

PLAYING THE UNPLAYABLE: SOME THOUGHTS ON  
INTERPRETING RENAISSANCE LUTE MUSIC AND ITS SOURCES  
*IZVAJANJE NEIZVEDLJIVEGA: NEKAJ MISLI O INTERPRETACIJI  
RENEŠANČNE LUTNJSKE GLASBE IN NJENIH IZVORIH*

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YA'QUB YONAS N. EL-KHALED  
University of Music and Performing Arts Graz  
yaqub.elkhaled@gmail.com

*Abstract:* The paper examines two main questions: first, could lutenists of the second half of the sixteenth century perform their works as preserved in printed lute books? And, secondly, how can modern performers approach this highly challenging and predominantly neglected repertoire? The first question is answered by critically examining existing musicological positions and introducing a new methodological approach: the comparative analysis of multiple source types. The results of this analysis will show how sixteenth century lutenists handled certain instrumental challenges and suggest that these solutions could be applied by modern performers.

*Keywords:* Renaissance, intabulation, Melchior Neusidler, lute fantasia, performance practice

*Izleček:* Prispevek preučuje dve glavni vprašanji: prvič, ali bi lahko lutnjisti druge polovice 16. stoletja izvajali svoja dela, kot so ohranjena v tiskanih knjigah za lutnjo? In drugič, kako se lahko sodobni izvajalci lotijo tega zelo zahtevnega in večinoma zapostavljenega repertoarja? Na prvo vprašanje odgovarjamo s kritično preučitvijo obstoječih muzikoloških stališč in uvedbo novega metodološkega pristopa: primerjalne analize več tipov virov. Rezultati te analize bodo pokazali, kako so se lutnjisti 16. stoletja spopadali z določenimi instrumentalnimi izzivi, in nakazali, da bi te rešitve lahko uporabili sodobni izvajalci.

*Ključne besede:* renesansa, intabulacija, Melchior Neusidler, fantazija za lutnjo, izvedbena praksa

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the past decades, many scholars have observed an increase in complexity in the lute music of the second half of the sixteenth century compared with lute music of the preceding fifty years. This increase in complexity is frequently linked to the works of a group of lutenists – the most prominent are Vincenzo Galilei (1520–1591), Sebastian Ochsenkun (1521–1574), Valentin

1 This paper is based on two chapters of my doctoral thesis, which was accepted in April 2022 by the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, Austria.

Bakfark (ca. 1526–1576), Melchior Neusidler (ca. 1531–after 1591) and Giovanni Antonio Terzi (ca. 1580 – after 1600) – who were masters in adapting the style of vocal polyphony to the lute and moved the boundaries of what was thought to be possible on the instrument. In printed lute books of the mentioned lutenists, one can find passages of extreme difficulty, which raise the question how they were actually performed by the composers and intabulators themselves and by other lutenists of the sixteenth century. Modern scholars have not yet answered this question convincingly and have either ignored the subject of performance practice in their research<sup>2</sup> or simply stated that lutenists of the past were able to perform what was written down in exactly the way it was written down.<sup>3</sup> A third group of scholars merely pointed out that it is not possible to play certain intabulations, without exploring the implications of this observation.<sup>4</sup> Modern lutenists and guitarists have consciously or unconsciously drawn their own conclusions and pragmatically ignored these problematic parts of the lute repertoire in favour of the more prominent and accessible parts.<sup>5</sup> In conversations, practitioners confirmed to me that it is quite unrewarding to practice works by Melchior Neusidler for example, since they are hard to play and require much more time, effort and adaptations than compositions by others. Nonetheless, the final interpretation is in many cases still not as convincing as studying compositions by, for instance, Francesco da Milano or John Dowland.<sup>6</sup> In this paper I will therefore examine and try to re-think two main questions:

1. Were scholars right in assuming that Bakfark, Neusidler and others could play their music in exactly the way it is preserved in their lute books?
2. See, for example, Suzanne Court's (1988, pp. 45–95) examination of Terzi's ornamentation-techniques or Jonas Pfohl's (2011, pp. 98–106) discussion of virtuosic lute intabulations after Ludwig Senfl's compositions.
3. See, for example, Otto Gombosi's (1967, p. 46) characterization of Bakfark's faculties as lutenist, which is quite similar to Daniel Benkő's (1972, pp. 215–216, 223) or István Homolya's (1982, p. 141). With regard to Melchior Neusidler, Erich Tremmel (2003, pp. 205–206) states the same thing.
4. See, for example, Kurt Dorf Müller's (1967, p. 86) and Markus Grassl's (2013, p. 364) remarks on Sebastian Ochskenkun's *Tabulaturbuch auff die Lauten* or Jürgen Heidrich's (2003, p. 158) similar observations regarding the vihuela da mano repertoire.
5. In 1997 Peter Király already observed that the genre closest related to vocal music, the lute intabulation, is not very popular among modern performers – he therefore titled a concise study *Intavolierungen – ‚Nein, danke‘?* (Intabulations – ‘No, thank you?’).
6. These corresponding assessments have been expressed to me by Thomas Boysen, Ryosuke Sakamoto, Xavier Díaz-Latorre, David Bergmüller, Jürgen Ruck and others. Additionally, I had the chance to talk to Paul O'Dette about his recording *Lute Music: Melchior Neusidler* (2008), who also confirmed that he made several changes in fingerings in order to get better-sounding results.

