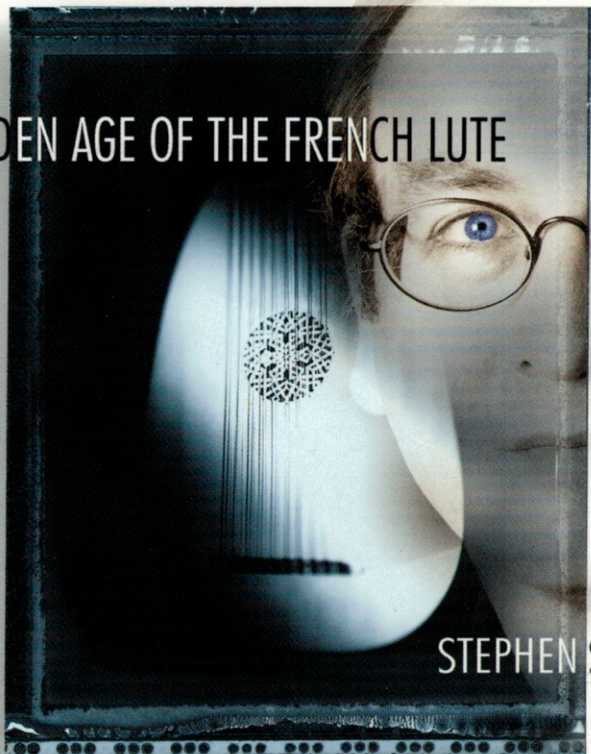
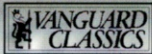


THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE FRENCH LUTE



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Of the many repertoires which have been brought to light by the early music revival, that of the seventeenth-century school of French lutenists has remained relatively unexplored and is regarded as difficult or obscure by musicians and listeners alike. There are several reasons why this music may seem remote from us: perhaps a conscious awareness of these will help to bridge the gap.

First and foremost is the fact that from an evolutionary point of view, the French lute school had little impact on later music. Though eclipsed in their own country by the triumphal career of Jean-Baptiste Lully with his theatrical works on the grandest scale, the French lutenists did manage to pass on some of their ideas to German and Bohemian successors; but even this inheritance was all but obliterated when the following generation (including Weiss and Bach) focused on Italian cantabile and teutonic counterpoint.

The second reason is the instrument-specific nature of the works themselves. All the seventeenth century music for plucked string instruments was written in a graphic illustration of strings and frets called tablature. But more than in other lute repertoires, the French sources (both printed and manuscript) are fastidiously attentive to the details of technique (fingering, ornamentation and the special effects of brushing and arpeggiating), so that transcription of these works for other instruments (modern guitar or piano, for example) is unrewarding.

4 Finally, the dynasties of like-named French lute composers can be confusing (they even confused near-contemporaries); the attributions in early sources are so sketchy that reconstructing the biographies of individual composers and relating them to specific works is a daunting task. As a result, it is difficult to identify one pre-eminent genius, like John Dowland in Jacobean England, who can symbolize his entire culture.

If the French school of seventeenth-century lutenists thus had little impact on the subsequent history of music, and produced no genius to stand alongside Molière, Lully and Descartes in the pantheon of that era, why should it be called a 'golden age', and why should it deserve attention? There can be no doubt that seventeenth-century connoisseurs, both in France and abroad, knew that theirs was indeed the golden age of the French lute. The Italians were supreme with the violin and the voice, and the Germans were the greatest artists of the keyboard; but the lute was the special excellence of the French. They took great pride in the quantity and quality of their lute music, well aware that much of Europe admired their mastery and wished to emulate it.

When a party of Siamese ambassadors visited France in 1687, they were treated to a private concert at the home of the lutenist Jacques Gallot le jeune and were said to be astonished by his talents. The fact that Cardinal Richelieu (the most powerful man in France, if not in all Europe) took lute lessons from Ennemond Gaultier is enough to symbolize the central place of the instrument in French culture early in the century. Somewhat later, Louis XIV would study the guitar with Robert de Visée; while this illustrates how the simpler instrument began to erode the supremacy of the lute, it also demonstrates a link with the golden age in the person of Visée, who

was also renowned as a composer for the lute.

The span of a century is usually an artificial historical unit. In the case of the French lute school, however, the seventeenth century precisely covers the birth and decline of this unique art. In 1600 Antoine Francisque published his *Trésor d'Orphée*, which includes an early example of pieces in a new tuning which he calls 'à cordes avalées'. Francisque's successors experimented with a great variety of tunings, and there gradually evolved the tuning we now call 'Baroque' (with the first six strings, or pairs, forming a chord of D minor). This new tuning was to be a characteristic element of the French school from Ennemond Gaultier onwards.

