

# Conclusion: Approaching a concept and biology of lute sound

What can we make of it all? The discourse has passed through several perspectives throughout the book, to present the arguments which are based on the following investigative chronology (here revised):

1. Historical foundation and interpretation of the building blocks (historical research and literature studies).
2. Present practice (and practise) and the past/present discourse (literature studies, artistic research and observation).
3. The instruments at hand and their construction and function (hard sciences, e.g. mathematics and physics).
4. How social context takes part in shaping the discourse (psychology and other strands of the humanities, group focus).
5. How we use tone production, based on the social context, to self-express (psychology and other strands of the humanities, individual focus).
6. How we capture and present our tone production through technology (technology, media studies and other relevant fields of study).

## Methodological review

Clearly, it is more common to discuss the methodological review in the introduction of a book, but in this case, the methodology was in the making as part of the process of writing this book. To join academic and

artistic practices successfully is not an easy task. To be interdisciplinary and not parallel disciplinary is not always equally clear. We need to balance in-depth studies with meta-discussions, and our familiar field of study with the unfamiliar. In this book, I set out to combine an academic approach with an artistic one. The result can, in some respects, be said to have failed, as it does not include any dedicated artistic products (such as films, recordings or concerts), but this was not my original intention either. The format is the book, and therefore literature sets the natural framework for the evolving discussion. What I wished to do, however, was to present an academic argument that included artistic practice in its *modus operandi* and presented ideas and statements that had not only come about in my mind, but also through my artistic practice. It was an attempt to address some of the issues that can easily be lost when only considering the academic or the artistic alone. In Table 7.1 below, I present my process as it unveiled schematically. On the right-hand side, we have my artistic process and how my artistic ideology developed, both before and during the writing of this present book; and on the left-hand side we have my academic, literary approach, which is also reflected in

**Table 7.1.** The academic-artistic methodological structure from a biological perspective.

Biological pathway	<i>Initial idea of what tone production is</i>	
	<b>Academic pathway</b>	<b>Artistic pathway</b>
	1. Historical foundation and interpretation of the building blocks.	1. We build an expectation and understanding of tone production through perceiving others.
	2. Present practice (and practise) and the past/present discourse.	2. We learn from others how to play (tutors, lecturers, colleagues, etc.).
	3. The instruments at hand and their construction and function.	3. We gain practical experience which we use to interpret literature and sources.
	4. How social context takes part in shaping the discourse.	4. We position ourselves within the collegiate through the practice we develop.
	5. How we use tone production, based on the social context, to self-express.	5. We find our own expression, grounded in our achieved position.
	6. How we capture and present our tone production through technology.	6. We are perceived by the audience who cast their judgement on our practice.
<i>Result: Our own concept of tone production and informed play.</i>		

the order of the previous chapters. Both categories relate back and forth within each column and between the academic and artistic pathways, in a sort of algorithm or flowchart. By changing the material and process of one component, we are also changing the result. This is also why the subtitle of the book makes use of the word ‘Approaching [...]’ because, as I hope to have made clear throughout the work, tone production is not static. It is not a result or truth, but a process. It is an interdisciplinary process that must consider multiple perspectives, both artistic and academic, to reach a present state that we feel comfortable presenting to our surroundings. It is a biological process in the sense that we study a living organism through its physical structure, function, development and morphology.

## Biological perspective

One of my intentions when writing this book was to better understand lute tone production from a biological point of view and its morphological aspects. Through this understanding, we are better equipped to not only understand tone production as a phenomenon, but also to contribute to new perspectives of lute performance and place ourselves within the very process of artistic development.

