

# The slur concept in the late Baroque lute tablatures

By Michel Cardin

In this article certain crucial points will be raised concerning the slurs in the late Baroque lute tablature music, an area of performance practice that remains enigmatic although players are always skeptical and puzzled about it. It is hoped that it could help them to gain insights into their use in music of the late Baroque. My concerns will be focused on S.L. Weiss and his fellow composers' music found in the Central Europe manuscripts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This kind of analysis could come to different conclusions with manuscripts of other places and other times. Looking in the future, it will be very interesting to have general analysis of compared slur calligraphies of all tablatures. I'm talking about calligraphy indeed, since although slurs are at first an instrumental and musical technique, they must be seen on the paper more as ornamental signs than representations of left hand articulations. My growing observations over the years took shape when practicing the three last solo sonatas of the London Manuscript by Weiss, with detailed comparison with the concordant sources.

We can begin an analysis of slur usage with the solo sonata no.24, S-C 30 by noting that in measure 14 of the minuet, slurs are obviously necessary. The question is: why are they present in the London ms but not in the Dresden one. The latter shows an as clean, carefully made copy, and it is not possible to consider these "optional".



At measure 19, 2<sup>nd</sup> beat, the inferior appoggiatura is perfectly drawn in London but much too far away at left in Dresden, misleading players by giving the impression of a slur between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> beats. This would make no sense since a bass occurs in the same time but a publisher following carefully the Dresden version and not being a lutenist could think it does.



At measure 24, London again has a slur well placed between two notes, but Dresden has it much too far at right this time, giving the reverse impression of an appoggiatura. This happening on a sixteenth note, it wouldn't make sense either.

By the same token the London version of the sarabande contains a meticulous approach to the treatment of slurs whereas that of the Dresden ms seems less carefully contrived. Conversely, in a sonata such as no.8, S-C 12 it is the Dresden version that comes across as the more highly thought out. Why are there so huge differences? It would seem that, except for special cases, the slurs were of secondary importance to the

actual notes in the 18th century lute repertoire, providing an optional, deliberately imprecise adjunct to the musical gesture, and were providing first and foremost an important contribution to the visual flow of the calligraphy. This would account for the different copying styles, with some copyists using infrequent slurring while others would garnish the manuscript with same. Still other copyists were prone to enormous calligraphic gestures that slurred only two notes while their colleagues would use the tiniest of ink curves to combine several notes, or, as seen in the previous example, neglect the sign positioning to the point of breaking the performance's logics in the sake of pure calligraphic elegance. This often leads to the modern habit, visually oriented as we are, of performing these slurs incorrectly, and indeed often in a manner completely at odds with the intention of the composer.

This is why one could say that modern editions of Baroque lute music, like the Peters London Ms, could have included corrections for slurs as well as for notes, rhythms, etc. Many slurs could have also been added, *especially* where they are obviously needed. Of course, this would have meant a long supplementary process, to be in hands of an active performer who must find solutions for a flowing, equilibrate playing, not a musicologist. This consciousness of interpretative necessity for slurs can be done only with a long term practice schedule and even if most of them (existing or to be added) can be easily dealt with, a good number will have to be relocated or reinvented, this with parsimony because personal taste is an inevitable part of the choice. This will bring in the future various editions with different slurring, just as for modern guitar transcriptions. And, yes, I do believe that one day new editions will put the emphasis on slurs in order to help amateurs or students, restrained as they are with continuous indecision about slurs. They read original tablatures without this remake, their playing being directly affected. This being said, as for advanced guitarists annoyed by abundant fingerings in guitar editions, these lute editions-with-precise-slurring will be of short concern for advanced lutenists, who will do their own adjustment work.

This topic can be expanded upon during discussions concerning the Allegro of the twenty-fifth solo sonata, S-C 31 (London only). Slur indications appear frequently at great distances from the musical notes (e.g.: four notes in meas.5, 45, 53) and it becomes difficult to know which ones should be "officially" grouped: the first three? The last three? All four? Only the middle two? But look how beautiful those slurs are. What a pleasure for the copyist to draw them with a nice pen !



