

Frequently Asked Questions About The Theorbo

Compiled by Lynda Sayce and published on www.theorbo.com.

I want to start playing continuo: should I buy a theorbo or an archlute?

The archlute was rather a specialized instrument, which should properly be used for continuo mainly in Roman and southern Italian music, mostly from the second half of the 17th century, and the first decade or so of the 18th. Its main territory is the trio sonata. If this repertory is your great love, or the main focus of your group's repertory, buy an archlute. Otherwise, an Italian theorbo has a much wider application, chronologically and geographically. Its vast repertory includes much of the archlute's music too, for example, reprints of Corelli's trio sonatas often specify theorbo rather than the original archlute. The archlute has gained a rather spurious popularity today, largely because many players begin their careers on the renaissance lute, and they do not need to relearn the fingerboard to play archlute. It is therefore an easy way to begin continuo, but not necessarily the most useful or satisfying one.

How big a theorbo should I buy?

In the interests of historical accuracy, I should say 'buy the largest theorbo you can find'. Modern theorbo players are overwhelmingly reluctant to play on instruments which are as large as the majority of surviving originals. I must point out that my recommendation of a large theorbo is directly contrary to the advice given by Nigel North in his lutenists' continuo tutor, who advises one to consider the length of one's arms and the stretch of one's hands before buying a theorbo. This is, of course, a valid point, but I think it is worth considering the example of double-bass players, who simply learn to play on their intractably large instruments, irrespective of their own personal dimensions. Consideration of this point grew into a mini-essay, too long for this already text-heavy page, which you can read [here](#) if you so wish. Otherwise I can summarize the main points as follows:

- 1) The vast majority of surviving theorbos have stopped string lengths over 85cm. Only a tiny handful are below 80cm, and these were probably intended for tuning with only one re-entrant string, or for tuning with two re-entrant strings at a very high pitch, such as in D.
- 2) I consider that an Italian theorbo with a stopped string length much shorter than about 85cm cannot produce a sound at all comparable to that of a full-size instrument. A theorbo with a stopped string length under 80cm can only function in theorbo tuning by using ultra-modern stringing - fluoro-carbon trebles and metal-overspun basses - thus departing even further from the historical examples.
- 3) If, for reasons of air travel, or physical limitations, a smaller instrument has to be

used, a French model requires fewer compromises than an Italian theorbo. It will, however, be later in style, and not strictly suitable for music by composers such as Monteverdi, which forms part of the theorbo's core repertory.

4) If you are already in possession of a very small theorbo, it is possible to make better use of it by stringing it in a tuning more suitable for its size, rather than invariably stringing it with two re-entrant strings, in A or G. Examples include tuning it in A with one re-entrant string, in D with two re-entrant strings, or in G with one re-entrant string.

5) Modern theorbo players are fighting a losing battle for audibility in large venues, against large forces, often against inauthentically modern instruments. Our major weapon in this battle is to use instruments of historical size, which were expressly built to suit large venues and large forces.

How do I hold a theorbo?

The most effective support is a well-fitting strap, which spreads the weight of the instrument's upper neck across the player's back and shoulders. One end of the strap should be firmly fixed to the endpin. The other end can either be tied around the lower pegbox, or fastened near the upper pegbox and shortened to functioning length by a clip behind the lower pegbox. Another method is to fasten one end of the strap around the lower pegbox, pass it through a loop tied to the endpin, and sit on the end. Another variation is to tie both ends around the lower pegbox, making a large loop which passes over the head and right arm. Whichever version you try, make sure that the strap is exactly the right length to support the instrument, so that your left hand plays no part in this.

My hand/arm/neck/shoulder/back hurts when I play my theorbo; what can I do?

Here I'm assuming that a) you're healthy, and b) you don't have a history of back problems, tendonitis, or other complications. If you do, then I strongly advise you to take your theorbo to a teacher and get detailed advice on holding and playing the instrument BEFORE doing lots of practice on it, even if you have a solid training on lute or guitar.

Here are some of the commonest causes of physical distress when playing the theorbo. Check through them one by one, and take whatever steps you think might help.

1) Find a suitable chair. Most modern chairs are too high to play a lute or guitar in comfort, and many players resort to either a footstool, or raising one foot on the toes, to bring the leg to a comfortable height on which to rest the instrument. A better solution is a lower chair, which should be stable and solid, without arms. Once you've found one, sit squarely on it, with both feet firmly on the ground.

2) Fix a strap to the theorbo, and make sure that it does its job. See above, for different methods of fitting a strap.

