer programmes where I can have an electronic lute file, and press the button, and it's in braille

already. So I've got most of the repertoire at my fingertips – literally.' He has since used the same system to launch an online platform at talkingtab.com for visually impaired guitarists: 'I feel that's been my contribution, to make tab accessible in a way that it hasn't been before.'

How Wadsworth's ambitions for the lute develop in the modern age will be intriguing to follow. So skilfully is Goss's concerto crafted that it would be entirely wrong to label it as a fascinating curiosity. But it remains the case that until there are more modern works for lute, let alone for theorbo, the instrument's presence with, or among, a modern orchestra will likely remain an unusual one for a while yet. Which is a shame because, as discussed earlier, when it *is* there, it finds itself surrounded by plenty of instruments whose origins lie in a similarly early era, but whose histories fared rather differently.

Wadsworth adds that modernity has helped overcome yet one more hurdle for the lute: that in an age of declining CD sales, with many labels seeing lute recordings as niche and unlikely to sell enough to justify their return on investment, the trend for online listening has worked in the instrument's favour; the increase in streaming and downloading, where anyone can access any music and audiences can explore a greater breadth of repertoire than ever before, has created 'a much more level playing field' he believes. Wadsworth will initially release the Goss concerto as a digital-only 'single' on the Deux-Elles label, home of both that debut '14 Silver Strings' album and his more recent 'Late Night Lute'. He's well placed to experiment with the release and distribution of music: last year, he became Deux-Elles's owner, thus adding 'label manager' to his CV.

Few people I've met seem so calmly undaunted by challenges placed in their path, whether by music or by life itself. If anyone's capable of making the lute an instrument for the 21st century, I wouldn't bet against it being Matthew Wadsworth. **G**
Matthew Wadsworth's recording of Stephen Goss's Theorbo Concerto is released by Deux-Elles in February and will be reviewed next issue