

GUITAR MUSIC  
FROM THE COURT OF LOUIS XIV  
Works of Robert de Visée and Francesco Corbetta



ROBERT STRIZICH, Baroque Guitar

## The Baroque Guitar in France

The five-course guitar (or “Spanish guitar,” as it was then known) was well established in France before 1640 because of a fashion for things Spanish, and was used at that time primarily to accompany the new popular dance-songs that came from Italy and Spain. The key to the universal success of the baroque guitar as a serious instrument, however, hinged upon its acceptance at the French court. France at this time was unofficially ruled by Cardinal Mazarin, who surrounded himself with a sumptuous Italian life-style that included a score of Italian musicians. The Dauphin – destined to become Louis XIV (1638-1715) – became passionately interested in both dancing and music; indeed, Voltaire later rather bluntly remarked that “the only thing he ever learned was to dance and to play the guitar.”

Mazarin wanted to provide the best teacher available, in order to encourage what would become Louis’ lifelong attachment to his chosen instrument. Historians Bourdelot and Bonnet confirmed in 1715 that it was “proof of the greatness of His Majesty that they say he equaled, after eighteen months, his guitar master whom Cardinal Mazarin had brought from Italy expressly to teach him to play this instrument, much in vogue at the time.”

Louis’ tutor was Francesco Corbetta, an Italian born at Pavia in 1615. By mid-century, Corbetta had already published two guitar books for rulers of the Italian city-states at Bologna and Milan, and was the probable author of another for the king of Spain. Not only had he been influential in establishing the guitar as a solo instrument, but he had also already secured his reputation among two important groups:

Europe's professional guitarists, and the potentates of Italy, Spain and France.

Meanwhile, France was beginning to assume its dominance throughout Europe, and Paris was capturing both politically and socially the attention of every European court; indeed, until the resurgence of the Austrian empire, France was the focal point of Western culture. And since Louis XIV himself was a guitarist, the instrument experienced its first "golden age" under the patronage of Europe's courts, as attested to in many paintings, especially those of Jean Antoine Watteau.

Because the Italians had already developed a solo guitar style, they were in demand at virtually every court, and Corbetta enjoyed top priority. He maintained Paris as the hub of his activities, and from there went first to

Vienna, and afterwards to Hanover. Corbetta's acquaintances at Paris precipitated a permanent friendship with Charles II and his family, who were in exile in France during the period of the English Commonwealth; as soon as Charles was restored to the throne, Corbetta was also seeking his fortune in Great Britain and entertaining at Whitehall.

### **The Music of Corbetta and de Visée**

Corbetta's book for Charles II, *La Guitarre Royale* (Paris, 1671), represents not only the peak of Corbetta's output, but also in many ways the apex of the baroque guitar style. In spite of its significance, however, this music has been misunderstood and performed anachronistically on the modern 6-string guitar – partially because of a lack of understanding of the style, but chiefly due to ignorance of the tuning

of the French baroque guitar. Indeed, Corbetta's tuning for the music in this book – which later became the standard French tuning – was only recently re-discovered and publicized. Corbetta recommended a lower octave only on the fourth of the five courses (i.e., aa, d'd, gg, bb, e'); any other tuning would distort or obliterate his intentions.

Corbetta, by virtue of his consummate musicianship and his continuous travels, was able to achieve a balance of continental styles. He ordered his music into suites; in his preface of 1671, he recommended the cosmopolitan set of dances that later became standard for all instruments – *allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue*. He commonly used a *prélude* and often added other dances as well. His melodies were densely embellished with five *agréments* or ornaments (trill, slurs, vibrato, inferior

appoggiatura, and mordent) which fill his lines with marvelous nuances.

Unfortunately, the life of Robert de Visée is not as well documented. He served the courts of both Louis XIV and Louis XV of France as guitarist in the private chambers of the royalty. In addition, he sang and played other stringed instruments – theorbo, viol, and possibly lute. He is best known today for his guitar music, which is contained in two books dedicated to Louis XIV as well as several manuscripts; Robert Strizich has made all of it available in modern notation (including the music on this recording) in *Robert de Visée: Oeuvres complètes pour guitare* (Paris: Heugel, “Le Pupitre” No. 15).

