

A NEGLECTED MUSICAL INSTRUMENT: SOLO THEORBO.

Some notes, only to point out that....

By Lucia Domenegati

- Theorbo/Chitarrone has always been considered mainly as an instrument to play continuo in small or big ensembles. But since its invention, in the late XVI° cent., many composers have written astounding pieces for solo instrument.

A quite complete list of works for solo theorbo/chitarrone available in the world, including manuscripts, will be available on this website quite soon.

- Of course right hand technique for the chitarrone has always been discussed.

For example, in 1623 Alessandro Piccinini wrote that the right hand technique for the chitarrone is different than the one for the lute:

“(.) Dvnque douèdo suonare vna pizzicata nel Chitarrone...., come la qvi sotto regola insegna auuertendo che nò s’adoprano, che trè dita della mano destra a suonarle cioè il Pollice, l’indice, & il Medio è questa è regola vniuersale..(.)” (CAP XXIX) (Ed. Civioli).

In 1640 Johannes Hieronymus Kapsberger was even more clear about the use of only three fingers of the right hand to play the chitarrone.

In my opinion, the repertoire for solo chitarrone of the XVII° cent. must be played with three fingers, so thumb, index finger and medium finger, leaving the ring-finger on the soundboard. Many paintings and pictures could confirm this different technique for the right hand.

Moreover guitarists who studied Fernando Sor’s music should find this technique quite “familiar”.

- Also the use of double stopped strings, instead of single strings, has always been disputed.

In my opinion, the repertoire for solo chitarrone of the XVII° cent requires an instrument with double stopped strings, with an average string tension of kg 3 for each strings, leaving an average string tension of kg 4 for basses (single strings). A string calculator can help finding the right diameter of strings quite easily.

The timbre is different, but far more credible (more “baroque”?) than with single strings.

Of course a specific technique is required to play the instrument with good results.

- Only a few original medium-size instruments have survived (so suitable to play the repertoire for solo theorbo) e.g. the model by Matteo Sellas in the Brussels Museum (nr. 255).

I believe that an instrument with cm. 75/76 stopped strings length and about cm 140 for the extension can give best results to play the solo repertoire; bigger instruments can be used to play continuo.

- Many woods can be used to make theorbos; in my opinion rosewood can give good results; sound is bold and crisp and timbre is very credible. Of course strings are essential but right strings can be found only after a “trial and error” process and usually personal taste and availability can “help” for choice.

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