2. How can modern practitioners of plucked instruments handle these extremely difficult parts of the repertoire of the second half of the sixteenth century?

#### UN-LUTE-LIKE LUTENISTS?

In roughly the last 70 years, it was not unusual to characterize the abilities of sixteenth century lutenists in ways which were similar to the following example:

*The outstanding virtuosity of the greatest lutenists of the sixteenth century lay in the fact that they were able to perform on their instrument those tasks which were the most un-lute-like, that is which were furthest from the character and nature of the lute. The highest degree of this virtuosity was perhaps achieved by Valentin Bakfark who, in spite of the natural tendencies of the instrument, was able to produce perfectly the correct polyphonic transcription of vocal works.* (Benkö, 1972, p. 223)

If these observations prove to be true, it would be quite discouraging for modern performers, since no lutenist today has convincingly managed to become an un-lute-like lute virtuoso. But it is enlightening to examine the underlying assumptions of this statement. First of all, it exclusively refers to printed lute works. (This is also true for comparable statements.)<sup>7</sup> Secondly, there is no discernible argument for the hypothesis that lutenists like Bakfark could play their printed lute works in exactly the way they were printed – except for the design of the printed lute works themselves. Thirdly, the assumption that printed lute works should be regarded as the genuine ‘definitive versions’ of compositions and intabulations. All mentioned assumptions are at least problematic and were shared by many scholars in the twentieth century (El-Khaled, 2022, pp. 94–96).

The concentration, even limitation, to printed lute books when dealing with questions of historical performance practice is striking, especially since many manuscript sources survive alongside printed lute books. It is even more striking when taking into consideration that handwritten sheets or larger manuscripts were the primary medium of dissemination of lute music in the sixteenth century (Minamino, 2014, pp. 51–52) and that it was manuscripts – and not printed lute books – which had a practical function, serving as playing scores or memory aid (Boetticher, 1979, p. 194; Schönig, 2019, pp. 310–312). To examine the performance practice of Bakfark, Neusidler, Ochsenkun and others, it is therefore highly revelatory to take into consideration not only their printed lute books, but also manuscript sources.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Gombosi, 1967, pp. 40–41 or Tremmel, 2003, pp. 205–206.

At this point we can focus on the German lutenist and composer Melchior Neusidler. Neusidler is special, not only because he can be described as ‘the most distinguished composer of lute music in the German lands during the sixteenth century’ (Smith, 2002, p. 173)<sup>8</sup> and his works are frequently characterized as being most challenging or un-lute-like, but also because his works survive in six different types of sources:

1. Three printed individual lute books.
2. Autographs.
3. Reprints (‘pirate editions’).
4. Handwritten copies by professional or very advanced amateur lutenists.
5. Handwritten copies by amateurs.
6. Handwritten copies in presentation copies.

This source situation is highly remarkable due to two factors: firstly, the three individual lute books were published under supervision of Neusidler himself, a rarity in Renaissance lute music (Ness, 1985, p. 354). Secondly, the number of preserved autographs ‘may actually be the most extensive collection of autographs by any composer of the Renaissance’ (Ness, 1985, p. 369). Therefore, many pieces survive in two ‘authentic’ versions, which can be traced back to Neusidler himself and which offer unique reference material to examine. Moreover, handwritten copies by professional lutenists supply insights into how contemporaries of Neusidler dealt with the highly demanding repertoire. Consequently, these three groups of sources are of special interest when it comes to questions of performance practices of virtuosic lute music.

#### WHAT MAKES A LUTE PIECE UN-LUTE-LIKE?

As the quote above suggests, the technically demanding parts of an intabulation or lute fantasy are connected to the polyphonic realization of several voices. But not every polyphonic lute piece is automatically hard to play. In my doctoral thesis I introduced categories, which allow for describing instrumental difficulties more tangibly. All passages, which seem to ‘transcend the possibilities of the instrument’, as Benkő (1972, p. 216) puts it, concern the fretboard hand (typically the left hand). The following left hand techniques can cause seemingly insurmountable problems:

1. Cluttered fingerings.
  2. Hyperextensions.
- 8 Arthur Ness (1985, p. 354) described him in a similar vein: ‘Melchior Neusidler is one of the most important and prolific German lutenists of the sixteenth century.’ A good biographical sketch and introduction to his work can be found in *A History of the Lute* (Smith, 2002, pp. 173–178).

3. Letting fingers remain on their positions so that intended voice leading can be realized.

The term ‘cluttered fingerings’ refers to chords which require more fingers than anatomically available and which are not adequately realizable even if advanced playing techniques are used. Passages with hyperextensions of the left hand require playing in distant positions either to play a single harmony or to play two or multiple voices simultaneously. The third group is the most flexible, since the realization of voice leading naturally depends on the abilities of a player. But in many cases the movements of voices are set on the lute by the intabulator or composer in a way that cannot be realized appropriately regardless of the player’s abilities. Combinations can, of course, also occur.

Examples for these three types of difficulties can be found *en masse* in Melchior Neusidler’s printed lute books. The important question is thus: What do the correlating passages in the autographs and manuscripts by contemporary lute colleagues look like?