At the other end of the century, dated 1699, stands a manuscript collection of encyclopedic proportions created by Étienne Vaudry de Saizenay. The compiler (who described himself as a student of Visée) included in his two volumes not only the best of contemporary music but also an impressive amount of music from earlier in the century, including that of Ennemond Gaultier and Jacques Gallot le vieux. The anthology, like most French lute manuscripts, is organized by key rather than by author; this points towards the practice of playing suites of pieces by diverse composers, introduced with a prelude which was often improvised by the performer. (This recording retains this idea of the 'mixed' suite.) Even when a prelude was composed and not improvised, in the French school it took on a special style called 'unmeasured' – that is, without an exactly written-out rhythmic structure. This notation, which almost ensures a quasi-improvised quality, gave birth to a 'lute-like' style at the hands of French harpsichordists such as Louis Couperin.

One distinctive feature of the French style – its emphasis on surface qualities such as ornamentation, arpeggiation and rhythmic alteration – may at first seem to mask the underlying formal structure of harmony, melody and rhythm. Indeed, it is often said that this elaborate surface manner is deliberately aimed at mystifying the listener, and in our time some lutenists have taken this as their cue to develop an intentionally imprecise style of performance. However, in my experience (both as listener and as performer), the surface complexity enriches rather than confuses the lyrical or dancelike structure of the music. In an analogy appropriate to the land of haute cuisine, this relationship between form and surface might be compared with that between the basic ingredients of a well prepared dish and the spices and cooking techniques with which it is brought to completion.

This banquet of very special musical cuisine ends with the suite by Losy, in which pride of place is given to a full-blown *ouverture* in the style of Lully. The presence of this Bohemian nobleman on the programme alludes indirectly to the transition from the French tradition to the German high Baroque: just as the French lutenists often paid tribute to their predecessors through the distinctive type of musical memorial which they called the *tombeau*, so the German master Sylvius Leopold Weiss (1686-1750) was to pay a final homage to the entire French tradition in his *Tombeau pour le Comte de Logi*.

The composers

Ennemond Gaultier (1575-1651), also called 'le vieux Gaultier' or 'Gaultier de Lyon', was widely regarded as the father of the French school and its highest authority on taste and style.

Denis Gaultier (1603-1672), also known as 'Gaultier le jeune' or 'Gaultier de Paris', was Ennemond's cousin. He compiled *La rhétorique des dieux*, one of the most important lute collections of the seventeenth century, and in another anthology called *Pièces de luth* he provided 'classic' texts for many of the compositions of both Gaultiers.

Jacques Gallot (c.1600-c.1690), or 'Vieux Gallot de Paris', was sometimes confused either with his brother Antoine, also known as 'Vieux Gallot d'Angers' (who died in Vilnius in 1647), or else with Antoine's son 'Gallot le jeune' (who was still alive in Paris in 1716). Our Parisian Gallot was the most important lute composer of the mid seventeenth century.

6 **Esaias Reusner the younger** (1636-1679) was the son of Esaias Reusner the elder, a lutenist composer who used the old (Renaissance) tuning, and who died in Silesia in the second half of the seventeenth century. The younger man was a prodigy on the lute from an early age; after his father procured a French teacher for him, he went on to become the outstanding German lutenist of his generation.

Jan Antonín Losy, Count of Losinthal (c.1650-1721) was a Bohemian nobleman, known to the French as 'le Comte de Logis' (or 'Logi'). He was the leader of the 'Prague school of lutenists, dedicated to the French style, at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Robert de Visée (c.1660-c.1725) was the most prominent composer for plucked instruments (especially the guitar and theorbo) in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In the collection compiled by his pupil Saizenay, many of Visée's pieces for theorbo and guitar are transposed for the lute. Visée carried this idea of adaptability to its logical conclusion by publishing some of his music in a treble-and-bass clef format, to make it accessible to violinists, harpsichordists and others. This adaptation was probably a symptom of a sharp decline in the numbers of lutenists, theorbists and guitarists in the eighteenth century.

Stephen Stubbs

Stephen Stubbs, born in Seattle in 1951, has been engaged in music-making since early childhood. Parallel interests in new and pre-romantic music led him to take a degree in composition at university and to study the lute and the harpsichord. Further years of study in the Netherlands and England preceded his professional debut as lutenist at the Wigmore Hall, London in 1976. Since 1980 he has lived in North Germany, where he is a professor of lute and performance practice at the Hochschule der Künste in Bremen.

With his direction of Stefano Landi's *La morte d'Orfeo* at the 1987 Bruges Festival, Stephen Stubbs began his career as opera director and simultaneously founded the ensemble Tragicomedia. He has been invited for opera productions in several European countries and Scandinavia. To expand his repertoire into the late Baroque period, Stubbs has founded the Baroque orchestra Teatro Lirico.

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Production:	Kompas CD Multimedia BV, Zeewolde NL
Recording Producer:	Ted Diehl
Engineering and Editing:	Bert van der Wolf
Executive Producer:	Marcel Schopman
Recording Dates:	26-28 October 1998
Recording Location:	Doopsgezinde Remonstrantse Kerk, Deventer NL
Instrument:	11-course Baroque lute by Michael Lowe

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