

Laux Maler was the most famous and sought-after of the 16th century Italian lutemakers, whose instruments commanded huge prices more than a century after they were built (by which time they were being converted into 11c lutes). Of the thousand lutes and parts of lutes present in the Maler workshop in Bologna when the master died in 1552, only five appear to have survived. One of them (in the V&A) is only a back, the others are only backs and soundboards, and a recent discovery (now in Paris) appears to have its original soundboard, albeit with more recent barring. All of the surviving Maler lutes have the long thin body shape (like a pear, or the “pearl mould” as Thomas Mace has it) which is in contrast to the more rounded shape of the Venetian and Paduan lutes of the late 16th century. In modern times this shape has been associated with Bolognese lutes, but in fact this shape was used by many early-mid 16th century makers elsewhere (Laux Bosch in Schongau, for example). Piccinini (1623) seems to imply that there were different shapes of lutes made in Bologna, some of them “sweet” and others “harmonious”; an intriguing indication that different lute shapes were valued for different characteristics and a challenge to us to guess what those characteristics were.

Maler was already well-established by 1523, when Duke Federico Gonzaga asked his brother to order a lute from Maler on his behalf. Even Maler’s varnish was famous – in 1526 the Duke of Ferrara asked his ambassador to Venice to obtain the recipe from Laux’s brother Sigismondo.

As we would expect, Maler built lutes in a variety of sizes. The inventory of his workshop, taken shortly after his death, lists over a thousand lutes and parts of lutes, of which about two-thirds are described as “large”, one-third “small”, and just a small number as “medium”. However, it may be that the medium size was the most common size, with the others specified more often because they were exceptional. Constantijn Huyghens wrote in 1647 that “they are all for the most part of medium size and not suitable for accompanying singing”. Huyghens also attested to the rarity of Maler’s lutes: “...I believe that there are not fifty of them in the whole world: as for here [England] I am certain that there are not six of them”.

Alessandro Piccinini, 1623

Cap. XXVIII

Gia molti anni sono che in Bologna, si facevano liuti di bontà molto eccellenti ò fosse l’esser fatti di forma lunga à similitudine di pera, ò fosse l’haver le coste larghe, che l’uno fa dolce, e l’altro armonioso; basta che, per la lor bontà erano molto stimati, & in particolare da i francesi, i quali son venuti à posta a Bologna, per portarne in Francia pagandoli tutto quello che era loro domandato, talche pochissimi hora se ne trovano; & oltre di cio si facevano liuti grandissimi, che in Bologna erano molto apprezzati, per suonare in concerto con altri Liuti piccoli passamezi, Arie, & altre simili.

[p.5]

For many years in Bologna they have been making lutes of very excellent quality which were made either in a long shape like a pear, or with broad ribs, such that one was sweet, the other harmonious. Needless to say, because of their quality they were much esteemed, and in particular by the French, some of whom came on purpose to Bologna, to take them back to France, paying any price that was asked of them, so that very few can now be found. Other than these they made very large lutes, which

in Bologna were much appreciated, to play together with other small lutes passamezzi, arie and other similar things.

Burwell Lute Tutor, c.1670 [punctuation and paragraphs editorial]

Of the increase of the lute and its shape

Tis to be beleevd that at the first the body of the lute was of one peece but since to give him the figure of a peare they have made it of severall peeces which they call ribbes as of a muskemillion [musk melon].

Notwithstanding there is a great dispute amongst the modernes concerning the shape of the lute. Some will have it somewhat roundish, the riseing in the middle of the backe and sloping of each syde, as wee see the lutes of Monsieur DeMoulins of Paris which are very good and were sold at first for 20l and sold still for tenne or twelve. The reason is that the lute soe framed is capable of more sound because of his concavity and that the sound not keeping in the deepe and hollow bottome but contrariwise being put forth by the straightnes of the sydes towards the middle and soe to the rose from whence it issues greater and with more impetuosity. The other have for their defense and reason the handsomnes of the figure of the peare, the comelines of it because being more flatt in the backe they lye better upon the stomache and doe not indanger people to growe crooked, besides all Bolonia lutes are in the shape of a pare and those are the best lutes but there goodnes is not attributed to there figure but to there antiquity, to the skill of those lutemakers, to the quality of the woods and seasoning of it and to the varnishing of it. The Bolonia lutes are knowne by there shape and varnish which is darkish red. Laux Mauller and Hunts frith have beene the twoe cheifest lutemakers that have lived at Bolonia who have rendered there names immortall by the melodious sound of that famous instrument and will still make them resound through all the earth as long as it will please God to mainetayne the harmony of the universe.