### THREE TYPICAL EXAMPLES

The following examples are all taken from Neusidler’s *Teutsch Lautenbuch* (‘German lute book’) published 1574 in Straßburg by Bernhard Jobin. The *Teutsch Lautenbuch* was Neusidler’s third and last individual lute book.<sup>9</sup> It contains 46 pieces, thereof 28 intabulations, fifteen dances and three lute fantasies. The chosen examples are narrowed to the ten motet intabulations, since these are the lengthiest and most momentous pieces of the *Teutsch Lautenbuch* and consist of up to six voices, while the intabulations of French, Italian and German songs and the lute fantasies are all set in four voices. For the purposes of visual evidence, I will use my own transcriptions in Italian tablature and modern standard notation,<sup>10</sup> as the German lute book uses the rather abstract German lute tablature.

It is not possible to determine the composer of the two-part motet *Hierusalem Luge* with certainty. Different sources of the sixteenth century name three possible composers: Lupus Hellinck, Jean Richafort and Adrianus Caen, with Richafort being the most commonly used (Jas, 2016). Neusidler ascribes the motet to *Adrianus Kein*, following other South-German sources. The motet is set for five voices and Neusidler’s intabulation is quite faithful to the vocal modal, albeit that he adds numerous ornamentations. Bar 47 of the *prima pars* seems to include a very un-lute-like chord position, which can be classified as a cluttered fingering:

- 9 A summary overview of almost all known extant works by Melchior Neusidler can be found in Tremmel (2003, pp. 78–87, 90–99).
- 10 Transcriptions in standard notation are transposed down a minor third (= guitar notation).

**Figure 1**

*Melchior Neusidler/Adrianus Kein – Hierusalem Luge. Prima Pars, b. 47*  
(Neusidler, 1574, Nr. 7)

The problematic chord appears on the first beat of bar 47.<sup>11</sup> As lute tablatures show the exact chord position on the fretboard, there is no mystery in where to put the fingers. The mystery lies in the fact that there are simply not enough fingers to press all the required notes. The chord requires five notes, but no two notes can be pressed by one finger, that is to say, it is not a barre chord. The only possibility to press all notes is to use the thumb, but since the *Deutsch Lautenbuch* explicitly requires a lute with seven courses (the seventh course is added as an additional bass course) it is not possible to press the bass note with the thumb from above the fretboard. Instead, the thumb needs to move in front of the fretboard and is then capable of pressing the bass note, while the other four fingers can press the remaining notes. This, of course, is not a conventional left hand technique and is not mentioned in any instructional book or shown in any picture. It is also not easy to handle and significantly slows down the overall speed. Two questions, then, are of interest: firstly, why did Neusidler use this unplayable or rather un-lute-like chord position? And secondly, what do contemporary manuscript sources show? The first question is easy to answer: the chord position of the intabulation applies the exact same chord position as the vocal model.<sup>12</sup> By staying faithful to the model and taking over its peculiarities, Neusidler notates a rather un-lute-like chord position, which is not surprising, since it is a chord position for five singing voices and not a lute chord position. In a manuscript version of the same intabulation (Anonymus, ca. 1550–1580, fol. 26v–28r),<sup>13</sup> bar 47 offers a different solution:

11 For complete transcriptions of all mentioned intabulations see the second volume of my dissertation.

12 More note examples (including the vocal models) can be found in Chapter V of my dissertation (El-Khaled, 2022, pp. 83–195).

13 This manuscript consists of three different parts, the first of which contains autographs by Melchior Neusidler on fol. 1–16. The third part (fol. 24–35) was written by an unknown scribe.

**Figure 2**

Melchior Neusidler/ [Jean Richafort] – *Gierusalem Luge*, b. 47  
(Anonymus, ca. 1550–1580, fol. 27r)

As can be seen, the chord in question is reduced by the note of the first tenor voice (f; fifth fret on the fifth course; note d in the transcription) and becomes instantly playable with regular left hand techniques. Remarkably, the missing note is not simply omitted, but elegantly incorporated into the slightly varied ornamentation. So, all notes of the vocal model still appear in the manuscript version of the intabulation, although not simultaneously.

The next example belongs to the third group of instrumental difficulties, namely problematic voice leading. It is taken from the motet *In te domine speravi* by Lupus Hellinck and is once again for five voices. Bars 64 and 65 of the *Deutsch Lautenbuch* version can be transcribed like this:

**Figure 3**

Melchior Neusidler/ Lupus Hellinck – *In te domine speravi*. *Prima pars*, b. 64–65  
(Neusidler, 1574, Nr. 4b)

Instrumental difficulties occur in bar 65. The cadential ornamentation of the tenor voice is placed in a way that neither the superius, the alto nor the bass can ring until their connecting notes. To play the first note of the ornamenta-

tion (first fret, fourth course; d sharp in the transcription) a player is forced to lift the barre from the second fret, and thus the outside voices become silent. The alto (fourth fret, fourth course) cannot continue to sound, since the tenor movement is played partly on the fourth course. Even though the texture consists only of four voices, only one voice can actually be heard in the second half of bar 65.

