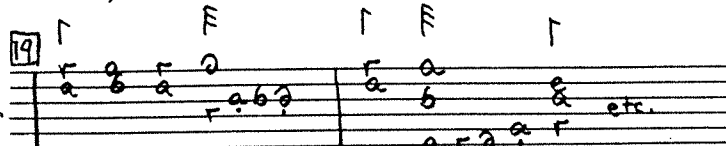


## TECHNIQUE

by Catherine Liddell and Robert Strizich  
(continued from the previous newsletter)

Perhaps at this point we should mention some relative advantages and disadvantages of the thumb-under technique. The first advantage to be noticed is a definite improvement in tone, for it is now easier to play both strings in a course and to use a larger area of flesh on the fingertip, all of which produce a fuller, rounder, and more "fleshy" sound. Thumb-index runs on the lower courses are much easier to execute, since the thumb can move more naturally and the index finger is now in a better position to play on the bass strings. For example, the following passage from Francesco's Fantasia 33 (Ness edition) would be much more difficult to play with the thumb-out technique:

You will also find that thumb-index runs on the lower courses sound fuller and stronger with the thumb-under technique, particularly if you use



octave stringing on the basses. On a ten-course or baroque lute, it is much easier for the thumb to reach the lower courses, and the upward strumming with the index finger, called "raking play" by Mace, is greatly facilitated. Although it has not been our experience, some have found that they can play thumb-index runs faster in this position. Lastly, when using this position, one has the feeling of being much closer to the spirit of the music, since one is using the technique the composers themselves used.

On the other hand, a possible disadvantage of the thumb-under technique is that the tone can lack a certain sharpness, depending on the size and shape of the fingers. This is especially true if one is accustomed to the type of tone produced with fingernails; indeed, those who play with nails will probably find this technique unfeasible.

We feel that if your main interest is in playing Renaissance music, it would definitely be worth your while to try the thumb-under position. Furthermore, if you are dissatisfied with your tone, this hand position might be the answer for you. If you desire to try it, you will have better results if you completely set aside your old technique. It may take 2-4 months before you begin to feel comfortable in the new position. It is entirely natural for your thumb to feel confused at first, but with persistence it will become accustomed to plucking inside the hand. We do not claim that this technique is the answer for everybody, but most lutenists who have tried it find that their playing sounds better and their hand is more comfortable, even though they may have been quite satisfied with their old position.

One might question the appropriateness of this technique for baroque lute. It is true that a number of 17th-century writers (e.g. Vallet and Piccinini) definitely advocate that the thumb be held away from the fingers. Also, most paintings from the period seem to indicate a thumb-out position. However, the pictorial evidence cannot be taken as entirely conclusive, since most of these paintings show the hand in an open position, with the thumb resting on the basses; when this is the case, it is not at all clear how the thumb would behave if the hand had to play in closed position. Furthermore, at least one painting from the late 17th or early 18th century quite clearly illustrates a player using the thumb-under position on a baroque lute: J.B. Heinsch's "Glorification of St. Ignatius" (reprod. in Buchner, no. 121). In general, we believe that one is on shakier ground historically in using the thumb-under position for later music. However, many have found it to be very successful on baroque lute, especially since the angle of the hand makes it easier to reach the bass courses.