

## Interview with Lucas Harris

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*Lucas Harris joins Les Délices for La Guitarre Royale on February 12 & 13, 2011*

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Debra Nagy: Lucas, one of the things that's always intrigued me in your bio is that you started out as a jazz guitarist in your hometown of Phoenix. What was your background as a jazz guitar player like? Do you still play jazz?



Lucas Harris: As a teenager in Phoenix, I started guitar lessons with a teacher who played and taught both classical and electric guitar. As a result, I ended up playing equal amounts of both as a teenager, and I think the experience of crossing between those two worlds on a daily basis was invaluable. In particular what I mean is that my experience playing pop/jazz music made me understand certain aspects of classical music more deeply – especially harmony, which must have led me to becoming a continuo player. Playing basso continuo is not so different from ‘comping chords’ in jazz, though of course the notation and style are very different.

I still own my electric guitar and amplifier, but I’m afraid I rarely have time to dust them off. I’m hoping that someday I’ll go back to it!

DN: And how did you discover early guitars and lutes?

LH: As a classical guitarist I adored playing Renaissance and Baroque pieces, including transcriptions from the lute repertoire. I discovered lute instruments at a guitar summer camp that hired lutenists to coach the guitar students, and eventually I checked out an old terrible lute in college and started trying to teach myself to play.

DN: You also studied in both Milan, Italy and Bremen, Germany. Did you feel it was essential for you to study in Europe? What's the most memorable experience of your time there?

LH: I had never been abroad before I moved to Europe to study the lute at age 22, so I was unspeakably excited to arrive there. My memories from those two years are sharper and more vivid than from any other time in my life, so it’s difficult to choose one. I suppose one that comes to mind is when I dreamed all night in recitative following an intense Baroque opera workshop in Bremen.

I would just say that the experience of living in a foreign country was life-changing, but I don’t mean the sort of experience you can have from visiting a country and staying in a hotel, etc. I wish everybody could live for a year in a foreign country and be forced to struggle with cultural differences, to make friends and deal with loneliness, to understand what’s being said when natives speak quickly in classes or rehearsals or at a noisy pub, to battle with a strange bureaucracy to get your visa or school registration approved, etc. I think I learned as much about human culture as I did about music!

DN: I know that you teach and direct the "Continuo Collective" in Toronto (a weekly class and performing ‘pluck band’ dedicated to learning the art of seventeenth-century accompaniment). What do you enjoy most about playing continuo? What are the unique challenges of playing continuo as opposed to playing solo repertoire?

LH: I think continuo playing is a fantastic and complex art. I have a theory that music in general but especially continuo playing engages both hemispheres of the brain about equally. It requires you to think simultaneously about things that are more quantitative (harmony, intervals, rhythm, voice leading) and also things that are more

intuitive (colour, dynamics, phrasing, texture, emotions). I love supporting soloists and trying to imagine how I can shape the accompaniment in a way that will inspire their delivery of the upper parts. You are in a supportive role, so it's not as stressful as playing solos, and yet you have significant responsibility as the 'bottom line' or foundation of the ensemble, so there's a sense of collaboration that's really satisfying.

DN: How do you approach playing continuo differently when playing the guitar compared with the theorbo?

LH: The two instruments have really different resources. The guitar doesn't have much of a bass register, but it can be a very effective source of ensemble support, especially when strummed, when it becomes a kind of pitched percussion instrument that can really drive an ensemble. On the other hand, the theorbo is all about bass! It wants to create deep, rich, arpeggios that lay down a carpet of harmonic support. Sometimes I'm so loathe to choose between the two instruments that I take the trouble to play both of them in a performance, switching between them according to the repertoire's needs (i.e., theorbo for recitatives or slow/serious pieces, guitar for quicker dance pieces or light/humorous airs).

DN: Can you tell us a little about the role(s) of the guitar at the French court during the time of Francesco Corbetta and Robert De Visée?

LH: Francesco Corbetta was one of the best guitarists in Bologna, and he was recruited to travel to Paris and become the personal guitar tutor to King Louis XIV, who was also a dancer and had a great love for the guitar. In Paris Corbetta also met Charles II of England, who was in exile during the English Civil War/Protectorate period. Corbetta published his two books of guitar music called *La guitarrre royale*, dedicating one to Louis and one to Charles. This had the effect of lifting the guitar from its lowly status to the very pinnacle of the music scene. Corbetta seemed to be quite an opportunist - apparently also made a killing by patenting a card game that became all the rage in Paris. One scholar has suggested that he also might have worked as a spy for the Gonzaga family in Italy.

Robert de Visée was probably Corbetta's student, and he took over his post as court guitarist/theorbist.

DN: Obviously, Corbetta is not an indigenous French name, but his late collections "La Guitarrre Royale" epitomize the French guitar style. Can you sum up what makes the music in Corbetta's 1674 collection characteristically French?

LH: You can compare the situation some extent with the music of Jean-Baptiste Lully, the Italian dancemaster who ended up dominating the whole music scene in Paris and ended up writing music that almost defined what was 'French.' The music from *La guitarrre royale* is French in every way – the dance genres and their phrase structures, the rich textures and lavish ornamentation, the *je ne sais quoi* elegance of the musical gestures. You would never guess they would be written by a foreigner – Corbetta became more French than the French!

DN: What are a couple of the musical projects you're most looking forward to this year?

LH: I have a new CD coming out with my wife, violinist Geneviève Gilardeau, which will feature BWV 1025, a big seven-movement sonata by J.S. Bach. It was recently discovered that the harpsichord part of this work is a transcription of a lute sonata by Bach's lutenist friend Sylvius Weiss, and it is gorgeous as a duo for lute and (muted!) violin.

I'm also having a blast with the startup of a new group in Toronto called the Vesuvius Ensemble. We do folk music from Southern Italy, things like tarantellas and rustic songs in Neapolitan dialect ([www.vesuviusemble.com](http://www.vesuviusemble.com)).