De Visée was a devotée (and perhaps actually a student) of Corbetta. This is evident in the

title of the last selection on this recording, “*Allemande – Tombeau de Mr. Francisque*,” a moving elegy in praise of Corbetta; as all of de Visée’s music, it requires Corbetta’s tuning of 1671. His ornamentation is based on Corbetta’s, yet de Visée adds the possibility of a delayed or stressed appoggiatura.

Of all of Corbetta’s admirers, de Visée was the only guitarist-composer in France to fully assimilate – already in his first book of 1682 – the innovations and technique of the older master; in his second book of 1686, de Visée went on to develop a unique and individual style, representative of the gallantries that eventually characterized the music of French absolutism.

Dr. Richard Pinnell

## The Performances

The music of Francesco Corbetta and Robert de Visée represents the zenith of the development of the baroque guitar during the *grand siècle*, and even – I think it is not too bold to assert – one of the artistic glories of the court of the *Roi de soleil*. Yet, although their names are frequently mentioned together, and in spite of the evident superficial similarities of their music, the two composers could hardly be more different with regard to musical ethos.

Heir to both the mystical musings of the mid-century French lutenists and the energetic vigor of the Italian tradition, Corbetta emphasizes the coloristic and harmonic aspects of the baroque guitar: the dense textures, and the fragmentary, motivic melodic treatment reminiscent of the lutenistic *style brisé* are all earmarks of his essentially passionate music.

De Visée's works, on the other hand – written under the admitted influence of the “inimitable M. de Lulli” – represent an artistic stance of poise and elegance; the long, singing melodic lines, the clear division between melody and bass, the more purposeful harmonic motion – all these contribute towards a musical statement of control, balance and refinement.

The pieces by Corbetta recorded here comprise some of the most remarkable works from *La guitarrero royale* of 1671. The Suite in D Minor is one of his most extended, and yet most successful, treatments of the suite form. The Suite in C Major finds Corbetta flamboyantly exploiting the coloristic resources of the instrument in a work of unusual form: sandwiched in between two *chaconnes* (which make electrifying use of a number of idiomatic devices, including two types of strummed *repicco*) are a *menuet* and a rather idiosyncratic

*gigue*. I have chosen to precede this suite with a *prélude* in C Minor taken from another suite in the 1671 anthology.

The first of the three works by de Visée is the Suite in E Minor, taken from his *Livre de pièces pour la guitarrero* of 1686; it is of concise three-movement form, culminating in a *passacaille en rondeau* that makes use of striking chromaticism in several of the couplets. The Suite in A Major as recorded here is actually a synthesis of pieces from two different sources: to a short suite (*allemande, courante, sarabande*) from de Visée's *Livre de guitarrero dédié au Roy* of 1682, I have added a *prélude*, and *rondeau*, taken from a manuscript of guitar music now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Rés. F 844). The *tombeau* dedicated to the memory of Corbetta and its *prélude* are taken from a C minor suite also found in de

Visée's first publication; the *prélude* features some of the composer's most moving chromatic passages, while in the *tombeau*, with its emphasis on strummed *batteries* intentionally in the style of its dedicatee, de Visée achieves one of the most eloquent musical statements ever conceived for this small, yet expressive instrument.

### **Right-Hand Technique and Tone**

Players of the modern classical guitar almost always use long right-hand nails, engaging the strings with either nail and fingertip together or, in some cases, with the nail alone. Nail technique, in conjunction with the relatively heavy stringing and construction of the modern guitar, produces a tone that is forceful, pointed and somewhat "glassy" in character. The paradigm for modern guitar tone is, actually, the sound of the piano; while most present-day guitarists

are often not cognizant of this fact, the connection between the two instruments was acknowledged by none other than Andrés Segovia, who often related that it was the piano that had initially inspired his concept of right-hand technique and tone.

By way of contrast, baroque guitarists and lutenists had a quite different sound ideal, and generally favored an alternative right-hand technique: they kept their nails very short, and used only the fleshy fingertip in plucking the strings. Fingertip technique, combined with the lighter stringing and construction of baroque instruments, resulted in a tone that was softer and less focused than modern guitar tone, but which was at the same time fuller, more intimate and sensitive in character -- indeed, a tone more akin to that of the harpsichord than the piano.