Luckily, we can compare this printed version to an autographic version by Neusidler (ca. 1560–1575, fol. 14v–22r), written probably slightly earlier. The corresponding two bars look like this:

**Figure 4**

*Melchior Neusidler/Lupus Hellinck – In te domine speravi. Prima pars, b. 64–65*  
(Neusidler, ca. 1560–1575, fol. 17r)

The figure displays two musical representations of the same passage. The upper representation is a lute tablature consisting of four horizontal lines. Above the lines are fret markers (Γ) and numbers indicating fret positions. The first bar has fret markers at the first and second frets. The second bar has fret markers at the first, second, and fourth frets. The lower representation is a musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a common time signature (C). It shows a complex texture with multiple voices, including chords and melodic lines.

The main difference is conspicuous: the problematic ornamentation of bar 65 is simply left out. Alternatively, Neusidler chooses simple inner voice movements, which allow the first finger to comfortably remain as barre in the second position and consequently the outside voices to ring until the next bar. A sounding four-voiced interpretation on the lute is de facto technically feasible.

The last example is taken from yet another motet intabulation for five voices. It is Neusidler's setting of Clemens non Papa's *Maria Magdalenae*, which is probably one of the most challenging lute intabulations by Melchior Neusidler or any other Renaissance lutenist. To convey an impression of the dense texture of this intabulation, the chosen example consists of four bars:



Figure 5

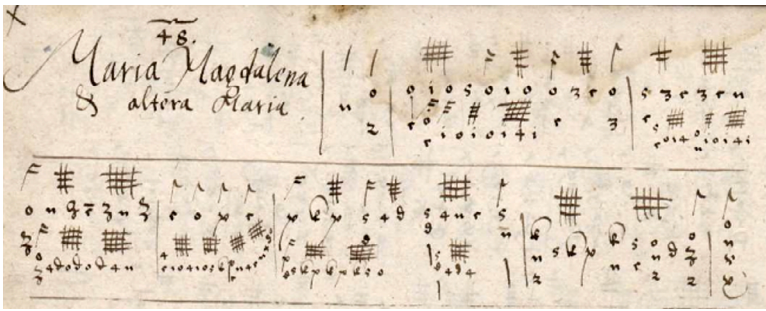
Melchior Neusidler/ Clemens non Papa – Maria Magdalenae. Prima pars, b. 9–13  
(Neusidler, 1574, Nr. 8)

The image displays a musical score for a lute piece. The top part is a lute tablature on a six-line staff, with letters 'F' above each line. The bottom part is a standard musical notation on a five-line staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The score covers measures 9 to 13. The tablature shows various fingerings and fret positions, including some unusual ones like '7 3' and '3 3 2'. The standard notation shows a complex texture with multiple voices and ornaments.

In this short passage, difficulties of all three described types can be found and they can all be traced back to Neusidler's focused efforts to intabulate the vocal model as accurately and completely as possible (El-Khaled, 2022, pp. 105–106, 111, 119). Cluttered fingerings can be found in bar 9 on the first beat and in bar 10 on the last beat (both reproduce the chord position of the model). Especially, the chord in bar 10 is interesting, because it can actually be played by using a first finger barre, not to cover multiple strings, but to cover two frets – a technique which is challenging, but not impossible. Suitable voice leading is not realizable in bar 11. The superius should sound from the beginning of the bar until the middle, but a change of position on the second beat effectively prevents this. In the second half of bar 11, the middle parts cannot ring until the next bar, since the first finger has to change its position to play the ornamentation. Finally, bar 12 shows an example of a hyperextension. The B-flat-major chord (G-major in the transcription) on the third beat is placed in the fifth position in an unusual fingering. On the fourth beat the bass moves from d to B flat (B to G in the transcription) which forces the first finger to give up its former note (fourth course, fifth fret) and stretch down to the third fret on the sixth course – an entirely impossible movement if the upper voices ought to continue to sound. To realize a continuous voice leading of the two remaining upper voices, the third and fourth finger have to remain on their respective positions on the eighth fret on the third course (fourth finger) and on the seventh fret on the first string (third finger). This causes a maximum stretching of the left hand, which is probably only viable for persons whose hands are considerably above average size and who play small-scaled instruments. Most players will have to release their fingers from the fifth position in order to play the bass part. Similar problems occur throughout the whole *prima pars* of *Maria Magdalenae* and justify the characterization as a piece which is written against the character of the instrument.

**Figure 6**

*Melchior Neusidler/ Clemens non Papa – Maria Magdalena, beginning*  
(Anonymus, ca. 1570–1585, fol. 95v)



The corresponding passage of the manuscript version (Anonymus, ca. 1570–1585, fol. 95v–99r), however, shows a different approach. Instead of adopting all the individual voice movements of the vocal model and accepting the resulting awkward fingerings and chord positions, a more lute-compatible attempt is detectable. The manuscript was written by either a professional lutenist or highly skilled amateur with the initials M.W.S. It is a voluminous manuscript and contains lute music of the highest quality and demands the highest virtuosity of a performer (Kirsch & Meierott, 1992, pp. 279–280). What makes it particularly valuable as a source for performance practices of sixteenth century lute music is the fact that it contains unusually rich information about fingerings, alternative fingerings and ornamentation variants. Many pieces even have additional ornamentations written in small letters in the main tablature text (see fig. 6).

