

OBJECT-BASED ORGANOLOGY: RETRACING THE LUTES DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ARTISANSHIP

Tracing the development of the lute, one of the most iconic instruments of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, requires more than just a study of texts. Through hands-on engagement with the materials and methods of luthiers, a unique form of knowledge emerges—one where the feeling of wood, the tension of strings, and the craft of shaping sound reveals insights inaccessible through written records alone. This research embraces the lute as both artifact and teacher, uncovering its developmental history through the artisanship that brought it to life.

Introduction

Organology has traditionally relied on **written sources**, but many subtleties of an instruments' build, function, sound and cultural context are better understood through hands-on experience. While historical texts describe the lute's form and function, it's the process of building, restoring and playing these instruments that truly illuminates their historical and cultural evolution. Very little has been written down of the **artisanal knowledge** gathered over generations of lute-makers about the building and design concepts of lutes, how instrumentmakers arrived at solutions and overcame technical shortcomings from the materials available at that time or with what concepts in mind they designed and redesigned lutes is still very unclear.



Inspiration

In *The Body of the Artisan*, dr. Pamela H. Smith argues that artisans gained knowledge by engaging directly with materials – cutting roses, cooking varnish, tuning soundboards. Their insights were derived from the **processes of making** rather than from written treatises or formal education. A lutemaker in the 18th century would understand the qualities of wood-types and acoustics through the physical act of constructing the instrument, gaining a feel for its sound and structure. This **tacit knowledge** is often unspoken and hard to convey in words. It is knowledge that lives in the hands and bodies, passed down through apprenticeship and practice rather than books. **Sensory engagement** is a crucial component here: artisans always relied heavily on touch, sight and hearing to judge the quality of their work.

Focus

In this research I focus on the **technical development of the lute** at the end of its glory days in the first half of the 18th century. This period was riddled with experimentation in the design and concept of the lute to keep up with the changing times. Most, if not all, of these experiments and the envisioned concepts were never written down by the makers and solely exist in the form of extant instruments or texts from non-luthiers. By engaging directly with the process of lute-making, a form of historical knowledge can be accessed that was lived rather than described.

“For who could be taught the knowledge of experience from paper? Since paper has the property to produce lazy and sleepy people, who are haughty and learn to persuade themselves and to fly without wings... Therefore the most fundamental thing is to hasten to experience”

- Paracelsus (1493 – 1541)

Aim and Methodology

By building on the work of Pamela Smith, I aim to uncover and evaluate this tacit knowledge. By combining this '**artisanal epistemology**' with modern measuring and testing methods, the underlying concepts can be unveiled and evaluated. This approach provides a deeper understanding of the lute's acoustic qualities and peculiarities, materials and design.

With the use of several prototypes, acoustic principles and concepts that shaped the lute, are evaluated and quantised. With this experiential research perspectives can be offered that purely textual analysis might miss.

In the end, a new experimental model will be designed, driven by the information found during the research.



Principle source material

- Extant instruments for the first half of the 18th century preserved in numerous museums across the world, the most important ones are: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Scenkonstmuseet, Grassi Museum, Yale University, National Music Museum Vermillion, Cité de la musique
- Historical and modern written sources
- Iconography

Goals

1. 6 finished new lutes based on the knowledge gathered
2. New/adapted methodologies for acoustic testing and documenting of lutes
3. New/adapted methodologies for artisanal research
4. Collection of articles that help luthiers understand the underlying principles of the lute and help researchers get access to this artisanal knowledge
5. A thesis that combines this information with my own insights and experiments to help bring the lute into the 21st century

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