INTERVIEW with Miguel SERDOURA, lutenist, about the lute in France in the 17th century



Interview with Miguel SERDOURA lutenist, about his new cd: « The Kings of Versailles ». By dedicating his new album to the kings of the lute at Versailles, especially the composers and lutenists under Louis XIII and Louis XIV, Germain Pinel and Robert de Visée, Miguel SERDOURA highlights the golden age of the lute in the 17th century in France: a solo instrument that embodies the taste, the education, the perfection of style and manners, recognized and adopted by the sovereign, the Queens and their intimates. But Miguel SERDOURA has done more than reveal the difficult art and virtuosic, poetic and contemplative side to this legendary instrument: the young lutenist, one of the best pupils of Hopkinson Smith, also through own project return to the lute the fame and fascination it exercised at the time of its glory… Serdoura is not only a subtle performer, he is now an ambitious entrepreneur creating a new adventure for the lute. Here is an exclusive interview with Miguel Serdoura about his new album: « The Kings of Versailles » a new cd to be published December 1, 2014.

Why did you choose Germain Pinel and Robert De Visée? What do we learn of the taste of Louis XIII and what aesthetics are revealed?



We have only a few recordings of French music for the baroque lute. This is due to our lack of knowledge of the life of the french lutenists of the 17th century as well as the style of their music. The choice of these two composers is first both musicological and historical. It is a question of returning the lute to the place that it held in the 17th century in France: the instrument of Kings and the King of instruments. From her childhood in Florence, Marie de Medici played the lute and when she became queen of France, she had lutenists constantly among her close followers. Jean Héroard, the doctor charged with constantly looking after the young Louis, the future Louis XIII, from the hour of his birth, provides us with numerous anecdotes that show the importance of this instrument in the private lives of the kings of France. Thus, Jean Héroard tells us that one of the little prince's first toys was a lute. At three years of age, in 1604, « he asks for his lute, brings it at ten o'clock to the Queen to show her how well he can play it ». A lute playing groom of the chamber (valet de chambre), Florent Hindret (or Indret), was from the first hour, charged with singing and playing the lute to send the child-king to sleep. Two years later, the king « takes a big lute, and has Indret stop the strings on the fingerboard,

while he plucks the strings ». When the young Louis XIII had regained power, the power his mother had confiscated from him, he had the Spanish courtiers and their ladies who surrounded his wife thrown out and replaced by a French court. It was Ennemond Gaultier who was then chosen to teach the lute to the young queen, Anne d'Autriche, who until that moment had only played the guitar, a typically Spanish instrument.



Germain Pinel (c. 1600-1661) was not only lutenist at the Court of Louis XIII, but he had the privilege to have been selected to teach the young Dauphin, future Sun King, his 9-year-old to the age of 18. Pinel then worked, until his death, at the Court of Louis XIV, after the death of Louis XIII. Until I made this recording, there was only a few scattered recordings of the works of Pinel. One wonders how is it possible, that one of the most essential lutenists of the French baroque, who held one of the most important positions in the Court of the Kings of France, could be so little today? After investigation into his music, the answer became obvious: Pinel is not like the other composers of his time – he is different. Understanding his music requires a deep immersion in his style. His music is nothing like that of his contemporaries (the Gaultier for example). The most striking example are the unmeasured 3 Preludes on my disk. Pinel's music is probably the most refined and the most elitist of all that was written for the French baroque lute. Each note has no meaning unless it is essential after full analysis of the sound and the style of the piece. I will give a modern literary example so that we can better understand the complexities of this music: Pinel is to French music for baroque lute as Jorge Luis Borges is in contemporary literature: extreme sophistication, playing with a great

profusion of references, claiming an inimitable and complex style. Similarly, the musical language of Pinel is immense, sometimes confused, but with deep meaning.



For **Robert De Visée (c. 1665-1732/3),** everything is much more prosaic: his music is beautiful, inspired by the pleasures of the Ballet so loved by Louis XIV. De Visee's music is direct and elegant. It is certainly much easier for the listener to understand. For the lutenist, it is 'easy' music but can delight in its skilled composition (one can hear that on the 2 Tombeaux on my recording). To sum up, the two composers summarize the reign, the style, the spirit of Louis XIII and Louis XIV. For Louis XIII, the music is intimate, deep, spiritual, reserved and discreet, very internalized, but remains modest in its presentation. But for Louis XIV, there is expressed the love of himself and easy pleasures – he was a megalomaniac (and a guitar player!). Louis XIII is embodied in Pinel, and Louis XIV in De Visée. And were they not all Kings of Versailles!

What instrument do you play? What are its qualities?

