

## **Contemporary music for the theorbo: creating a new repertoire**

**Janet Oates**

The 'Theorbo Today' project ([www.theorbotoday.com](http://www.theorbotoday.com)) aims to educate and inform composers and audiences about the theorbo, and produce and inspire a new repertoire for it, both as a solo instrument and as accompaniment to the voice.

The project was conceived in 2020 when my vocal ensemble Philomel<sup>1</sup> recorded short, newly written songs and duets - unaccompanied, with piano, or arranged for theorbo accompaniment - while unable to perform live during the lockdown. Toby Carr,<sup>2</sup> the guest theorbo player, was asked if he would like to play a contemporary solo, and to the group's surprise he said he didn't have anything suitable in his repertoire. This led to conversations online with early music specialists and theorbo players, and the understanding that though there are a few pieces scattered around, and although early music ensembles were often quite willing to consider contemporary works, there was not a satisfying body of new works for theorbo. Unlike the harpsichord and recorder, and to some extent the lute, it seems that the theorbo has been neglected by contemporary composers. Further discussions revealed a lack of knowledge about the theorbo (among composers, audience and even quite experienced musicians) and a perceived lack of performance opportunity. And so the project was devised; it received a grant from Arts Council England, and work began in the Spring of 2021.

A Facebook group and page were established to publicise the project and to make contact with a geographically wide range of composers and performers. In May, two open workshops were held online for composers to learn about the theorbo: its history and repertoire, its capabilities and sonorities, and playing techniques. The workshops were led by Toby Carr and Janet Oates, with composer Dominic McGonigal having prepared some questions and materials. The workshops attracted 23 composers from Britain, Sweden, Italy and America; we also invited the Royal Academy of Music to participate, with six postgraduate composers and one performer taking part, and the involvement of Geoff King (composition tutor) and Elizabeth Kenny (renowned theorbo performer and tutor at the RAM). The Arts Council Grant enabled us also to commission Rhiannon Randle, a rising composer who is already published by Boosey & Hawkes and Stainer & Bell.<sup>3</sup>

Fourteen works were submitted by workshop participants, ranging from theorbo solos to a quartet of voices and instruments; to our surprise and pleasure, the standard of writing was high, with very few issues of playability or technical errors. It is to Toby's credit that he prepared interesting material and examples, and explained so clearly how to write for the instrument; it was evident that composers were completely engaged in the task and thought carefully about their writing. These 14 pieces were recorded in August (illus.1), and in October a live concert took place, performing those pieces alongside the commission by Rhiannon and a contribution from me. Subsequently, the website [theorbotoday.com](http://theorbotoday.com) was set up, explaining the project and linking to recordings, resources and composers.

Learning about the composers' intentions and inspirations for their pieces was interesting. It was clear that the history of the instrument, and its canonical repertoire, was in the minds of many composers, while others were determined to carve a new path, exploring new sonorities and challenging the performers.