2nd section

The lutes of Padua are something roundish and like those of Monsieur DesMolins therefore there sound is greater then those of Bolonia which are very sweete. Those of Florence and Venice are betweene both of them shapes but sound nothing neare to those of Bolonia. For the moderne lutes, that is those made in our dayes, they are made onely in France and very few are good for any thing. The neck of the lute at first was not broader than that of a mandore and has but seaven double strings but has been made bigger by little and little and the head of it soe extreemely increased that the best masters of the lute have beene inforced to take of some of the stringes to bring it to a moderate use as wee shall demonstrate heerafter in its owne place. [this seems to refer to the later section where it is stated that the double-headed 12-course lute was adopted, then rejected, by the French, who returned to the 11-course lute with a single head]

The lutes of Bolonia and the other good lutes are to have but seaven ribbs and at the most nyne or eleaven notwithstanding there have beene some Dutch who instead of followeing those examples have made lutes with six and thirty, and 38 ribbes more or lesse. The reason why the fewer ribbes make the best lutes is that many ribbes must need a great deal of glasse [glue] to be joyned together which makes the lute dull.

We have lutes that wee call cutt lutes that is when of a great lute they will make a little one which is done in cutting of something of the bredth and length of every ribb and then joyning them together uppon a little mould. A lute of twenty pound lessened soe is not worth 5l.

The lutes of gold, silver, ebony, ivory, are adorned with mother of pearle or such like are worth nothing because a lute must be made of a wood that is poorest [porous?] and crabb wood is the best wood. It must be sawne in tenne ribbes [9 ribs plus the endclasp?] and kept dry many yeares before it be fitt to make lutes. The biggest comonly are made of ebony but those are not the best, noe more is ivory because it is too hard and those pegges are never fast to the lute, cheifely in dry or frosty weather they fly from the head of the lute when none meddle with it. Those of plombtree wood are the best, hard enough to endure the turning of

the pegges and sticke likewise soe well to the hole wheare the pegges are that it never flyes from it.

The flatt part of the necke of the lute [fingerboard] and the bridge are to be made of ebony, but to cover the head, the neck of the neck with it as some doe tis improper because it makes the lute too heavy upon the left hand, the neck cold and slippery for the thumbe and the frettes are never fast. A neck made of a light wood with a fine varnish as neare as may be to the colour of the lute is better but you must keepe it cleane.

And on the use of a single 11th course:

Concerneing the Eleaventh string which is the last Base the good Masters of the Lute doe use onely the Octave that is the little one because the Eleaventh Base is a superfluous string that has beene added to the Lute of late to give ease to the hand, for the D [tablature letter d] of the sixth is the same thing with the Eleaventh [the same note as the open 11th] and if we must stoppe a string belowe the neck with the D of the Sixth tis hard and sometimes impossible to doe it, then we use the Eleaventh instead of the D of the Sixth therefore it were necessary to discharge the Lute of that burthen.

Makeing the bridge and the Nutt smaller and takeing from the head the superfluous pegges the Lute would sound the better and the hands would find more ease. The Eleaventh string being alone ought to be something bigger then if it were an Octave his bignes must be betweene the size of the fifth and the great of the Sixth. The Lutemasters have taken away that great string because the sound of it is too bigg and smothers the sound of the others.

[f.8]

Thomas Mace, Musick's Monument, 1676 [capitalization modernized]

There are diversities of mens names in lutes; but the chief name we most esteem, is Laux Maller, ever written with text letters: two of which lutes I have seen (pittiful old, batter'd, crack'd things) valued at 100l. a piece. Mr. Gootiere, the famous lutenist in his time, shew'd me one of them, which the King paid 100l. for. And Mr. Edw. Jones (one of Mr. Gootiere's scholars) had the other, which he so valued; and made a bargain with a merchant, who desired to have it with him in his travels, (for his experience;) and if he lik'd it when he returned, was to give Mr. Jones 100l. for it; but if he refus'd it at the price set, he was to return the lute safe, and to pay 20l. for his experience and use of it, for that journey. I have often seen lutes of three or four pounds price, far more illustrious and taking, to the common eye. Therefore I say, it is a difficult thing for an unexperienc'd person to chuse a good lute.

The next thing to be observed is, the shape of the lute. The shape generally esteemed, is the pearl-mould; yet I have known very excellent good ones of several shapes or moulds: but I do acknowledge for constancy, the pearl-mould is best, both for sound, and comliness, as also for the more conveniency in holding or using.

Then again observe the number of ribbs. The compleat number (most esteemed) is nine; yet there are very good ones of several numbers.

Next, what wood is best for the ribbs. The air-wood is absolutely the best. And next to that, our English maple. But there are very good lutes of several woods; as plum-tree, pear-tree, yew, rosemary-air, ash, ebony, and ivory, &c. The two last (though most costly, and taking to the common eye) are the worst.