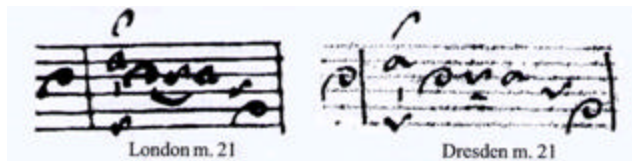
In fact, It seems that the copyist had no intention to indicate anything other than the general idea of a slur. In order to publish this music in modern notation, however, certain decisions must be taken, and somebody's choice remains one among other choices. Another publication of the same works will propose, partly, even without noticing discrepancies, different solutions. One can find a perfect example of this 'deliberate impreciseness' in the tablature notation of the Allegro. A certain passage (meas.2) returns in the second part (meas.26) without its slur, though it is clearly implied. At another point in the music (meas.24) three semi-quavers are slurred within a group of four, even though normal playing practice would indicate a preference for the logical, spontaneous grouping of all four. According to custom, this kind of precision would have been less important than the visual allure of the graphic design. Let's look carefully at the notes: a curve drawn under the four notes would have messed up the nice visual presentation simply because the bass note under the first of four would have been in the way:



Editors and non-professional lutenists are misled to think that what they see is what is real and they perpetuate wrong slurring. A lutenist might end up correcting these but not editors. The precision inherent in contemporary editing practices leads, inevitably, to a misleading presentation of the music since slurring decisions do not become tested through regular performance. These ambiguities will no doubt be clarified as more and more practicing lutenists embrace the problems of early notation. As yet another example of the indiscriminate use of slurring, the Allegro reveals at one point (meas.17) a three note slur which reappears superimposed on a two note grouping, in a very delicate way, following as always the first rule of elegant design.

It is equally important to resist the temptation to add slurs where they are not musically pertinent. One passage in the Bourree naturally needs a detached, slightly heavier approach, an effect that would be negated if rendered light and fluid through the use of slurs. One must not automatically think that the composer or copyist "forgot" to put slurs, and rather strive to resolve ambiguities within the direct sense of the musical discourse. For the gigue on the other hand, as for many others, we note the absolute necessity of providing more slurs than those indicated in a piece of this kind. This also leads one to believe that in this musical period slurs were treated similarly to figured bass notation, with great precision during certain passages of clear expressive import, but otherwise presented in a lackadaisical manner, leaving many decisions to the discretion of the performer. This can be once again compared to the modern guitarist's duty with fingerings and retranscription.

In the sonata no.26, S-C 32, here again a certain preoccupation with slurs becomes expedient. First in the Courante: in measures 21, 64 and 67, how many notes are intended to be slurred? Two? Three? (the Dresden manuscript is even less precise in this respect). As always, an interpretational judgement must be brought to the task.



London m. 21

Dresden m. 21



London m.64-67



Dresden m.64-67

Now the Bourrée : there are almost no slur indications in the Wroclaw version. It is quite obvious that, aside from a few specific passages, it is unnatural to play the Baroque lute without slurring. As was the case in the gigue of the twenty-fifth sonata, it is incumbent on the performer to provide slurs for this piece. The Dresden version confirms the notion that calligraphic concerns took precedence over musical issues. In the London manuscript a large slur indication is traced, logically, under four notes while the Dresden ms shows a very tiny indication concerning only, it seems to be, the two middle notes. It must nevertheless, and this becomes obvious at 100% with lute in hands, concern all four. These calligraphic variations must have been routinely accepted and re-interpreted by performers of the time. This approach seems very distant to our time, living as we do with the high degree of notational precision demanded by composers since the nineteenth century.

The Sarabande was also more carefully edited in the London Manuscript, showing very sophisticated fingering and slurring indications. This is quite clear even from the beginning of the piece. I would hereby offer three supplemental hypotheses concerning slurring indications: 1) Written in ink, the occasional inadequate slur indication was not crossed out since it was considered to be less of an error than, say, a bad note. In any case, a probable repetition of a similar pattern later in the work would allow the copyist to offer an improved version. Frequent examples of this exist. 2) Given the inevitable slowing down of gesture (mentally or in performance) during the act of composing or copying, the choice of slurs becomes a bit more haphazard. This very slowness inhibits a precise articulation of proper slurring as would be found in a well-rehearsed performance. Indeed the normal tendency is to defer placing overly precise indications until such time as the piece becomes truly 'in the fingers'. 3) When the copying involved two persons, especially in faster pieces for which it was impossible to play faster than for a slow piece, the person performing could have deliberately avoided using liaisons to allow the copyist a chance to hear all the notes.

Working on many different sources often containing the same pieces brought me to this germ of an explanation. Indeed, how else could we explain this anarchy, this

perpetual imprecision in slur indications, that are in the same time so elegant, so well rendered graphically?

It is hoped that lutenists, lute teachers and editors of Baroque lute music in staff notation will look at this delicate subject with detailed examination, with the same care as for the notes themselves, by looking for the hidden meanings of these tablature signs. This should help greatly the lute candidates, so far trying to untangle and manage the thing by themselves, without useful principles at the start.

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