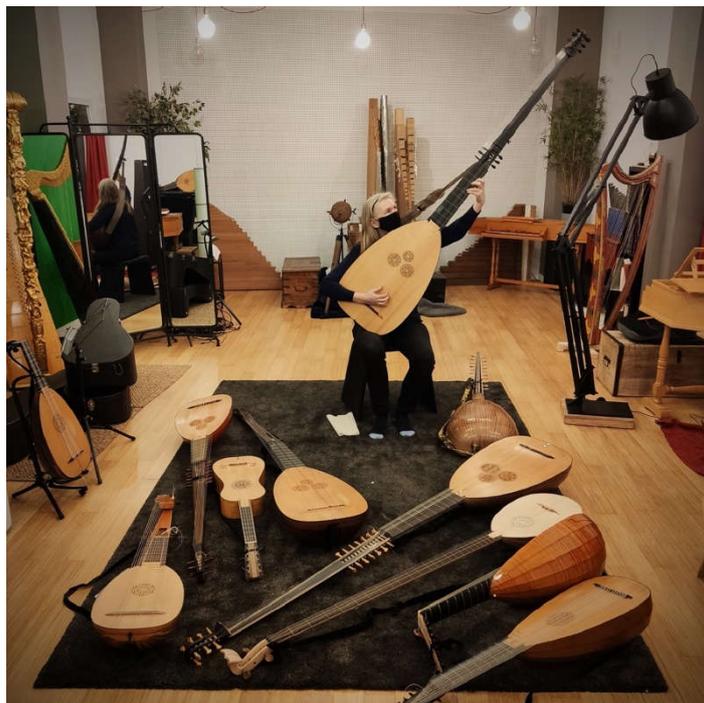


*Illus. 1 The four performers involved in the project, recording the pieces in August: Janet Oates (soprano), Toby Carr (theorbo), Sergio Bucheli (here playing lute) and Felicity Hayward (soprano).*

### **'Re-enchanting the past'**

Toby talked in the first workshop about the history of the theorbo, and its function. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the lute was very well established around Europe – though with many variations in size, tuning, number of courses and so on. Renaissance lutes were designated 'perfect' instruments as, along with keyboards, they could play melody, harmony and chords. They were also termed 'noble', particularly when accompanying voices: able to fill in accompaniments (replacing other voices) as well as displaying 'high-minded' counterpoint. Then came two linked developments in music: a shift away from counterpoint towards monody, with the consequent use of a prominent bassline, and the Bardi Camerata's interest in classical Greek drama with music – the birth of opera. Singers were now not merely makers of beautiful sounds, but were reciters and story-tellers; their accompaniment instruments needed now to assist the drama, rather than add layers of polyphony; bass notes and chords are more important than vocal imitation. Thus the theorbo was invented: another 'perfect', 'noble' instrument but one with greater range, with the extra unfretted low strings (the diapasons) explicitly designed to add bass notes rather than melody.<sup>4</sup> The Bardi Camerata wished to bring alive the idea of storytelling not by an act of recreation (in our modern sense of thoroughly researched evidence) but by an act of inspiration. Rather than using historical record to recreate the Greek *kythara*, they were happy to use the theorbo, an ultra-modern instrument (one of its early names was *chittarone*, deriving from *kythara*); instead of a lyre, the baroque harp would do. Of course, the theorbo did not emerge fully formed and stable as an instrument – like the lute, there were different sizes, strings per course, tunings and sonorities; France (for example) had its own head-shape with single-string courses rather than the double-string courses usual at the time in Italy. The numerous names for the instruments of the theorbo family – seemingly never agreed on at the time, let alone in current debate – speak for the range of

instruments. Illus.2 shows theorbo player Lynda Sayce<sup>5</sup> surrounded by a range of instruments, most of which would have been available at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century:



*Illus.2 Lynda Sayce in Nicolas Achten's workshop in Brussels (photo: Nicolas Achten).*

The first days of opera were dominated by monody, with solo voice accompanied by a 'perfect' instrument; again, the art of singing to one's own stringed instrument was their idea of the perfect recreation of antiquity. Not for nothing was Orpheus the most-set myth of the time. Early operas such as those by Cavalli and Marazzoli might have been scored for pairs of keyboard instruments and theorbos, with a pair of violins for the melodic aspects of the ritornelli.

Three of our composers mentioned this historical function explicitly, either in conversation with the performers, or in their programme notes.<sup>6</sup> James Batty, who set extracts from the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*, wanted the singer to be theatrical, employing various vocal techniques including speech, hissing and whistling; he encouraged the singer to invent gesture and engage the audience with eye-contact; the effect is of an anguished bard, perhaps captivating his audience as he tells his story in a tavern. Susie Vaughan, setting extracts of Sappho, says she was inspired by Toby's description of the theorbo 'with its origins in the Ancient Greek storyteller accompanying themselves on the lyre, and from a desire to re-enchant the past'. And our commissioned composer Rhiannon Randle had a similar intention: to create a snapshot of Antigone, using Sophocles' words in the original ancient Greek, with the theorbo 'seen as a kind of descendant of the *cithara* in its usage with storytelling that came full circle with the *seconda prattica* movement, drawing on ancient bardic traditions the likes of which Sophocles' audiences would have been familiar with', as explained in her programme note.