The identified instrumental difficulties all appear resolved in M.W.S.'s version of Neusidler's intabulation:

**Figure 7**

*Melchior Neusidler/ Clemens non Papa – Maria Magdalena, b. 9–12*  
(Anonymus, ca. 1570–1585, fol. 95v)



The cluttered fingerings of bar 9 and 10 are adjusted to the capabilities of the instrument and its players. Particularly remarkable is the adjustment in bar 10 on the fourth beat, where all but one of the sounding notes of the *Teutsch Lautenbuch* chord setting are preserved, while the fingering has completely changed. The note transcription shows only the omission of one note, but by using the open strings M.W.S. turned an impractical chord into an easy one, on which an ornament can be played comfortably. Problems of voice leading in bar 11 are solved equally elegantly: by replacing the chord on the first beat to the first position, the position change on the second beat is no longer necessary. Consequently, it is possible to let the superius ring till its following note. Finally, the hyperextension in bar 12 is amended. M.W.S. changed the melody of the bass voice and relocated the f' (in the transcription d') from the eighth fret of the third course to the third fret of the second course. By doing so, the virtually unplayable stretching of the *Teutsch Lautenbuch* version is avoided and this short passage can be played comfortably in the third position. It should be mentioned that M.W.S. is also a master in the use of ornamentation – the ornaments enliven the phrase and cleverly conceal the instrumental difficulties of the passage.

These three examples are by no means exceptions. In my dissertation I performed detailed comparative analyses of five motet intabulations and three lute fantasias of the *Teutsch Lautenbuch* and their respective, sometimes up to four, different manuscript sources. The result is clear: passages that seem to transcend the possibilities of the instrument or, in short, unplayable or unlute-like passages only occur in the printed lute book! In manuscript sources these passages are changed into actually realizable variants. It is important to stress that these changes are in no way simplifications – as has been suggested in the past (e. g. Gombosi, 1967, p. 36) – but necessary adaptations. This is especially transparent in the contrasts of the authentic Neusidler sources, that is to say, his personally supervised prints and his autographs, which clearly show a different prioritization. The manuscripts were unambiguously used for practical use. This observation completely agrees with what was stated earlier, namely that manuscripts are much closer to actual lute performances than printed lute books. The crucial question is, what was the purpose of printed lute books when they were obviously not aimed at serving as playing scores?

#### WERE LUTENISTS REALLY ABLE TO PLAY THEIR PIECES IN THE PRINTED VERSIONS?

As demonstrated, it is safe to assume that lutenists did *not* play all the printed versions of their intabulations and lute fantasias. Printed lute books were obviously not published to illustrate the instrumental virtuosity of their composers nor to offer a completed version of a piece to practice, memorize and play from

memory in front of an audience.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Neusidler's settings of the intabulations and lute fantasies in the *Teutsch Lautenbuch* suggest that he understood these versions as *compositions*, comparable to those of the great masters of vocal polyphony. As a result of this idea the intabulation was a favoured genre not only by Neusidler but by many great lutenists. It enabled lutenists to show their musical and compositional skills by adopting the style of the greatest composers of their time. It is not a coincidence that intabulations of Josquin des Prez, Adrian Willaert, Cipriano de Rore, Orlando di Lasso and other famous composers frequently appear in lute publications with artistic ambitions – in many cases alongside compositions of the lutenist himself. In this context it is rather telling that Neusidler describes his approach of composing the *Teutsch Lautenbuch* as compiling motets, French, Italian and German songs, dances and fantasies by the best and most distinguished composers he knows.<sup>15</sup> He discreetly mentions his own compositions in the same breath as those of Orlando di Lasso, Clemens non Papa, etc. Lutenists evidently tried to ennoble lute music (and probably their social reputation; Calella, 2004, pp.121–124) by imitating the most esteemed musicians of their time: vocal composers. There are many hints for this broad-based image campaign (El-Khaled, 2022, pp. 68–82).

The idea of presenting a composition rather than a realizable lute piece also explains the un-lute-like appearance of many pieces. The pieces were simply not designed to be playable lute pieces, but met the requirements of polyphonic counterpoint regardless of the instrumental realization. The compliance with rules of sixteenth century polyphony thus led to the astounding appearance of lute pieces in printed lute books, that in turn led musicologists to the assumption of an extreme, almost superhuman, virtuosity.

Professional lutenists of the sixteenth century, of course, knew that printed lute books did not present playing scores which could be played note for note. Hence, copying a piece from a printed lute book simultaneously meant adjusting a piece for one's own use. The opposite can also be seen: Neusidler obviously edited his works for publication in print. His printed versions are better from a compositional point of view, while being worse from a player's perspective and vice versa the manuscript versions. Deducing instrumental abilities from printed lute books can therefore be misleading. The insight that Bakfark, Neusidler, Kargel, Galilei and Terzi were most likely not able to perform their works in exactly the way they were printed does not take away from their capabilities and reputation as lutenists. On the contrary, outstand-

14 This last idea was recently suggested by Kateryna Schöning in her insightful study *Isaac in Lautenintavolierungen aus handschriftlichen und gedruckten Quellen (ca. 1500–1562): Ein Beitrag zur Intavolierungstechnik*. She writes: 'Bei den Druck-Versionen [von Intabulierungen] oder bei den an Drucken orientierten Handschriften hingegen handelt es sich – im Grunde – wahrscheinlich um eine fertige, präexistente Intavolierung, die mit dem Zweck veröffentlicht wird, das "Fertige" zum Üben anzubieten' (Schöning, 2019, p. 312).

