

Theorbo sizes: the uncomfortable truth

One of the questions I am frequently asked is how large a theorbo one should buy - or rather, to be more accurate, how small a theorbo one can get away with! Modern theorbo players in the majority are marked by their extreme reluctance to use instruments of historical size, preferring instead to commission inauthentically small instruments. There are two main - and perfectly understandable - reasons for this. One is that larger instruments are more tiring to play than smaller ones, especially for solo music. The other is that the extreme length of a large theorbo makes it very difficult to travel with, especially by air.

I will address those specific difficulties later, but first I must be blunt here: many of the so-called theorbos which modern makers are producing (often at the request of theorbo players) are in no way historical. Many have too many strings on the neck, and thus a larger chromatic range and a weaker bass register than their historical counterparts. The overwhelming majority of surviving theorbos have only six stopped courses, which is enough to play all of the surviving Italian and French solo theorbo music. Many modern theorbos are too small in all of their dimensions, but especially in their string lengths. As a result of this, a great number can only work in theorbo tuning if they are strung with overtly modern strings, such as fluoro-carbon trebles and overspun nylon diapasons. The small size of the instruments results in a small volume, which is usually compensated for by increasing the string tension and playing with nails, for which there is at best, very limited historical evidence. Needless to say, the sound is far from that of a large, historically accurate theorbo.

Historically, theorbos came in several sizes, almost all of them larger than the average modern instrument. The largest are instruments by Buchenberg and Grail, which have stopped string lengths of 98-99 cm. Not far behind are instruments by Giorgio Sellas at 96cm, Magno Dieffopruchar at 93cm, and Alban, Schelle, Buchenberg and many others, in the high 80s. These are not the exceptions but the norm: surviving old theorbos which are significantly smaller are extremely unusual, yet these are the norm today. In scaling down modern theorbos purely for convenience, we are attempting the equivalent of making a cello function as a double bass. A bass presents different technical problems from a cello, and of course it is more cumbersome to carry around - but people still learn the bass! If we have any respect and love for historic instruments, (and why else would we want to play or make them?), we should respect them for what they are, and learn to play on them as they are, not on scaled-down toy versions. Opting for inauthentically small instruments may save us the effort of learning to play on the big ones, but in doing so we are not recreating the historical theorbo; we are inventing a new instrument, and one which is wholly dependent upon modern string technology in order to function.

There is another good reason to revive the large historical theorbo, rather than to continue to rely on its modern, reduced counterpart. The volume of a theorbo, and the

incisiveness of its timbre, are directly related to its size and especially to its string lengths. A full-sized theorbo will easily hold its own within a baroque ensemble, even a large one. The modern small theorbo, even with the dubious benefits of modern strings and nails, will be largely inaudible, mainly because its timbre lacks the incisive, nasal edge of the larger instrument. As the economic situation in the Arts becomes ever more difficult, we theorbo players have increasingly to justify our presence in an ensemble, and directors are unlikely to employ us if they cannot hear us. If we play on properly built, authentically strung, full-sized historical theorbos, they will hear us! If we play on under-sized, compromised instruments which have little or no historical basis, we not only ignore the skill and experience of generations of historical lutemakers, who created the theorbo, but we are also undoing much of the valuable work done by our modern-day colleagues who made the theorbo an indispensable part of the early music scene during the 1980s and 90s. In short, we are making ourselves obsolescent through inaudibility and laziness.

At this point I must return to the main difficulties of playing a large theorbo. First, the technical problems. The vast majority of the perceived difficulties with large instruments are caused by one or more of the following:

1) The instrument is badly set up. Many makers assume, quite reasonably, that the larger the instrument, the higher the action and the wider the spacing must be. In fact the action does not need to be higher; the string tension on a large instrument needs to be tighter than on a small one, and this will compensate for any perceived tendency for longer strings to rattle against the frets if plucked hard. The bridge spacing does not need to be wider - it can be anything you like within reason. The nut spacing of the stopped strings needs to be significantly **NARROWER** than on a smaller instrument. You can ask your hand to stretch along the strings, or across them, but not both simultaneously. With a long string length we have no option but to stretch along the strings, so we must reduce the stretches across the fingerboard to compensate.