Once the theorbo was established as an accompaniment instrument, either on its own or as part of the continuo (including for smaller vocal works, and instrumental works such as sonatas and dances), a small repertoire of solo works was written and published, by several

virtuoso players. Giovanni Kapsberger and Alessandro Piccinini are perhaps the best known in Italy, writing dances, variations and toccatas, while in France – using a smaller instrument more handy for solo performance – Robert de Visée and others wrote lively, rich, expressive works. A few of our composers took inspiration from this baroque function, both as continuo-style accompaniment and solo instrument. Sheena Phillips, in her gentle pastoral piece *Christmas Morning*, sets words by John Milton. She says in her programme note:

*Music was very important to Milton (even before he went blind). He undoubtedly knew the sounds of lute and theorbo and the ‘stringed noise’ he refers to in the poem is made (he tells us) by the striking of fingers. So he could well have had the sound of theorbo – answered by ‘divinely warbled voice’ – in mind as he wrote the poem.*

*Milton’s words are so wonderful that I didn’t want to disrupt their flow. So the piece is a fairly direct setting of the text – but, while it borrows from the sound world of the 17th century, it also makes things new through decidedly un-17th century harmonies, rhythms and textures.*

Though writing for theorbo becomes more complex in later sections, her opening (ex.1) could (almost) be notated as figured bass:

Ex.1 The opening of *Christmas Morning* by Sheena Phillips. Note the use of the lowest bass string. These diapason strings were described by the Italians as the theorbo’s ‘special excellence’; when combined with the soprano voice(s), there is an almost orchestral pitch-range.

Peter Openshaw contributed two pieces to our collection, each with an eye to the past. Like Phillips's piece, both his song *Love in Fantastic Triumph* (one of our winning compositions), setting words by Aphra Behn, and his solo *An even sadder pavane* draw on English cultural tradition despite the theorbo never really taking off in England.<sup>7</sup> *Love in Fantastic Triumph* draws on the lively, word-painting effects of Purcell's keyboard accompaniments, while Openshaw says about *An Even Sadder Pavane*:

*A few days after Charles I's execution, the veteran composer Thomas Tomkins wrote a consort piece entitled 'A Sad Pavane for These Distracted Times'. This title has been much on my mind during our own, very different, 'distracted times'. The Theorbo Today project gave me a perfect opportunity to write a 'sad pavane' of my own for an instrument from Tomkins's own time. I have followed the traditional structure of English pavanés – three sections, each followed by a freely varied repeat - and have also borrowed some of the rhythmic devices used in his music.*

It is, I think, a very successful piece, shifting subtly between familiar and unfamiliar patterns and harmonies, with a strong sense of structure and purpose.

A third tradition from the baroque is referred to in the brief, energetic duet *Theorbo Chaser* by Dominic McGonigal. I would describe it as a toccata, structured as a canon:

*The theorbo has beautiful resonant bass strings and Theorbo Chaser exploits this resonance with delicate colour in the upper strings. The canon is at the second so the melody appears to be climbing on itself as each theorbo comes in above the other. Thus the harmony emerges from the melody, rising up to the colourful treble strings and then settling back to a bass ostinato, when the two instruments become one (Dominic McGonigal, programme note).*

### Questions of notation

In general, theorbo players play from tablature or of course figured bass when playing continuo. As tablature is not known by most composers – and is possibly not able to comprehend the intricacies of many contemporary rhythmic devices and playing techniques – it was decided mutually to use staff notation. But which staves? Guitar music is written on one treble staff only, as its range goes from three ledger-lines below the staff to about three ledger lines above. The theorbo needs a greater bass range, and it was suggested that a double staff – usually two bass staves, only using a treble staff if the tessitura of the piece was consistently high – would be useful. In this way composers can make clear the use of the diapason strings versus the fretted, or the different voices of counterpoint. In general this worked very well, with all submitted pieces in one or two bass staves.