15 For a full transcription of the dedication see: El-Khaled, 2022, p. 388.

ing lutenists were able to perform multiple versions of the same intabulation, dance, or fantasy and did not adhere to one 'definitive' version of a piece. Taking the importance of improvisational and *ex tempore* practices into account, this makes perfect sense. The idea of a final or definitive version of a piece is not part of their thinking.

#### CONSEQUENCES FOR PERFORMANCES

The comparative analyses of printed and handwritten sources seemed to show unmistakable results. Nevertheless, I conducted practical experiments in collaboration with professional lutenists and guitarists in order to falsify or verify the hypotheses that printed lute works were not made for immediate performance purposes. These experiments verified the hypotheses very vividly: no player was able to perform chosen passages from Neusidler's work in their printed version in a satisfactory way. As anticipated, the manuscript versions led to better sounding results and were much more comfortable to realize for the players.<sup>16</sup>

This knowledge has far-reaching implications for modern interpreters. To begin with, it explains why the repertoire of the aforementioned lutenists is rather unpopular with modern performers. Even Early Music specialists have in many cases gone through a regular musical education, which is not specialized in Early Music.<sup>17</sup> Learning to play what a composer notated is therefore an elementary part of the instrumental training of most classical trained musicians. While this approach works fine for a particular part of the European music tradition, it works less well for others. Trying to play a Neusidlerian motet intabulation from the 1560s and -70s like a guitar transcription of Francisco Tárrega (1852–1909) will inevitably lead to different results, not to the benefit of the former. So, the first step to a new way of handling the artistic Renaissance lute repertoire from 1550–1600 is to abandon the idea of *Texttreue* ('principle of strict adherence to the text'). Just like lutenists of the sixteenth century did not aim to reproduce a composition in the best possible way on the instru-

16 These experiments were conducted in April 2021 and are documented in my doctoral thesis (El-Khaled, 2022). Among the participants are the renowned lutenists Thomas Boysen and Ryosuke Sakamoto and guitarists such as Jürgen Ruck.

17 I have no access to reliable numbers and statistics, but since there are only very few music schools which offer an early musical education in Early Music or teach early instruments like lute, harpsichord, baroque violin or historical wind instruments from an early age on, I think it is permitted to assume that many Early Music specialists switched at one point in their career from a 'modern' instrument (piano, violin, flute, guitar, etc.) to an early instrument. Others added an early instrument to their portfolio in the course of time. This has been described multiple times for lutenists, who started their musical careers as guitarists or perform as guitarists and lutenists (Griffiths, 2021, pp. 8–9; Schlegel & Lüdtke, 2011, pp. 349–352, 356–357).

ment,<sup>18</sup> it should not be the primary aim of present-day performers. The primary aim of past performers was to play a euphonious and working version of a lute piece – and this is what modern performers should also strive for.

How, then, can this fine goal be achieved without just randomly changing parts of a lute composition? Luckily, there are two possibilities for modern performers. Firstly, it is possible and perfectly fine to play manuscript versions of pieces. Those versions can usually be played as written and therefore do not require much relearning in this regard. Admittedly, usually manuscript versions are more difficult to find in the first place and are usually more challenging to read. But it is increasingly easy to find many lute manuscripts and even transcriptions of manuscripts online and many sources are written in the easy-to-read Italian or French tablatures, anyway.<sup>19</sup> Anyone who can read these two historical notations is in principle capable of accessing a large part of this highly interesting and sophisticated lute repertoire, which can also be played on the lute's modern descendant: the guitar. This is the easiest and least time-consuming way to exploit this until now largely neglected body of works in a historically informed manner.<sup>20</sup>

The second possibility, however, is more time-consuming and requires a great deal of dedication and expertise. It involves the study of many pieces in different versions to understand *why* certain changes were made and *how* they were made in order to develop a distinct feel for the music of that time. The overriding goal is, of course, to create one's own versions of intabulations or lute fantasies. Generally speaking, it is neither hard to explain why changes were made nor how they were made. Changes were necessary because otherwise certain pieces would not work on the instrument,<sup>21</sup> and regarding the how, eight main strategies can be identified:

1. Repeated plucking of notes, especially to clarify voice leading if sustained notes occur.
2. Changed fingerings of awkward chord positions.
3. Adding conveniently situated notes to chords in order to gain more sonority.

18 See Schöning's quite similar assessment: 'Außerdem war das Gelingen der musikalischen Realisierung vor einem Publikum für einen mit der Technik der "ausgearbeiteten" Intavolierung vertrauten Musiker viel wichtiger, als das Beachten des Notentexts der zu intavolierenden Vokalvorlage' (Schöning, 2019, p. 311).

19 Sarge Gerbode's website *Accessible Lute Music*, for example, offers transcriptions in French tablature of more than 8000 lute pieces and numerous PDF files of original sources (Gerbode, n.d.).

20 Historically informed interpretation naturally includes more than just the underlying tablature text on which a performance is based. But to expand on this topic would be beyond the scope of this study.

21 It is, of course, also possible to personalize pieces just to make them fit to one's own taste and capabilities – a procedure which can also be seen in sixteenth century lute sources.

4. The preferred use of open strings.
5. Changing of the progression of voices.
6. Tendency to avoid high positions on the fretboard.
7. Purposefully deployed and/or individual use of ornaments.
8. Use of 'wrong notes' because of better playability.

