

# “Do What Thou Wilt”: An Interview with Pantagruel’s Mark Wheeler by Andrew Hartig

*Mark Wheeler is known to most members of Wayne Cripps’s Lutenet email listserv and is currently a member of the early music ensemble Pantagruel. I first “met” Mark on-line sometime around 1998 or 1999. Since that time we’ve had more frequent contact, especially in regard to the cittern. I asked him if he would be willing to do an interview about his work with Pantagruel and their most recent album Laydie Louthians Lilte. What follows is the transcript of our interview from February of 2010, which was conducted via on-line, real-time chat. The endnotes are from additional information that Mark provided to me after the interview. More information about him and Pantagruel can be found on-line at <http://www.pantagruel.de>.*



**AH: Good day. Thank you for taking some time to talk with me.**

MW: It’s a pleasure.

**AH: Though you’ve been getting a lot of good press these days, some people might not be familiar with you or Pantagruel. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your musical background? Perhaps how you got started with playing lute and early music in general?**

MW: I began playing rock guitar when I was thirteen, initially inspired by the emerging New Wave of British Heavy Metal [NWOBHM]. I was listening to groups like Iron Maiden and then moved on to exploring stuff that had influenced them, particularly 70’s progressive rock. I first became aware of lute music through an interview with Steve Howe, the guitarist of Yes. He mentioned that he enjoyed listening to Julian Bream, so I popped off to the local library and borrowed a couple of his records.

There was an awful a lot of early music on BBC radio 3 at that time, which exposed me to other lute players, particularly Chris Wilson, Jacob Lindberg and Anthony Rooley — but in the end it was a program of lute concertos featuring Nigel North that convinced me to actually buy my first lute.

**AH: And when was that?**

MW: That must have been in the summer of 1983. At that time I was mainly interested in baroque lute music and eventually went on to study baroque lute with Nigel North.

**AH: You play mostly Renaissance now, though. When did you switch and why?**

MW: Strangely, I completely lost interest in lute playing and early music after a couple of years at the Guildhall School of Music with Nigel. It certainly was not his fault. I just felt that at that time in my life, I needed to do something that was more “culturally relevant,” so I returned to rock music.

**AH: So you pursued rock again for awhile. You were in the band Love Like Blood, right?**

MW: Yes, I produced two CDs with them. I stopped playing the lute for about 8 years and ordered a lute more out of nostalgia, not really having any plans to pursue it seriously again.

**AH: But now you have been playing with the ensemble Pantagruel for some years.**

MW: Yes, I met Dominik when he just began studying the recorder, in a record shop where I was working. It was absolute chance or fate — not sure which. What began just as [a] series of informal jam sessions eventually expanded with the addition of a singer to become a sort of renaissance power-trio. Things had come full circle, but now I felt that I had something that had the “relevance” I was missing a few years earlier.

**AH: Interesting. So you’ve been playing with him since...?**

MW: We met around the start of the century...

**AH: (Laughs.) There are a number of professional perform-**

ers who, in addition to lute, have also been known for playing wire-strung instruments. (James Tyler and Paul O'Dette spring to mind.) However, you've made a real point of playing them with almost as great a frequency as the lute and guitar. What motivated you to become interested in wire-strung instruments, and why have you chosen to feature them so prominently in your professional playing?

MW: The basic motivation is that the instruments just work so well. I think an audience now and back then enjoys the huge palette of sounds that these instruments alone or combined can make.

The way that we organize our concerts into longer blocks means that each concert is in fact more like nine or ten mini-concerts.

**AH: By "longer blocks" you mean arranging the songs into groups that work together — a suite, perhaps?**

MW: Maybe a suite is too classical sounding. The pieces have to gel together so it sounds as though they are one long piece.

This may sound a bit strange, but maybe it's like alchemy: putting all these sometimes opposing elements together to make something that works as a whole. I always find short little renaissance pieces performed with little breaks in between them sound more like a lecture than something that should move an audience.

**AH: That makes sense. I'm sure some people from the Renaissance would whole-heartedly approve of that comparison.**

**While we're on the subject, can you describe a little more about your approach to performing with Pantagruel? Your recordings are so unlike other early music recordings out there today — much more like a rock "concept" album.**

MW: We wanted to get away from the lute songs or ballads with a few isolated solo pieces from the lutenist or flute player concept. It is a bit like watching a rock guitarist playing a flashy solo just to show off his technique, but doesn't have any relevance to the song. Jimmy Page is a huge inspiration for me. When he plays his amazing solo in "Stairway to Heaven" it may be virtuosic, but it fits in so perfectly with the mood of the song. The text almost carries on.... So if Dominik or I play a solo, the story or theme — or to use a more HIP term, the affect — has to be considered. The aim is to move the audience and still get to show our licks — but in a sort of hidden manner.... I think that is what the "sprezzatura" thing is about.

Finding the right pieces that fit together is probably what takes up the bulk of our rehearsals — and then of course choosing the right instruments. Some things just work better on a cittern and some things need what only a lute can give.

It is also interesting to try things on different instruments. We have a version of "Can She Excuse" where I play the complete lute part on the cittern.

**AH: So what are some of the factors you take into consideration in your choice between using gut- and wire-strung instruments in your own practice and performance?**

MW: A few bass notes [from the cittern] are missing, but it is surprising how much "content" you get on the four courses played with a plectrum.