This example from near the beginning of *Song of the Olive Garden* by Elliott Park – another of our winning compositions for its well-structured and idiomatic theorbo writing – shows the clarity of the two-staff technique, with the diapason strings used *marcato* and sustaining through the bar, while the fretted strings create colourful chords:

Ex. 2 Elliott Park, *Song of the Olive Garden* (bars 5-7)

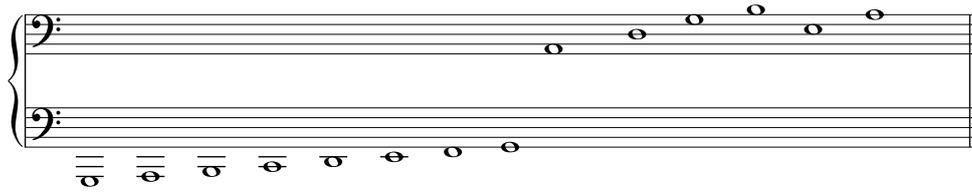
### The theorbo as playground

The principal composers for lute and theorbo of the past were themselves great players: De Visée, for example, was named ‘Guitar Master of the King’ to Louis XV; he was also a singer, lutenist, viol player and theorbo player. Similarly, Piccinini came from a family of lutenists and held high positions in Bologna and Ferrara. No surprise, then, that composers who (with one or two exceptions) do not even play guitar, let alone lute or theorbo, might encounter a few initial difficulties when writing for the theorbo. Toby discussed playing technique – for example, when the thumb was and wasn’t used; how spread chords were plucked, and how the left hand has to stretch and move for various patterns; we also provided a fret-board fingering chart for composers to visualise the fingering of melodies and chords. These proved very useful; nevertheless, there were some interesting challenges for the players!

As a composer, it’s exciting to think of this lovely instrument as a new playground: with its melodic and harmonic capabilities, and the diapason/fretted strings, it is effectively two instruments in one. As Toby said in the first workshop, when thinking about the potential of writing for the theorbo, ‘the idea of doing the work of two instruments terrifies me, but I think that things that terrify me are something we should embrace in the project, and then the [second] workshop might be about reeling it back in a little bit!’. Indeed, in a couple of cases this ‘two instrument’ concept, coupled with the double stave notation *and* the idea that dynamics were created by thicker textures rather than ‘playing more loudly’, did lead to the composers feeling that there could be a lot going on in both staves at once. In practice, the trickiness of navigating the instrument (the logistics of hand size, finding the correct strings out of 13, the speed of finding harmonics, moving quickly across large intervals and so on) meant that composers occasionally needed to pare back their writing. A related pitfall for composers excited about the range of the instrument was writing a little bit too high – sometimes above the highest fret – which is possible but obviously harder for the performer, with notes slower to find and not as resonant.

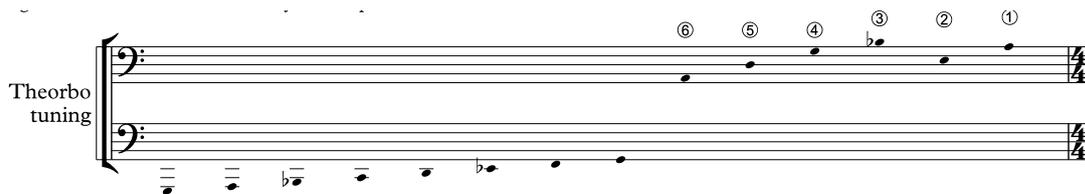
There were many interesting aspects of the theorbo to write for and exploit. The first is the tuning and retuning (scordatura) of all those strings. The performers suggested that composers can tune any string up to a tone in either direction, allowing for new sonorities.

The first diagram shows the natural tuning of the theorbo in G, with 14 single-string courses, as this is the instrument both Toby and Sergio would be using.



Ex. 3 Tuning of the 14-course theorbo

The second shows the diagram provided by Randle for her piece *Entombed*, showing re-tuning of both diapason and fretted strings; the piece has a modal feel.



