Peg Problems

Pegs are the bugbear of many a lutenist. For gut or nylon strings, a well-fitted peg is a vastly more efficient tuning device than either a machine head or an adjuster, but a badly-fitted peg can render the instrument unusable.

Sticking pegs

First check that the peg has not simply swollen (because the weather has turned wetter), and jammed in the pegbox. Release it, wind it up again taking care to push it in just far enough to register securely in the pegbox, and see if it turns smoothly. If it does not, release the string and extract the peg from the pegbox. You should see two shiny bands around the shank, where the peg contacts the pegbox walls. Apply a tiny amount of peg paste to each of these shiny bands, return the peg to the pegbox and work it around a few times to distribute the paste. Re-attach the string. Take care not to overdo the peg paste; you can always apply more but it is rather difficult to remove it. Peg paste is available from most music shops, since violin family instruments also use it.

The peg paste is a dark brown colour. If you have light-coloured pegs and don't want dark brown stains on them, either be very careful to confine the paste to those parts of the peg which are hidden in the pegbox walls, or use a VERY small amount of dry soap instead of peg paste. The soap is much more slippery so be even more sparing with this than with the paste.

Slipping pegs

Rather controversially I also use peg paste on slipping pegs. I find it ensures a properly lubricated contact between peg and pegbox, no matter what the problem may be. Most makers and players recommend applying powdered chalk to slipping pegs, but I find it ends up everywhere except where it's needed. In my experience slipping pegs are, in any case, almost always caused by badly led strings which effectively pull the peg from the pegbox, and these are easily fixed by rewinding the string. Sometimes this is because the hole in the peg is drilled at an unhelpful point along the shank. Drilling another string hole further along the peg may solve the problem permanently. The string holes may even be drilled on the part of the peg shank which lies outside the pegbox. This detail is sometimes seen in old lute pegs and paintings, and is particularly helpful for the outermost strings on all kinds of lutes, and especially for the diapasons on theorbos. Drilling a new hole in a peg is a simple job but remove the peg from the instrument before drilling, and secure it in a padded clamp. A hand drill offers more control of this fiddly job than an electric drill, and the best tool is a tiny finger-held 'Archimedes' drill. To avoid weakening the peg too much, use the smallest drill compatible with the string, and drill the new hole 90 degrees around the shank from the original one. Clean away any fragments of wood

where the drill breaks through, and with a small file make a small groove across the hole, in the direction the string will run. This removes the sharp rim from the hole, which might cut through a thin string.

Pegs which pop out of the pegbox

We are all familiar with the scenario where one opens the lute case to find several strings detuned because the pegs have lost their grip on the pegbox and popped out. Sometimes pegs even pop during playing, and this is a nightmare on a theorbo where many of the pegs are out of reach. The usual culprit is ebony: pegs made from this incredibly hard, black wood just don't seem to work very well on lutes, though they have been used effectively for centuries on the violin family. Most makers are aware of this and will avoid ebony for pegs, choosing to apply black stain to more friendly fruit woods instead. If your instrument has ebony pegs the only permanent solution seems to be a new set of pegs, though if the instrument is normally used in the same place, added care with temperature and humidity control, plus a good case, can help enormously.

Oval pegs

Most peg shanks become oval after some years, because of the different rates of wood shrinkage across and along the grain. A peg which moves alternately freely and stickily when turned has become oval. Oval pegs can be trued up in a peg shaper, which works like a large pencil sharpener. This job is best done by the maker of the instrument if possible, because the taper on the peg shaper needs to match that of the reamer used to shape the holes in the pegbox. If this is not possible, any lute maker should be able to fix this. This is not a DIY job.

Worn pegs

Pegs on older instruments have often worn to the extent that they project further through the pegbox than they originally did, and this may bring their heads awkwardly close to the pegbox walls. The best solution is to rebush the holes in the pegbox, which is a job for a maker. A less satisfactory solution is to get new, thicker pegs, but these will not offer such fine tuning adjustments as thin pegs.

Broken Pegs

Very occasionally a peg will break off, generally leaving the shank jammed in the pegbox. This needs to be drilled out carefully by a maker. Do not try to knock out the stuck peg with hammers and punches.

Twisting Pegs

Sometimes one meets pegs where the structure of the peg wood is unable to cope with the torque: the head of the peg twists but the shank does not move. The only solution to this is a set of new pegs in a different wood.

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