It should be noted that these strategies are, so to speak, 'naturally occurring' and not surprising at all. Every lutenist or guitarist would intuitively do these things to alter a piece. The interesting and very complex part is to use the strategies in a proper way – this is what requires a great amount of experience. What makes the use so intricate is the fact that excellent lutenists of the past did not follow discernible rules in modifying pieces. They obviously had certain individual predilections for ornaments or chord fingerings, but they were never schematic. Let me briefly illustrate this with an example: in the *Deutsch Lautenbuch* version of *Maria Magdalenae*, an F-major chord appears in an inconvenient chord shape four times. Instead of adapting each chord in the same way, M.W.S. uses three different variants, taking the respective contexts into account. Even the two times where he uses the same alteration, he adds different ornaments (El-Khaled, 2022, pp. 128–129).

The same sense can be observed with today's leading performers. As already mentioned, I had the chance to talk to Paul O'Dette about his Neusidler recordings after a presentation of my hypotheses and results. Paul O'Dette confirmed that he did the same thing as M.W.S. or Neusidler (in his autographs): he changed fingerings in order to get a better sounding and more conveniently playable result. In doing so, he did not follow a fixed pattern, but intuitively changed problematic parts in a 'lute-like' manner. Since Paul O'Dette is one of the most brilliant lutenists alive and possesses a vast knowledge of the instruments' repertoire, his choices correspond to those of the greatest lutenists of the past.

Hopkinson Smith provides further examples. In September 2022 he gave a lecture recital at the *Basel Lute Days*, which I was lucky to attend. Smith demonstrated his current preoccupation with Francesco Spinacino, whose two lute books are the first ever printed instrumental music (both appeared 1507 and were published by Ottaviano Petrucci).<sup>22</sup> The works of Spinacino are not at all comparable to those of lutenists living more than 50 years after him, but Smith's approach to them shows the true spirit of Renaissance lutenists. Smith explained that many pieces of Spinacino are unsatisfactory for him, but instead of ignoring them as a potential repertoire he adapts them to his predilections. In the subsequent discussion, Smith was asked which method he applies in adapting the pieces. An entirely justified question, since Smith's changes of the pieces are in part substantial. He answered that he used no method. His fingers

22 Good introductory information about the Petrucci lute books and Francesco Spinacino can be found in *A History of the Lute* (Smith, 2002, pp. 110–118).

simply knew what to do, since he played so much music in this style. All of his changes could be described with one or the other of the eight named strategies, but the details determine the success or failure of a new version. And Smith's versions are naturally successful for they are rooted in his long-standing experience with the repertoire and his mastery of the instrument.

To make a long story short: 'getting the music into one's hands' is basically what it is all about. Skilful lutenists of the sixteenth century naturally had this music in their hands. Modern performers need to get there, step by step. And this is where musicologists and performers can cooperate effectively. Musicological research can help interpreters to improve their choice of repertoire and their interpretations by providing solid bases for the practical execution.

### CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be demonstrated that scholars were wrong in assuming that lutenists like Valentin Bakfark or Melchior Neusidler were able to perform their works in exactly the same way they are preserved in printed lute books. This misconception can be traced back to the restriction to printed source materials. By expanding the source bases, it is possible to illustrate that printed lute books and manuscript sources had different functions and that prints did not serve as immediate playing scores. Manuscripts, conversely, did in many cases serve as playing scores and feature clear signs of usage such as added fingerings, alternatives and additional characters. Deductions about the instrumental abilities of lutenists which are based solely on prints are therefore misleading. Alternatively, I suggest to interpret printed lute books as representational artefacts, which document the musical and compositional skills of a lutenist in order to improve the reputation of the lute and its music in general and the standing of the lutenist as master in the craft of music in particular. The representational character of lute compositions within printed lute books leads to the increased occurrence of passages which cannot be adequately realized on the instrument. Systematic comparative analyses of passages in printed and handwritten sources clearly show that 'unplayable' or unlute-like passages only occur in prints and are changed into actually realizable variants in corresponding manuscript versions. It is important to underline that these changes are not simplifications which were made by lesser gifted lutenists, but necessary changes in order to make a lute composition a working lute piece.

Melchior Neusidler's works can be used to exemplify this emphatically. They survive in different sources, including personally supervised prints, autographs and copies by professional lutenists. The characteristic differences between printed and handwritten sources can also be seen in Neusidler's au-



tographs when comparing them to the printed versions. The autographs therefore unmistakably prove that manuscript versions were not simplifications of printed versions due to lack of ability, but rather playable instead of ideal versions. These autographs therefore resemble handwritten copies by other professional lutenists more than Neusidler's own prints. By taking into account the different function of different types of sources, the mystery of the 'un-lute-like' virtuosity could be solved. Bakfark, Neusidler, Terzi, Kargel, Ochsenkun and others probably possessed exceptional instrumental skills and were great lute virtuosos – reports on their skills, their employments as court lutenists and their wealthy and/or noble students prove this sufficiently. But their aspiration was more than being 'just lutenists': they wanted to be recognized as composers as well. For this reason, their printed lute books do not provide a reliable image of their instrumental abilities. Obviously, printed artistic lute books give some indication about the creator's instrumental skills, but one should retain a healthy scepticism: paper is patient and many things are easier written than actually realized.