Ex. 4 Tuning of the theorbo for Rhiannon Randle's *Entombed*

Lastly, here are the tuning instructions for *The Seafarer* by James Batty: the composer describes the intention of microtonal tuning (mirrored in the voice) to 'distort our sense of time and place'. The instrument sounds like a primitive, ancient string instrument.

**Scordatura:**  
 The theorbo may be tuned to A440, A415 or another pitch  
 Bass string tuning: G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G  
 The following strings should be further retuned:  
 G strings (4, 7 and 14): tune 31 cents lower  
 D string (5, but NOT 11): tune 46 cents higher

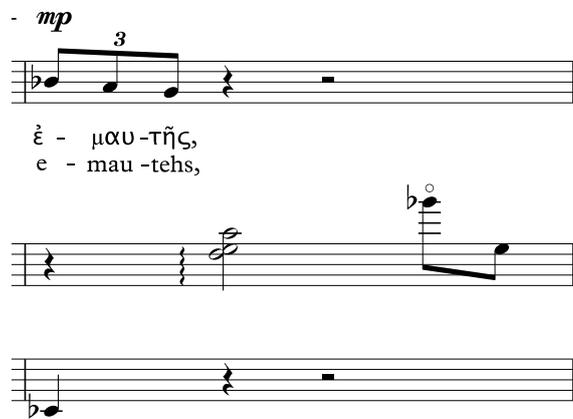
Another pleasure of the theorbo is the re-entrant tuning, which means that big rich chords seem to fold back into themselves, not always ending on the highest note; composers need to think carefully about the direction of strumming, and whether they want that feature of the theorbo highlighted, or whether to specify a particular order of notes. This is complicated by the many choices of fretting – with the strings close together in pitch, a chord (or melody) can be voiced and fingered in many different ways. How many open strings does the composer want? How much resonance versus how much dry clarity? How much spreading of chords versus plucking?

The first 'fragment' example created by Dominic McGonigal for our workshop explored this potential, with Toby demonstrating the various ways that the seemingly simply cluster-chords could be played and sounded.



Ex.5 Dominic McGonigal, fragment provided as an example for the workshop, allowing the player to show the different fingerings of the chord, with consequent varying resonances.

In practice, here we have a chord from Randle’s *Entombed*. It could be played on strings 2, 3 and 4, in which case the highest note C would sound as the second note of the chord; or on strings 3, 4 and 5, in which case the highest note would indeed sound last. Should the composer specify this, or can the performer make an artistic (or logistical) decision? Across all the composers, it was suggested that any such decisions would be up to the performer unless specified by the composer.



Ex.6 Example from *Entombed* by Rhiannon Randle

Similarly, in historical playing (particularly in continuo), a chord written out once may be then elaborated upon by the player to extend the harmony. For our contemporary composers, a couple of whom specified this technique, this tiny element of improvisation needs to be explicitly ‘allowed’ or rejected. It is of course entirely possible for a contemporary composer to write in historical style (if not in harmonic language), and, rather than trying to second-guess and control all aspects of performance, enjoy and encourage an experienced player to interpret their music idiomatically.

One positive effect of the re-entrant tuning is the facility the instrument has for playing fast scales or repeated notes, while still retaining resonance, with the fingers not needing to move far up and down the neck. This use of multiple strings (in a harp-like fashion, rather than constant re-fretting of one string) is called *campanella*: it has a lovely ringing quality, and is also a technique for increasing the dynamic, building up the sound.

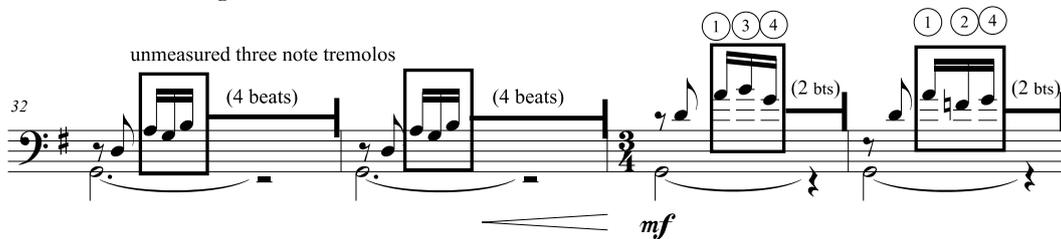
Below is part of the opening of *Toccata 11* from the first book of *Intavolatura di lauto* by Kapsberger (1611). In staff notation, the trill-like figure in bars 5-6, and the scales in bar 8, could be played a number of ways; the tablature version clearly shows that they are to be played using many strings (rather than constant re-fretting of one string), giving lots of resonance and texture despite the single melodic line.