For several years, I researched different luthiers, different kinds of Baroque lutes (French, German, etc.), in order to come closer to the great Parisian lutenists of the 17th century. I myself am Parisian, and I tried to put myself in their mid and spirit. I studied the musicological texts describing how the French lutenists went to Bologna, in Italy, in the early 17th century, to buy lutes by Laux Maler, described as the father of all luthiers by Ernst Gootlieb von Baron, a great composer and German musicologist of 18th century. So I ordered 2 Laux Maler lutes by two different makers (there are 5 original Laux Maler lutes worldwide today). I play on this disc an 11-course lute after Laux Maler

built in 2012, by Cezar Mateus, a luthier able to transform my aesthetic ideal into the lute of my vision.



The particularity of Laux Maler lutes is obvious when compared to other lutes: the body is very elongated (somewhat tear-shaped); further, the back of the body is very flat, while all other lutes have deeper backs. The French lutenists prized his Lutes so much that they paid top dollar (the Italians complained at the time because they suspected buyers speculated on the prices of these lutes that they also wanted). In part they all recognized the great clarity of sound which was due, I believe, to the fact that the body was very flattened. A shallower body allows the sound to emerge more quickly. French music is subtle with many amenities. Therefore it requires clarity and speedy execution. The French music for baroque lute is infused with the understanding of the rhetorics. A speech that is able to convince its auditor is not a forceful speech with many words; It is a speech of clarity and precision. That’s what I’m trying to express through my organologic, musicological and technical research. But there are other aspects like the choice of wood (the best is always maple) as reported to us in treaties such as the « The Burwell Lute Tutor » published in the 17th century; the position of the bridge, etc…, Mary Burrell also tells us that the French bought old Laux Maler lutes not only for the construction, but also because of the great age of the wood.

Why play a lute is different or even more difficult to play than the theorbo or the archlute, both being more frequent in concert today…?

In 1899, in an article entitled « Notes on the history of the lute in France », Marie Bobillier writes that « amateur

musicians are tired of the difficulties of the lute; they are moving toward the theorbo [and/or the archlute in Italy], and the harpsichord and bass viol « . » In 1660, Nicolas Fleury published a method to learn easily how to play Basso continuo on the theorbo. In less than 10 years, dozens of other methods of the same kind, emerged, meeting new tastes, accommodating their laziness and vanity. Most amateurs, retreating from the serious and deep studies required to be skilled in the art of music would « decide to play parts only », as the Fox of the fable dismisses the inaccessible grapes. Asked, said one author in 1701, why they abandoned the lute, the instrument so touted and so harmonious, and which in thirty years will be more known in name only: they respond that it is too difficult.



The archlute and theorbo are accompanying instruments (the archlute was used only for Italian music, never for English, French or German music). These aren't instruments for the solo repertory (despite a few rare works written for them). This was true in that time and this remains true today. Technically, the archlute and theorbo are more accessible instruments because they are strung with single strings, like a classical guitar. Earlier this was often not the case because these instruments were strung with double strings – sometimes not the bass. But today nobody does, in order to make the instrument more simple and of easy execution. The lute was strung at the time, and also today, with double strings. It is precisely this that allows all the beauty and refinement of the lute. Also, and as in any field of classical music, chamber music is generally less demanding than solo (except rare exceptions where the composer wrote an obbligato part). Basso Continuo is even less

(from the technical point of view and interpretation) because it consists only to accompany or play a simple bass line to support a singer or a violinist. In an orchestra, the theorbo or the archlute today are difficult to hear on live performances (large orchestras, oversized rooms, small numbers – often only one player on the theorbo and archlute…). Earlier, the orchestra contained several theorbos, archlutes or baroque guitars to solve the problem. You will not usually find this arrangement today (the fault lies with the organizers of concerts and conductors who prefer sacrificing two or three lutenists and keep one for visual aesthetics, due to financial constraints, so they say). Continuo playing therefore allows the baroque guitar, archlute and theorbo players to blend into any sort of set and by so, there is an increasing demand (which is very positive). Concerts with the solo lute are rare because organizers are more prone to ensemble music with basso continuo because it attracts the eye and the masses.

The solo lute (there is more repertory written for solo lute than for any other instrument… before the modern piano) seeks not only a great technical requirement and musicality on the part of the interpreter (we are talking about an instrument that is probably the most delicate, fragile and refined of all the instruments of the Western world) but also demands attention on the part of the listener. During a recital of lute, it is not uncommon to experience true moments of meditation and pure contemplation. It is the strength of the lute and its music: it leads the listener into a very personal and intimate experience with the sound and with oneself. No other instrument has quite this ability. In this regard, the Treaty of the 17th century by Mary Burwall said « Of all the arts that I know there is none that engages more the inclination of men than the lute, for ravishing the soul by the ear and the eyes by the swiftness and neatness of all the fingers ». Mary Burwell continued: « In effect, it seems that the lute was only invented for the soul, because the soul is

soon weary and glutted of all other things except the lute. And if we consider all the works and handicrafts of the world, we will find that there is none where all the fingers of b!oth hands are absolutely necessary but the lute ».