For modern performers these observations imply good and bad news at the same time. The good news is: there is no such thing as an 'un-lute-like' virtuosity on the lute (or guitar). Even Bakfark and Neusidler could not miraculously transcend the possibilities of the instrument. The bad news is: their works can still not simply be studied and performed like well-known and well-edited repertoires from the nineteenth or twentieth century. Some obstacles have to be overcome: firstly, the historical notations have to be mastered, because large parts of the repertoire are still not edited and transcribed reliably. Secondly, the existing sources must be assessed and treated accordingly. Thirdly, if there are multiple versions of a specific piece, comparisons should be made. At this juncture it is especially instructive to study manuscript versions of professional lutenists of the past, since they were in a similar position as modern performers: they also needed to cope with a highly challenging repertoire and found solutions which can serve as good guidelines for present-day performers. Finally, the long-term goal could be to rediscover the repertoire from the first tangible heyday of music for plucked instruments. Never again were the ambitions of lutenists or guitarists that high and never again have plucked instrumentalists got that close to living up to their ambitions. Lute music of the second half of the sixteenth century is a fascinating and intriguing subject and should be more popular among modern performers.

One last detail will give further food for thought: the most popular lutenist of the second half of the sixteenth century is without a doubt John Dowland (c. 1563–1626). Of his approximately 100 works for solo lute most are preserved in manuscripts; only a few were printed (Grapes, 2020, pp. 41–51; Poulton & Lam, 1978, pp. 309–310). Could it be possible that, for instance, Neusidler's works would be much more popular had they not survived in printed lute books?

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### Povzetek

UDK 78.034:347.774.5

Članek obravnava zgodovinske prakse izvajanja glasbe renesančnih lutnjistov. Za razliko od dosedanjih muzikoloških ocen, ki so temeljile predvsem na podskupini virov, je področje raziskovanja razširjeno z dodatnim, prej zapostavljenim izvornim gradivom. Primerjalna analiza glasbe, ohranjene v različnih vrstah virov, omogoča nove sklepe o praksi izvajanja glasbe poklicnih lutnjistov v 16. stoletju. Nadalje je natančno opredeljena funkcija različnih vrst virov, to je tiskanih lutnjskih knjig in rokopisov poklicnih lutnjistov: rokopisi so služili kot partitura, tiskane lutnjske knjige pa so bile uporabljene za prikaz

skladateljskih sposobnosti lutnjista. Intabulacije, fantazije za lutnjo in druge kompozicije, vključene v grafike, niso bile primarno namenjene izvajanju glasbe na lutnji in zato vsebujejo veliko odlomkov, ki so s praktičnega vidika begajoči. Z zglednimi primerjalnimi analizami med takšnimi odlomki in ustreznimi rokopisnimi različicami je mogoče p nazoriti, da rokopisni viri dosledno prenašajo različice, ki so zaželeno kot instrumentalne skladbe, medtem ko so manj dosledne glede pravil kot njihovi tiskani primerki. Tiskane različice na strogo način prilagajajo slog vokalne polifonije in zato ne upoštevajo pravil instrumentalne tehnike. Glede na medij prenosa različne prioritete določajo specifično zasnovo dela. Dela Melchiorja Neusidlerja se lahko uporabijo za prikaz te hipoteze, saj so se njegova dela ohranila v različnih virih, med njimi so tudi osebno varovane tiskane knjige za lutnjo, avtogrami in kopije sodobnih profesionalnih lutnjistov. Neusidlerjevi avtogrami imajo skupne značilnosti z drugimi rokopisnimi viri, njegova tiskana dela pa so podobnejša drugim tiskanim lutnjskim knjigam, npr. Valentina Bakfarka. Ta opažanja dokazujejo bistveno drugačno vlogo različnih medijev v lutnjski glasbi iz 16. stoletja. Sodobni izvajalci, ki tega znanja ne poznajo, se bodo pri interpretaciji zadevnega repertoarja srečevali (in so se v preteklosti tudi dejansko soočali) z nepremostljivimi težavami. To je razlog, zakaj so nekateri najbolj znani skladatelji lutnje in virtuozni preteklosti precej nepriljubljeni ter jih današnji lutnjisti in kitaristi redko izvajajo. Repertoarji Valentina Bakfarka, Sebastiana Ochsenkuna, Sixtusa Kargela, Vincenza Galileija, Melchiorja Neusidlerja in Giovannija Antonia Terzija so v veliki meri ohranjeni v tiskanih knjigah za lutnjo, mnoge od njih so dostopne na spletu v obliki PDF-datoteke. Seveda mnogi sodobni izvajalci izberejo te odtise kot osnovo za predstavitev. To vodi v zgražanje, nezadovoljive rezultate in izogibanje temu repertoarju, saj se ga obravnava kot repertoar iz drugih obdobij, na način, da se poskuša odigrati vse, kar je zapisano, vendar to ni izvedljivo. Model lutnjistov iz 16. stoletja pa kaže, da je treba uporabiti nekatere spremembe, da bi ustvarili izvedljive kompozicije za lutnjo. Rokopisni viri kažejo, kako je mogoče te spremembe uporabiti in kako je mogoče natisnjene kompozicije za lutnjo preoblikovati v glasbo za lutnjo. Rokopisi za lutnjo lahko torej služijo kot interpretacijski ključ za tiskane knjige o lutnji in kot vir navdiha za sodobne izvajalce.