We can find important traces suggesting that the idea of a tone production concept for lute instruments was rather detailed and well designed, but it received little explicit attention in historical lute instructions. This concept naturally changed over time. It would seem that the closer to the decline of the lute, the closer the ideal of tone production approached the increasingly more dominant harpsichord. And, as this shift in preference took place, we see an increase in lute instructions in which more detailed information is given, seemingly to regain knowledge and ‘proper conduct’ among contemporary lutenists. The earlier, Renaissance stages of lute tone production is less well covered in primary sources. Although paintings are numerous and detailed, we can never truly rely on them as evidence. True or not, they do convey an idea of how they wanted to mediate sound, because indeed, as we have seen through Leppert’s arguments presented in Chapter 2, visual representations of musical practice

and practise are also visual representations of sound. I used visual works of art to unveil rhetorical trends in how musicians were portrayed. From this perspective, it became evident that the concept of tone production went through a morphological process, from placing the hand close to the rose to closer to the bridge; the hand position went from nearly parallel with the strings to a high arched wrist, making the fingers more directed straight into the instrument. The body posture also changed according to the shifting ideology.

Regardless of the trends we can see, it is still not possible to know for certain and with authority what the lute sounded like. Visual works of art, literature and tablature, then as now, all lack the ability to produce sound. In this respect, it is interesting to see how much detail we find in modern lute tutors. The development of modern handbooks seems opposingly proportionate to the historical publishing. While we find very little instruction on tone production in the Renaissance, modern scholars and musicians have produced a greater quantity of instructions, while in later times where we find detailed literature (like that of Burwell and Mace), we find fewer modern contributions. There seem to be several possible reasons for this. Firstly, the valuable motivation of theorising the unknown, unfamiliar and mystical. Secondly, the Baroque lute technique's closeness to the modern Classical guitar, making it easier to deduce by logic — it is simply more familiar as a concept. Thirdly, from my personal impression there seem to be more 'Renaissance lutenists' active today than 'Baroque lutenists,' making the publishing market related to the Renaissance repertoire more lucrative (for which there are several possible reasons which I will not treat here). The trend in modern performance instruction seems to follow a certain ideological morphology:

1. 'My way of doing things.'
2. The mechanics of plucking (from which proper tone production seems to be a natural result).
3. Descriptive language to 'fill in the blanks' of what is to be achieved by the mechanical actions.

Within this structure we find two ways of relating to the primary sources:

1. The ‘this is my opinion regardless of (explicitly presented) history’ approach.
2. The ‘this is my historical stance (without necessarily problematising or openly re-contextualising to modern play)’ approach.

With such a level of detail in today’s publications (particularly those following the mechanical pathway), it is interesting to question where that knowledge comes from when it is apparently not an obvious part of the original sources. Following this, we understand that modern practice is separate from historical practice, and that they develop parallel to each other without necessarily being equally related at all times.

Despite much of modern literature’s authoritative presentation of past practices, where we easily get the impression that what is described in present instruction books is how it actually was, we are rather witnessing modern interpretations and re-contextualisation of historical sources. Often self-published in some form or other, the personalised statements and approaches presented are more or less directly transmitted from the author to the reader, following a traditional master-student pedagogical approach, i.e. the learned presents a methodology that the learner is to follow. There seems to be little room for criticism, especially within the author’s own practices, and they rather address sources that seemingly support their own approach while speaking to a certain social group. Whatever our position, we must remember that Early Modern musicians dedicated themselves to the prevailing musical tradition using the contemporary instruments at hand, while modern musicians attempt to grasp past and lost practices (in the sense that we cannot call Mouton or Corbetta to ask them what they meant), using various techniques and instruments from different countries.

What we can relate to, however, is the instruments at hand today. By moving from the instrument-centric to the external, we are better able to understand the tone production process at the level of the instrument itself, its design and maintenance, and how it interacts with the surroundings. Tone production, both seen as a physical, theoretical phenomenon and as a concept, has through physics, craftsmanship and theory now become part of an external space that is very much part of the present;

it concerns the here and now more than the past. It is a tool for musical expression in a present practice. At this level of the discourse, we are able to make a stand in the past-present, authentic-unauthentic debates; and we make that stand through the instrument we choose to use. Our craft is strongly determined by the tools and how we take care of them, develop them and change them over time.