How do you explain the lack of current interest in the lute? Neither festival, concert and recital organizers are taking the risk to program the solo lutenists? Is this linked to the sound of the instrument, the volume suitable only for small circles of listeners, at a time when they want mainly to fill more and more large rooms?



Several aspects need to be taken into account: the practice of the lute is still little known because those wishing to play still have difficulty procuring not expensive and good quality instruments… not to mention that they need to wait 2 or 3 years for a luthier construct one for them.

How to start studies from the earliest age, if you have no quality instruments available for purchase or rental? Also very few publishers sell music for the lute (almost everything is still in the libraries in facsimile… and in addition filled with errors). We can add to this the fact that many programmers of concerts today, and small independent labels, are no longer really artistically directed, but sell (without much success, by the way) and force the public always to hear the same works of Vivaldi or Bach. The argument of the organizers on how intimate the lute and its lesser volume, leading to the non-programming of recitals of small ensembles around the lute or the solo lute, shows not only a great lack of culture but also a lack of vision of a musical world richer culturally than just making noise and speaking louder than its neighbor. Silence is a sign of education, sophistication and a spiritual

quest. The lute is one of the rare musical instruments of the Western world capable of responding to the major components of the soul, and we must do everything to share this beauty with the highest number. Incidentally, I'm working on a large project (in France and the United States), with dozens of musicians but also business leaders from around the world: this project will be made public in two or three months. It is going to change the reality of the lute, early guitars and mandolins today, I hope, in a decisive way. But I can't say more for now.

In the 17th, how do you explain the favor for the lute? How to manifest this favor and this specific taste?



In France, as well as in the intimate circle of the royal family, the lute was relished by the aristocracy, by men of letters and also by the wealthy bourgeoisie. The powerful in the realm always maintained a lute player in their outer or inner court circle. Being able to play the lute was a guarantee of success in the eyes of the great of that world. At the end of the 19th century, the musicologist Marie Bobillier writes that « It is to stand out in some way that the Count of Fiesque, in spite of rather mediocre musical talents, began to study singing and theorbo playing which caused him infinite suffering. It is to flatter Anne d'Autriche that all the people of the court, beginning with the most powerful of the realm, the cardinal de Richelieu, wanted to play the lute ».12 Indeed, she tells us that « women in particular, all prided themselves in their knowing tablatures, and how to play this fashionable instrument at least a little, or if not to cherish and admire it ».13 It was in the Parisian salons run by high society women such as Mme de Rambouillet, Mlle de Scudéry, Mme de la Sablière or the beautiful Mme Scarron (who thirty years later

secretly married Louis XIV and became Mme de Maintenon) that the preciosity movement was born. Seeking extreme refinement in deportment, in ideas and language, the Précieuses delighted in subtlety of thought and language, intellectual games and discourse on love. These society salons were also musical gatherings, and as in the courts of Marie de Medici and of Anne d'Autriche, the desire to rise above the ordinary found expression in the lute. The skills of Ninon de L'Enclos, made her famous, while still a child. Mademoiselle Paulet distinguished herself through her singing which she accompanied on h!er lute. Charles Mouton, whose compositions marked the zenith of the French lute, was frequently invited to play at the Scarron's.



The lute was also the favorite instrument of an « honest man ». The honest man (l'honnête homme) is a model of humanity that emerged in the 17th century from the pen of moralists and the writers of the time. The honest man is a being of contrasts and balance. He embodies a tension that results from the search for balance between body and soul, between the demands of life and thought, between the secular (closer to the fashionable gathering of the Précieuses) virtues and spiritual virtues. The honest man in this continual adaptation must have the nature to lead. His behaviour responds to this fundamental imperative. It prohibits affectation, not trying to seem what he is not, strives to be simple, refuses exaggeration, and defends the positions of balance. The conception that the honest man knows is a direct consequence of the role that is his own. The diversity of environments that he inhabits obliges him to encompass a vast field of knowledge. He possesses enlightenment in all subjects. The moderation of the volume of the lute, but also the incredible versatility possible in musical discourse with this instrument makes us understand now why it was so appreciated and respected in the

17th century in France, but also all over Europe.

Translated from French by **Sandy Hackney**

Interview by Alexandre Pham in November 2014.

Read our presentation of the cd Kings of Versailles by Miguel Serdoura, lute (in french).

Read our record (special file) the history of the lute in France in the 17th century: a golden age of musical perfection (in french)

Lire notre entretien avec Miguel Serdoura en français