

lute requirements and idiosyncrasies

The first thing to say is that there is no standard size of lute. Intervallically, renaissance lutes are all tuned the same, but the actual pitches will vary depending on size of lute. In naming actual pitches, I'll assume g' as the top string, because the g'-lute is a common one, and because it's a convention to use a nominal g' tuning, even when the actual pitch is completely different. So, for example, my lute in e' is just like the lute in g' described below, only all the pitches are a third lower. I have lutes in e', f', f-sharp' and g'sharp' at the moment, and access to a bass lute in d'.

tuning (I will refer to middle c and the notes immediately above it as c' d' e' etc., and the c below middle c as c d e etc.; the octave below that is C D E etc., and the octave below that is CC DD EE etc. The octave above middle c starts with c'' d'' e'' etc.)

top string g' (single)
second course d' d' (two strings)
third course a a
fourth course f f
fifth course c c
sixth course G g (tuned in octave)
seventh course D d (tuned in octave)

This is a seven-course lute, which was fairly standard around the late sixteenth century. The absolutely classic lute, which was standard for most of the century until near the end was the six-course (my personal favourite). This is strung like the seven-course lute, except without the seventh course, and also with octaves on the fifth and fourth courses as well as on the sixth. These octaves are significant. They enrich the texture much as organ stops can. There is also the possibility of writing for eight-course lute (just insert an Ff pair between the sixth and seventh on the above example), or for ten-course lute (insert a Cc pair below the seventh in the above example, and Ee (or E-flat/e-flat) and Ff pairs above the seventh in the above example).

You will note that the intervals of the top six courses are the same as on the guitar, except that the major third is between the third and fourth courses rather than, as on the guitar, between the second and third.

Most techniques and devices used in composing for guitar also work for the lute, with the following exceptions:

1. fewer frets on the lute

The lute has twelve frets, so the highest available note is g'', but above the seventh fret (which is d''), there are limitations to chordal possibilities. I.e., large thick chords do not work so well above the seventh fret.

2. lute textures more spare

Generally, 2-4-part contrapuntal writing works better than lots of strummy chordal writing, although arpeggiation and chords can work well if it is idiomatic.

3. harmonics are not very successful

The lute sound is quiet and delicate, and the harmonics are even more so. Many attempts by modern composers to write harmonics for the lute in ensemble pieces have resulted in an inaudible lute part.

4. the lute is quieter than the guitar, and this has major implications for idiomatic writing

Balance: dynamics must be relative; the lute's forte will seem like mezzo-piano to a singer. So the dynamic scaling should be appropriate. The best way (the ONLY way, really) to achieve intensity and power on the lute is to draw the listener in, i.e., to play softly but with lots of attention to phrasing. Intensity is never achieved (as it can be with modern instruments and with singing) by loudness. Bashing the lute results in a weak and ineffectual sound. So when four recorders and a voice are sounding at the same time as the lute, the lute will inevitably be a background sound. Essential material is best not given to the lute in tutti passages. It's better if the lute is playing a sort of "commentary" in the tutti passages. Traditionally (for example in English "broken consort" music), the

lute makes itself heard by providing rapid melodic passage-work rather than chords. If for example, there is sustained music in the voice and recorders and rapid melodic passagework in the lute occasionally, you will achieve an idiomatic and satisfyingly balanced effect. This might alternate with sections in which the smaller subgroups play or sing with a more chordal lute part. This is just a suggestion, of course. I write it because I've occasionally had to play lute parts in contemporary music which were very beautiful, but (frustratingly) completely submerged in the texture.

I would strongly advise listening to lots of records of renaissance lute music before writing for the renaissance lute. This will give you some sense of its idiom, and (I hope) prevent you from simply writing guitar music for a lute.

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