



MEANTONE TEMPERAMENTS ON LUTES AND VIOLS, by David Dolata

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BOOK REVIEWS

David Dolata (2016). *MEANTONE TEMPERAMENTS ON LUTES AND VIOLS*.
Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press. 280 pp., \$48.00. ISBN
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“The myth, of course, is that fretted instruments have always been restricted to equal temperament.” (p. 9). This statement’s being considered a myth might unsettle those approaching the lute or viol as amateurs. Even those moving towards these instruments from their modern descendants in the guitar and violin families will have some trouble understanding how they can be tuned in anything but equal temperament: the frets on a guitar start off widest at the nut and narrow proportionately as one moves up the neck towards the body, ending in the narrow, dusty frets nearest the sound hole. Because one fret has to set the pitch for each of the six strings on the instrument and the frets on modern guitars are metal and fixed into the fingerboard, there appears to be little option in temperament. Lutes and viols, on the other hand, have gut frets tied around the neck that can be moved up or down to produce notes slightly higher or lower in pitch.

Although many amateur lutenists nevertheless set their frets in an evenly diminishing pattern like a modern guitar, close inspection of instruments played by modern lutenists such as Paul O’Dette and other top professionals reveals a much more complex pattern. On their instruments, certain frets appear to be a bit wider or narrower than expected, other frets are angled slightly; in some cases, small, temporary frets called *tastini* can be seen, especially between the first fret and the nut. Is this historically informed practice or practical adjustment made by modern performers? As David Dolata discovers in his new monograph, *Meantone Temperaments on Lutes and Viols*, it is actually a subtle combination of both.

Dolata begins by discussing the theoretical writings from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries that indicate that tied gut frets on the lute, as well as the closely related vihuela, were sometimes adjusted by more advanced performers. He carefully teases out the differences in practical advice on fretting and pure theoretical showmanship. In reality, the sources are often blatantly contradictory; one advises something approaching equal temperament, with another implying a just intonation possible on a monochord but virtually useless on a lute or viol. Sorting out the sources that appear as nothing more than classical allusion from those written by and for performers, Dolata comes up with convincing evidence that some period instruments were set up in a type of meantone temperament.

This evidence is buttressed by two additional factors explored in the succeeding chapters: (1) both lutenists and violists would have had to perform with keyboard players almost certainly tuned in meantone and (2) existing metal-strung instruments, such as citterns and orpharions with fixed frets, show variants from the expected equal temperament pattern—again approaching some version of meantone temperament. Iconographic evidence adds to the survey that something unusual was up with early lute and viol fretting. The quest in all of this involves finding purer major and minor thirds than strict equal temperament would allow; rather than a compromise which seeks the ability to play equally well in all keys (an ability rarely called for in early music), musicians sought ways to distribute dissonance into distant keys that were not used, so that their major thirds and other intervals were closer to pure.

None of this is particularly startling to those involved with early music in recent times. Mark Lindley's *Lutes, Viols and Temperaments* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), for example, explored the topic in some detail, but offered relatively little practical advice. And as performers, many of us have experimented with moving frets around a bit to correct intonation for a particular key/mode. Dolata, however, is the first to systematically and mathematically analyze the placement of certain frets on the lute, vihuela, and theorbo to achieve various types of meantone temperaments, as well as techniques such as bending and pushing the strings to raise or lower the pitch when fret placement alone is not enough. Angled frets, doubled frets, and *tastini* are all treated in some detail with musical examples. Although the majority of discussion involves the lute and related instruments, a separate section near the end of the book covers viols specifically. A Web site offers enlightening sound files associated with specific examples in the book, with both synthesized and recorded examples on a variety of instruments (http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/product_info.php?products_id=807989).

A slight word of caution: portions of the text are quite complex and assume a certain familiarity with the basics of intervals and acoustic theory. These concepts are explained in the text but it can be slow-going, even for those with a firm foundation in music. It is also more difficult than it should be to gather the advice on how to tune a lute, viol, or a theorbo to a specific temperament. One has to combine certain portions of chapters and jump around in the text a bit, depending on the desired tuning (there are many for lute) and the type of repertoire. An appendix collecting practical tuning advice for lute in G and A and theorbo in A and their fret patterns with exact pitch settings would have been useful, although in truth Dolata expects the reader to come up with these on their own. It might also be warned that to get the fullest advantages out of Dolata's meantone suggestions, one would play with high quality gut (not nylon) strings, that can be adjusted more easily with the pushing and pulling techniques he describes. Still, there is a wealth of knowledge here for more advanced performers and those with an interest in historical temperaments. Even if one is reluctant to explore the full implications of meantone temperaments, a basic realization that the repertoire for lutes and viols lies somewhere outside of the equal tempered world we now inhabit, will provide a stimulus for future performance and research.

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