Deciding on an instrument, string types and acoustic environment does not solve the equation. Tone production is still in the making, because such decisions take place in a social context, in a relation between group and individuals, self and other. When speaking of tone production as self-expressing, I placed it in a context emphasising the personality inherent in tone construction where we can produce an idiolectic sound quality, one that people recognise as our sound. Through phenomena such as embodiment and empathic cognitive systems (among others), tone production as a self-expressive act is not only perceived and understood by the audience, but it is also felt. Tone production cannot, therefore, be strictly something that is directly related to historical practices alone, but historical practices can be used to situate oneself within the social context the performer wishes to be judged; they can be used to position oneself within a socio-cultural construct.

Tone production can address certain social, historical or academic practices and unveil our aesthetics, identity and upbringing. It is a matter between myself and the external public self-consciousness and public self-awareness. We judge ourselves through comparison, between ourselves and our colleagues, through our own development as musicians, and through the recognition we get for our actions and who we get it from. Tone production can also function as a performative, dramatic effect to consciously or unconsciously elaborate our identities. A concept of Early Modern tone production for lutenists is, then, not only about historical practice and evidence, or who has the strongest authority within music performance, but who we are; who we want to be; who we wish to be acknowledged by; what social formations we wish to be accepted into; and so on.

This is why recording technology becomes relevant in an Early Modern discourse, because we do not only perform our music to audiences

where we have the possibility of elaborating our practice through presentation; we also record albums. When an album is released, especially digital releases where booklets are often unavailable, we are left defenceless to the judgement of the listener. The recording process therefore presents numerous aspects to consider. Through a biological understanding of a recording as part of the tone production process, the performer may be permitted to better communicate the initial intent. Recording technology is the hidden instrument, the filter through which we perceive the music. In much vocal music of more recent times, it has become practice to use a microphone as part of the vocal technique, where the singer sings in a fashion that demands a microphone in order to be heard. But much of Early Modern music has remained at a distance from the modern, electronic technology — ‘Let technicians do their thing.’ By including technological considerations in our tone production process, we can enable more coherent and successful communicative results.

## **Conceptual understanding and *post scriptum***

Clearly, there is not one true concept of Early Modern lute tone production, only competing concepts; concepts that resonate and create friction between one another, and concepts that constantly develop, mature and change. A biological understanding of the matter can help unveil and relate to this ideological, pedagogical and aesthetic flux. It is at the very nexus of this flux where informed play becomes important. Informed play is not a truth, nor a proper conduct; it is a conceptual understanding of a biological morphology that positions and presents the performer in a manner of their own choosing. From this position, the performer can shout to the world: ‘this is me and my new approach.’ They can remain undetected by conforming to already-accepted practices or any variation in-between. The point is not where the position is taken or how it actually sounds, but that an informed decision is made in which the performer feels confident with their own practice and can make an account of the ‘how, when and where’ of their personal expression. If tone production is a way to self-express, it must also preserve the self in its expression. Personally, I find this to be a true treasure for future lute performance, regardless

of where the lutenist positions themselves between social groups, academic affiliation or in questions relating to authenticity, HIP (i.e. Historically Informed Performance) or some sort of post-HIP. This is because, in a world of selfies, hashtags and life-tracking (such as pulse watches, step counters and workout log apps),<sup>1</sup> what seems to preoccupy the contemporary audience in the Western world, at least, is the personal, self-expressing and non-institutional. Changed profile pictures and photographs of a lunch in social media receives more attention and engagement than a shared, recent academic study. This is the world we currently live in and this is, in part, our audience. By reviewing the biological process of tone production and having a conceptual understanding of it to inform our self-expressive play, it can be artistically very interesting to join the public discourse and dare to ask what we have done, what we are doing and what it can possibly become. Can self-expressiveness, informed play and academic innovation not only strengthen the position of the performing artist, but also create new audiences and inspire them to invest interest in Early Modern music? I believe so, and I think informed play is a good place to start.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Jill Walker Rettberg's book on the subject: Rettberg, J.W., *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) Kindle book.