Ex.7 *Tocatta 11 (excerpt) from the first book of Intavolatura di lauto by Kapsberger (1611).*

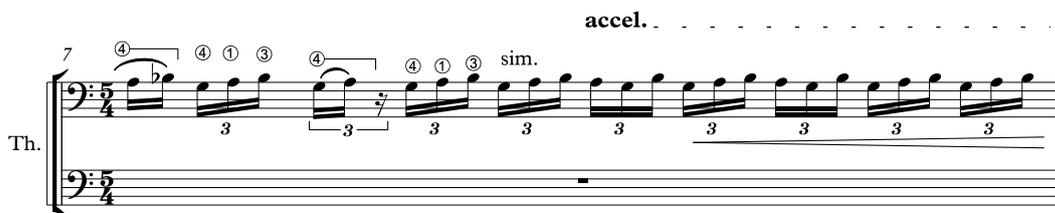
The *campanella* effect was used very effectively in several of our newly-written pieces.

Here, in the middle of *Christmas Morning* by Sheena Phillips, we have little repeated motifs, very clearly notated in box-and-line notation, with strings specified. The *laissez-vibrer* bass note, with the open D string also sounding, is then followed by a three-string motif, giving a constant five-string texture.



Ex.8 *Sheena Phillips, Christmas Morning (bars 32-35).*

And in this extract from Randle’s *Entombed*, we see something similar: a little cloud of sound created from playing across three strings:



Ex.9 *Cross-string passage from Entombed by Rhiannon Randle*

A couple of pitfalls arose in the initial drafts of pieces. Occasionally there were bars of writing that looked simple on the page but were tricky in practice, for example a beautifully written and precisely notated chord might be extraordinarily hard to play because there were a few pesky diapason strings in the way, so the chord could not be strummed, only plucked (or a compromise found).

A further unforeseen question arose when several composers wrote tremolos in their works. The intention behind this is to sustain a note (or chord) in a colourful way, but in practice tremolos are hard to execute on the theorbo and do not really have the desired effect – the constant touching of the strings deadens the sound. Composers had to find a

different way of producing the desired effect – for example repeated motifs as above, or simply doubling a note at the octave and letting it ring.

Toby had said how he was willing to ‘change, pull at, and stretch at the seams’ of conventional theorbo playing technique for the sake of the project – a delicious invitation.<sup>8</sup> As a result, several pieces explored techniques that are not used in the standard historical repertoire, including *tambura* (hitting the strings at the bridge, creating a sound like a resonant drum), *glissandi* (Toby’s demonstration made the composers’ faces light up!), *sul pont*, tapping on the wooden body/head, and harmonics. The whole issue of harmonics on theorbo is a new one for the performers too, as they are not required in historic repertoire; in the workshop and rehearsals, both theorbo players expressed how much they were learning and developing through this new music. We are lucky that Toby and Sergio not only play guitar, and are thus familiar with some of these techniques, but that they seemed positively to relish the process of discovery during the workshops and rehearsals, with Toby trying out lots of ideas during the lively workshop discussion.

In this example from *Seismographs* by Yu Hng Ng, we see a carefully controlled progression of *tambora* and tapping the wood in a resonant place (indicated by a triangular notehead) and a dry place (slash notehead).

33 *l.v. sempre*

(*tambora on fretless bass strings only*)

*p* ————— *mf* ————— *pp*

*barely audible, switch seamlessly from tambora to tapping*

37

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*pp* ————— *mp*

Ex.10 Yu Hng Ng, *Seismographs* (bars 33-40).