2) The player attempts to use left-hand chord shapes derived from the lute, without paying sufficient attention to the differences encouraged or dictated by the re-entrant tuning of the theorbo. This can lead to unnecessary effort for the stopping hand, duplicating notes on two strings, stopping notes where an open string is available, or reaching for a note which is available more conveniently on a different string, purely because of lute-based habits.

3) The player is reluctant to make full use of the diapasons, (usually because of a fear of plucking the wrong one). However, using the diapasons wherever possible not only increases the volume and audibility of the instrument, but also releases the left hand from the necessity of stopping large chords. Surviving tablatures in the song accompaniments of e.g., Castaldi and Kapsberger, indicate that heavy use of the diapasons, often doubling the written bass line an octave lower, was normal.

4) The player attempts to use too many thick chord voicings, (again a habit often carried over from the lute, which requires denser chord voicings because of its higher register and lighter timbre). The stronger sound and lower pitch of a theorbo mean that thinner chord voicings - two or three notes only - can still provide good continuo support.

So, as a means of taming a large theorbo into playability, I suggest the following:

- 1) Examine your instrument, and see if its set-up can possibly be improved.
- 2) Examine every chord shape you play, to see if duplicated notes can be removed, or hard-to-reach notes located elsewhere.
- 3) Practise using the diapasons routinely, not as a special effect.
- 4) Think carefully about the tuning of your diapasons when playing continuo, and be prepared to change them to suit the key of a piece, in order to give you as many useful chordal options as possible.

And so to the difficulties of travel... This is, I think, the only legitimate reason for hesitation before choosing a large theorbo, especially as a first or only theorbo. A large Italian theorbo is intractably long, and since the spaces between rows of airline seats have closed up dramatically in recent years, it is often now impossible to fit a theorbo into a seat, since its body will only fit between the rows if the instrument is bolt upright, which means there is never sufficient head room to accommodate its length. Also many airlines refuse to accept a theorbo, even if a seat has been bought for it. I must confess I have long ago given up attempting to travel on airlines with my original Italian theorbo (which measures just over 2 metres in its case), and have acquired a full-sized Italian folding instrument with a detachable neck. It folds down to cello size, and so far has not been a problem on a plane. Sometimes I opt to fly with a smaller French theorbo if the repertory is suitable. Historically, French theorbos seem to have had shorter diapason lengths, which significantly reduces the problematic length of the instrument, without severely compromising the body size or the stopped string length.

On the issue of travel, the bass players appear to have the advantage over us, because their instruments are more standardized, and there are commercially-made flight cases available, which are designed to enable the bass to travel safely in an aircraft hold. In fact stories of broken basses are not uncommon, and the cases are formidably heavy and expensive. We also have the option of putting our large theorbos in the aircraft hold for flights, of course. Personally I'm very reluctant to do this, because of the difficulty of replacing an instrument if it gets broken or lost. However, we all have to make our own individual decisions about this. Flying with a large theorbo remains a problem, and I would be glad to hear from anyone with suggestions or contributions

to a debate on this. However, not every performance requires a flight... Many professional lute players own many lutes, but usually only one theorbo, even though it frequently accounts for more of their work than the other lutes put together. Many amateur players are skilled accompanists, and do not have the same problem of flying to engagements on a regular basis. In both situations, a historically-based large theorbo would be an asset, not a liability, and if more such players were prepared to invest in large theorbos, the future of the historical theorbo rather than its modern mongrel counterpart would be assured. This essay was written partly to answer a question which frequently crops up in my email in-box, but also to encourage players to consider a full-size theorbo. Theorbos of one kind or another are frequently seen on the concert platform. It is time for them to be heard as well.