Next, observe the colour; which is the dark-black-reddish-colour; though I believe it contributes nothing at all to the sound; only the best authors did use to lay on that colour, especially Laux Maller.

[pp.48-49]

Ernst Gottlieb Baron, The study of the lute, 1727 [translation by D.A.Smith]
Lucas Maler is without doubt one of the oldest and best masters who ever made such instruments. He lived about 1415 [Baron was misled here by a forged label] and, we believe, in Bologna, together with Hans Frey. It is remarkable that they already were working in today's fashion, with the bodies oblong, flat, and wide-ribbed. These lutes are esteemed above all others, insofar as there is no fraud and they are original (or, as the technical term has it, *oriental*). They command very high prices, because they are rare and have a magnificent tone. [...] Some of the lutes from Füssen are made much too much in the oldest fashion, namely round like an apple, and they are not worth much.

Baron also quotes the "learned Society of Trevoux" as saying:

Les luths de Bologne sont les plus estimés par la qualité du bois qui est cause qu'on en tire un plus beau son.

The surviving lutes

1. GNM Nuremberg, MI 54

In its original state it would have been a 6c lute with a string length of around 74cm and a body length of about 52cm. The body width is 297mm. The rose is 303 from the bottom (slightly less than 3/5 of the estimated body length). It was converted to a 13c swan-neck lute with string lengths of 708 and 959mm by Sebastian Schelle, probably in the 1720s - photos can be found in the article by Klaus Martius. The 18th C neck and pegbox were removed in 1977 and stored in the archives of the museum. It has nine ribs of Hungarian ash. The last rib on the treble side does not match the grain of the rest and may be a replacement dating from the time of the conversion to a 13c lute. There is a bridge mark which is almost certainly that of the original 6c bridge: the front of this bridge is only 66mm from the bottom of the lute, making it about 1/8 of the original body length. This low bridge position is seen in some paintings and other surviving lutes, though it was obviously not a consistent feature of early lutes as even Arnault of Zwolle (c.1450) gives the bridge position as 1/6 of the body length. The soundboard has many traces of previous bars, such that although it is clear that it has been rebarred several times, it is impossible to say what the original barring might have been.

Drawn by Karin Richter, 1979?

2. Prague, Lobkowitz Collections, Nelahozeves Castle, Czech Republic, 1408E
Estimated body length 500, width 289, rose 300 from bottom (3/5 of body length), front of present bridge 102 from bottom, current string length 673. Nine ribs of Hungarian ash.

3. Prague, Lobkowitz Collections, Nelahozeves Castle, Czech Republic, 6551931E
Estimated body length 508, width 293, rose 304 from bottom (3/5 of body length),
front of present bridge 86 from bottom. Eleven ribs of lightly-figured maple.

4. V&A London, 194-1882

The largest of the surviving Maler lutes, with a body length of 56cm (originally probably more like 57cm) and width 33cm. Only the back, of eleven lightly-figured maple ribs, survives. The proportions of the back suggest an original string length of about 76cm.

5. Cité de la musique, Paris, E.2005.3.1

This instrument was offered for sale as a 5c guitar in 2003 and the new owner took it to Daniel Sinier and Françoise de Ridder of Saint Chartier for restoration. In the course of restoration they discovered the Laux Maler label and the instrument is now in the Paris museum. It is said to be almost identical in size and shape to the Nuremberg lute. It has nine ribs of Hungarian ash and the same dark red varnish. The soundboard has been dated to before 1529 and is almost certainly original, though of course the barring is more recent. The rose is the same pattern as on the Nuremberg lute. Photos can be seen at:

<http://sinierderidder.free.fr/pages/main.html>

and in more detail on the website of the Cité de la Musique at:

http://mediatheque.cite-musique.fr/masc/?INSTANCE=CITEMUSIQUE&URL=/MediaComposite/CMDM/CMDM000000500/luth_histoire_02.htm

In the area of the bridge there is a rectangular patch which makes it hard to see where any older bridges might have been, but the area just below the patch shows no traces, so it seems that any original bridge was somewhere under the patch rather than nearer the end of the lute. This suggests that the original bridge was perhaps in the 1/6 position rather than the 1/8 position as on the Nuremberg lute.

Bibliography

Hellwig, Friedemann : Lute-making in the 15th and the 16th century. LSJ XVI, 1974, 24-28.

Martius, Klaus: Sebastian Schelle and the swan-necked lute. JLSA, XXXV, 2002, 23-50.

Pasqual, Sandro: Laux Maler (c.1485-1552). The Lute, XLV, 2005, 71-97.