And at the end of *The Seafarer* by James Batty, the performer first clashes the microtonally tuned strings 4 and 5 against the ‘properly’ tuned one, and then uses *glissandi* on harmonics (here creating a sort of woody twanging sound) before handing over the playing of the final climactic note to the soprano. It was decided by composer and performers that the soprano should not pluck the theorbo string, as that takes her out of the carefully set-up dramatic narrator role (almost like breaking the ‘fourth wall’, when actually the intention is to heighten the drama, not break it): instead, I gestured the final note (see picture) while the theorbist played, which retained a sense of magic and gravitas.<sup>9</sup>



## Conclusion: a workable new repertoire

The project was lucky to have keen, open-minded performers, and composers who rose to the challenge of writing for this idiosyncratic instrument. The enthusiastic, interested reaction of the audience at the live concert (which comprised mostly either local people and/or friends and family, and therefore was not a specialist audience at all), and the appreciative responses to the videos from both contemporary music sites and early music sites on social media, lead us to believe that our project has been a success. Elliott Park's *Song of the Olive Garden* has already had two further performances, and interest from other performers. Furthermore, many of the participant composers have gone on to think about writing more for early instruments – developing their theorbo pieces, contacting early music ensembles, and enjoying the new world of sonorities and historical interest that has been opened up to them. We will be applying for funding to continue the project through new commissions and further performances of the current works. The project leads are currently in discussion with publishers about the possibility of a volume of works for theorbo with and without voice; we hope to leave a legacy of pieces with enough range, accessibility and quality that they will be taken up and enjoyed in the future as an established repertoire, bringing the theorbo out of its unjustified position of neglect in contemporary music.

Huge thanks go to Toby Carr, upon whose words and demonstrations in the two workshops I have drawn heavily. Also, thanks to the composers who made the project worthwhile.

*Dr Janet Oates is a composer, teacher, performer and conductor, who studied at Royal Holloway under Simon Holt and Phil Cashian. She has written chamber operas, ensemble operas for amateurs, an oratorio for baroque forces, and prize-winning songs. She is on the board of CoMLA (Contemporary Music for All), is co-founder of Richmond New Music Collective, and directs the vocal ensemble Philomel.  
Website <http://janetoates.co.uk>*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Philomel comprises six sopranos with a varying continuo group. We perform the repertoire of the Concerto delle Donne, and music of that era and slightly later. We also commission new works for sopranos with or without continuo. We focus on women composers – Strozzi and Caccini are frequent choices for solos and duets – and celebrate female performance practice. See [www.philomel.co.uk](http://www.philomel.co.uk).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.tobycarr.co.uk](http://www.tobycarr.co.uk). Our second performer was Sergio Bucheli, an accomplished and sensitive player studying at the RAM: <https://www.arcangelo.org.uk/performers/new-ensemblist-sergio-bucheli-lute>.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.Rhiannonrandle.com](http://www.Rhiannonrandle.com).

<sup>4</sup> The Florentines at first took a bass lute and modified it: when string tension became too great, they took thicker strings and tuned them an octave down, creating the re-entrant tuning; the diapason strings on the neck extension came a little later.

<sup>5</sup> Dr Lynda Sayce is a highly regarded performer and scholar; her website [www.theorbo.com](http://www.theorbo.com) is a treasure trove of information.

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<sup>6</sup> All the pieces, with recordings and programme notes, can be found in the ‘repertoire’ page of [theorbotoday.com](http://theorbotoday.com).

<sup>7</sup> In England, the lute continued to hold sway: there are very few records of pieces and performers. In the late 17th century the archlute (a lute with theorbo-like neck extension, with less resonance and range than the theorbo) became somewhat known.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that, as theorbo players rarely use conventional notation, our two performers Toby Carr and Sergio Bucheli had to put a lot of time and effort into learning the pieces, for which we are immensely grateful.

<sup>9</sup> The video can be seen here on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yxgz\\_89WnRw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yxgz_89WnRw) (or search ‘theorbo today the seafarer’).