3) Avoid trying to see the strings, or your left hand, as you play. Tipping the instrument back to view the strings puts a lot of extra strain on your left hand, and also means that the instrument needs to be held much more firmly to prevent it sliding away.

Should I tune my theorbo in A or G?

The commonest Italian tuning was in A, with two re-entrant strings. This works well for continuo in most keys, though very flat keys are difficult. It also means that you can play the accompanied solo tablatures by Kapsberger and Pittoni, and theorbo tablature accompaniments by Castaldi and Kapsberger without fear of clashing with the key of the continuo part, the guitar alfabeto, or the expected key of the vocal parts. G tuning is mentioned rarely, and was clearly a minority choice. It is more popular today than it probably was historically, largely because it simplifies the transition for players coming to the theorbo from the G lute.

What about double fingerboard strings?

This is the major problem for the modern theorbist. Virtually all surviving theorbos are fitted for double fingerboard strings. A couple have even been converted from single strings to double. However, most modern efforts to make theorbos work with double fingerboard strings have failed because it is very difficult to find a working tension which is tight enough to avoid the strings rattling together, yet light enough not to compromise the bridge, nor to damage the player's hand. The longer the string length, the tougher the problem. I confess I don't have an answer, and would appreciate any help anyone can offer. My sole double-strung theorbo is an English one with stopped strings of only 78cm. There is also the issue that most modern theorbists are fighting to be heard in venues which are often impracticably large, sometimes against implausible forces, and occasionally under directors who have little understanding of what the instrument can reasonably do. A single-strung instrument is less of a headache in such situations, because one can reliably smash out fortissimo notes for hours, without too many extraneous noises. Obviously neither the goal nor the instrument is ideal, and I invite anyone with useful experiences or observations to get in touch. The sooner a discussion of this gets under way, the sooner we may have a solution.

Does the wood of the back make a difference to the sound?

The short answer is probably, but in practice a fine theorbo can be made from almost any suitable timber. It is widely assumed that tropical hardwoods such as ebony and especially rosewood will produce a loud instrument with a bright tone, and that softer

woods such as yew will give an instrument with a softer but sweeter tone. I don't think the situation is quite as simple as that, though different woods do seem to flavour the sound. In my experience the choice of model, the thickening and barring of the soundboard, the stringing, and the way the instrument is played will all have at least as strong an effect on the sound as the wood of the back. The majority of originals have backs made from yew, with smaller numbers of instruments in cypress, sycamore, rosewood, snakewood, birds eye maple, ebony and ivory. Obviously some of these materials are impractical today. Some factors to bear in mind are:

1) An ever-increasing number of tropical hardwoods is on the CITES list, which means an instrument made with these materials will require a certificate from the maker, stating that the wood was purchased before that species was placed on the list. This can be a real pain, especially if the instrument is likely to travel abroad a lot. The same applies to ivory, and whilst not many of us are likely to buy ivory-backed theorbos, any parts (e.g., nut, bridge facing, peg decoration, neck stripes) which LOOK like ivory may attract unwelcome attention from Customs and Excise, especially in the US. If your theorbo has bone or plastic decoration, it is well worth getting a statement to that effect from its maker.

2) Some timbers require more complex varnishing than others, which will generally add to the price, and the resultant finish may be quite fragile. Examples of woods which are usually finished with coloured oil varnish are sycamore, yew, birds eye maple, cypress.

3) Some timbers are more suitable for multi-ribbed backs, others for broad-ribbed backs, and the number of ribs usually makes a significant difference to the price. Yew, and the tropical hardwoods make good multi-rib backs, birds eye maple and sycamore look best on broad ribs, cypress and various fruit woods will happily do either.

4) The traditional use of yew was to make multi-ribbed backs in which each rib is cut to exploit the contrast between the pale sapwood and the darker heartwood, thus having a two-tone stripe along its length. Yew of this straightness is almost unobtainable today, but heartwood yew is still a good possibility. You won't get the stripe, but you will still get the springy resilience of yew.

What about theorbos with more than 14 courses?

A small number of instruments with more than 14 courses survive, and of course we have Kapsberger's Libro Quarto for 19-course theorbo. I don't have an instrument with more than 14 courses, and I can't say that I've felt the lack of additional strings. However, a few of my colleagues own 16-course theorbos, and the additional chromatics are clearly useful in continuo playing. The extra strings put extra strain on the bridge and neck, of course, and also slightly complicate finding one's way around

the instrument. Personally I'm happy to stay with 14 courses, which is sufficient for virtually every need.