While it is possible that a few baroque guitarists might have used nails, I believe that the evidence points overwhelmingly to fingertip technique being the norm for lute and guitar players of the period. Therefore, I have chosen to perform these works of Corbetta and de Visée without nails (indeed, the only occasion on which nails engage the strings is in the execution of strums or *batteries*, and in this case only the back of the nail contacts the strings). The result is a tone that is lighter, quieter and somewhat more diffuse (often with an organlike “chiff”) than would be produced by nail technique – a tone with a warmth, roundness and intimacy that is well suited to the 17th-century aesthetic of this music.

## The Instrument

The guitar used is a replica of an instrument built in 1690 by Jean Voboam, one of a distinguished family of Parisian luthiers who were responsible for the most significant French guitars of the 17th and early 18th centuries; the original is now part of the instrument collection of the Paris Conservatory. The replica was constructed by Nico van der Waals, Oudkarspel, Holland; in this copy of consummate craftsmanship, Mr. van der Waals has realized the perfect vehicle for the performance of the music of Corbetta and de Visée. The instrument was tuned in the French manner (aa, d'd, gg, bb, e'), and tuned approximately a semitone below modern pitch (A = 415 Hz.); equal temperament was used throughout.

Robert Strizich





Peter Troxell

Robert Strizich, guitarist and lutenist, has concertized extensively in North America and Europe. As a soloist, he has performed in recitals, festivals and radio broadcasts on both continents. As an accompanist, he has collaborated with such notable singers as Julianne Baird, Max van Egmond, Judith Nelson, Andrea von Ramm, Nigel Rogers and Randall Wong. As an ensem-

ble player, he has performed with many well-known early music groups. He has also performed as both a soloist and ensemble player at numerous festivals in the United States and Europe. His recorded solo and ensemble performances can be heard on EMI, Intrada, Musical Heritage Society, MusicMasters, Titanic, and 1750 Arch Records.

In the field of early music performance practice, Mr. Strizich is recognized as one of the foremost authorities on the baroque guitar. He is particularly known both for his scholarly research on baroque guitarists and for his seminal edition of the complete guitar works of Robert de Visée (published by Heugel, Paris). His new edition of the complete guitar works of Spanish baroque guitarist-composer Gaspar Sanz has recently been published by Editions Doberman (Québec, Canada).

Mr. Strizich is also a noted composer, and his music has been performed in the United States, Europe, and South America. He has composed a variety of works for instrumental, vocal and electro-acoustic media, many of which are published by Fallen Leaf Press (Berkeley) and recorded on the Musical Heritage Society and Wildboar labels.

His endeavors in the fields of performance, composition and scholarship have been recognized by grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Wellesley College, and the Universities of California at Santa Cruz and Berkeley.

A former lute and baroque guitar student of Thomas Binkley and Eugen Dombois at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Basel, Switzerland, Mr. Strizich also holds both B.A. and M.A. degrees in music from the University of California at Berkeley, as well as a Ph.D. in composition from the University of California at San Diego.

He has taught performance, composition, music history and music theory at Wellesley College, Trinity College (Hartford), the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, San Francisco State University and the University of California at Santa Cruz.

## Recording Data

Baroque guitar by Nico van der Waals (Oudkarspel, Holland), after Jean Voboam (1690)

Producer and Recording Engineer: Ralph Dopmeyer

Digital Mastering: Mike Cogan and Robert Shumaker, Bay Records (Berkeley, CA)

Recorded at Houghton Memorial Chapel, Wellesley College (Wellesley, MA)

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Cover Illustration: Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), "The Foursome" ("La partie quarrée"), c. 1713 (detail); Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Mildred Anna Williams Collection, 1977.8.

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Robert Strizich, Baroque Guitar

## Works of Francesco Corbetta (1615-1681)

Suite in D Minor (1671) 16'49"

1. Prélude 2. Allemande 3. Courante 4. Sarabande  
5. Gigue – presto 6. Passacaille 7. Gavotte

Prélude in C Minor and Suite in C Major (1671) 9'54"

8. Prélude 9. Caprice de Chacone – lentement/plus vite  
10. Gigue 11. Menuet 12. Autre Chacone

## Works of Robert de Visée (late 17th – early 18th centuries)

Suite in E Minor (1686) 5'55"

13. Sarabande 14. Menuet 15. Passacaille

Suite in A Major (1682) 10'40"

16. Prélude 17. Allemande 18. Courante  
19. Sarabande 20. Rondeau

From the Suite in C Minor (1682) 6'20"

21. Prélude 22. Allemande – Tombeau de Mr. Francisque

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