

(Ed. note: The next few Newsletters will contain articles on lute maintenance by Ray Nurse, a noted lute builder, performer, and teacher. He studied building with Ian Harwood and lute with Eugen Dombois, and has examined old lutes extensively in European museums.)

Very rarely does one encounter a lute that is well maintained and adjusted. Lutemakers often do not put an instrument into final adjustment, believing that the player should be able to do this to his own liking. Over a period of time, nearly all lutes will change slightly and will have to be readjusted. Lutenists are frequently afraid to do anything to their instruments other than play (some even seem to tune reluctantly), yet a bit of common-sense maintenance work on a regular basis will invariably improve the playability and even tone of the lute. Players should not fear to do this work themselves; because of their intimate knowledge of their own instrument and personal preferences regarding action, stringing, and spacing, they are really the only ones who can get satisfactory results for themselves. These articles will deal with maintenance and adjustment problems that a player should be able to handle by himself, and I hope they will encourage lutenists to keep their instruments in top playing order.

LUTE MAINTENANCE - PART I

PEGS

"Look well unto the Pegs, that they be Truly Fitted; for if they be not, you will find more Trouble by reason of Them, than by any other Thing about the Lute." -Thomas Mace

Pegs will often either stick or slip. This is usually the result of one or more of the following: (a) The peg is badly fitted in the first place. (b) The peg has dried out since the initial fitting and is no longer round in cross-section. (c) The peg and/or hole have worn unevenly. (d) The peg-lubricant has dried out. (e) Excessive humidity has caused the pegs and pegbox to swell, thereby locking pegs fast in their holes. (f) The string is improperly wrapped around the peg.

The first four problems above will be solved by the following procedure, which should be carried out from time to time even if the pegs seem to fit adequately. The resultant ease in tuning will more than offset the minimal time involved. (1) Remove the peg. (2) Using a cloth or very fine sandpaper (no coarser than 220, which has been rubbed out by wiping it on itself), clean off the old peg lubricant. (3) Replace the peg in the hole and, applying a bit of pressure, give it a few turns. (4) Take it out again: it should have developed shiny spots wherever it was in firm contact with the hole. If it fits properly there should be an even ring of shine at both ends of the peg. If there is a shiny ring only around one end and not the other, the taper of the peg is imperfect, being too big at whichever end is shiny. If there are rings at both ends, but these are broken and not continuous around the peg, then the peg is not perfectly round. (5) If the fit is imperfect, the shiny spots should be sanded off (using 220 sandpaper). The peg should be replaced in the hole and turned (as in step c above) and reexamined. As this process is repeated, the shiny spots should gradually develop into shiny rings. Only when the rings are even at both ends and continuous around the peg should you go on to the next step. (6) The pegs should be lubricated over the shiny areas to make them turn smoothly. Commercially made "peg-dope" for violin pegs can be purchased at music stores and is adequate. However, one can easily do as well, if not better, with ordinary chalk and soap (Sunlight is my favourite). Pick some chalk that is the same colour as the peg on your lute and scribble over the shiny areas with it. Then roll these same areas over the edge of the bar of soap. Try the peg in the hole and see if it turns smoothly. If it jerks, put on a bit more soap; if it turns too easily and doesn't hold, put on more chalk. The peg should now be a perfect fit and operate smoothly.

If excessive humidity is the problem (problem e above), the lute has probably been kept somewhere damp (a basement, etc.) Lutes should be kept in normal humidity, neither too damp nor too dry, and preferably always in their cases. High humidity will often cause more serious problems: makers frequently use water-soluble animal glues which will soften, thus necks and bridges pull off, bellies come undone at the bottom, etc. A lute that has been under high-humidity conditions should be taken somewhere less damp and dried out slowly over a week or so. If this is done too abruptly, the instrument could crack.

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