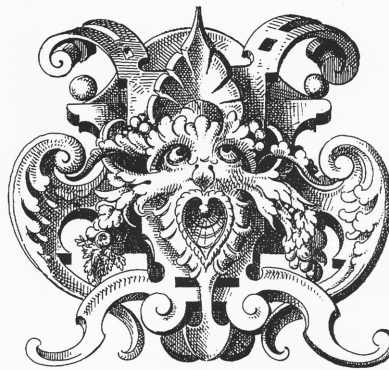
This may sound strange, but I think it is far easier to make an arrangement using cittern that sounds "historical" than using a lute. The limitations that a cittern may have—strange chord inversions and lack of bass notes — mean that you don't need to worry about being "unstylistic," because you can't do anything else. Play a few chords behind a ballad tune on the cittern and it sounds very convincing; add a few "tricky bits" and it can sound very impressive. A lute part can often be very difficult to make, simply because you have many more choices.

One thing that is different for a cittern player is there are simply fewer surviving musical sources compared with the lute. I don't think this reflects directly a proportionate interest in the cittern — more that the cittern repertoire was not always written down. I find it much easier to remember cittern pieces than lute pieces, which have the increased difficulty of more elaborate part writing and right hand fingering. But what is interesting is that almost every cittern source has something quite special in some particular stylistic way. So if any one of these sources had remained undiscovered, our view of renaissance cittern playing would be greatly impaired. This means we need to keep on the lookout for further sources that await discovery, but also to try and fill in the missing pieces through experimentation. I use quite a lot of campanella effects that are only hinted at in renaissance tablatures, but which I am sure some experienced [musicians] made extensive use of.

**AH: Your work with Pantagruel sounds pretty radical compared to most early music ensembles. How do you respond to those who might suggest that Pantagruel's approach is not HIP or "authentic"?**

MW: Nice to hear you think we are doing something that stands out from the crowd! As to if it's HIP or authentic, we are convinced, but with a healthy degree of skepticism. It is in the end for others to judge, but you at least get the feeling you are on the right track if you are getting positive recommendations from Anthony Rooley or Evelyn Tubb and also "I never thought I would like that sort of

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music” reactions from people who have never even been exposed to early music. I think that our paradoxical belief right from the beginning was that the more historically informed we get the more it can reach a non-specialist audience. It is important to see HIP as something that expands your possibilities.

**AH: So in the work you’ve done for your albums and concerts, you’ve done quite a bit of arranging, I imagine.**

MW: I think about half of what I play is arrangements and the rest is pretty much note for note from original sources.

**AH: One of the pieces from your last album was “The Shoemaker.” You play this with cittern and flute, but there is no historical cittern setting of this. Can you talk a bit about how you went about arranging this?**

MW: We had used quite a lot of cittern pieces from the two surviving Scottish cittern manuscripts<sup>1</sup> for arrangements on the CD, so when I came across this tune in a very old book about Scottish music book by Nelly Diem entitled *Beitrage zur Geschichte der Schottischen Musik*, it seemed like a good chance to try my hand at arranging something for the CD.

**AH: So it was basically just a melody line?**

MW: The useful thing about the Diem book was that it included three different versions. The versions from the *Guthrie Fiddle Manuscript* at College Library, University of Edinburgh, and the one included in Playford’s *Apollo’s Banquet* are just a melody, but there was also a keyboard version that included harmonies. But the piece works largely without a chordal texture, as do many of the cittern pieces in the *Robert Edwards’ Commonplace Book*.

**AH: So what kinds of decisions did you have to make in creating an arrangement?**

MW: First of all it needed to be transposed. Putting it down a fifth allowed me to use a lot of open strings, allowing for some nice campanella effects. Basically just playing the melody gives quite a full sound. We used the keyboard version as a guide for the sections with recorder in regard to harmony.

**AH: Were there any philosophical considerations or difficulties you had when approaching this arrangement? I’m thinking here from the standpoint of “historical authenticity”...**

MW: Personally for myself, the first step in such things is to get the right tools. So before we started our Scottish project I knew I needed

to get a diatonic cittern, and I had already become convinced that using quills was essential to cittern playing. You could of course play this music on a re-tuned “English cittern” with a Fender [plastic] pick, but I think you are putting yourself to a huge disadvantage. The octave stringing on the lowest course is so important to the sound, and I think a quill allows for far more varied sounds.

The next step was to look at all of the available sources of cittern music that might help in reconstructing Scottish cittern playing at the start of the 17th century. This meant primarily the *Robert Edwards’* and *Millar/Mackalman* manuscripts, but these are often just sketches and lack any rhythm signs at all. But what they show is a quite melodic style quite different from Le Roy, [whose style] for instance uses mainly a block chordal texture.

After this you are pretty much on your own and caught between the extremes of being too careful and maybe creating a style devoid of things that just couldn’t be written down or were so obvious that nobody wrote them down and just going totally over the top.

**AH: How do you personally handle such possibilities?**

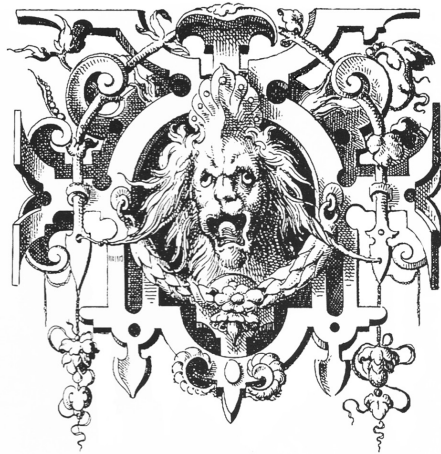
MW: I personally see this as where the fun begins, and I feel that you need to do what your heart says from this point on. But you need to take the first two steps very seriously. If I used the wrong instrument or had not researched the sources, then it is a bit like trying to find somewhere without having any sort of map. But a map is not the actual landscape: what I am aiming for is a musical performance that is convincing, and not just a pale reflection of what may have been.

For instance, in the middle of “The Shoemaker” we add a couple of other tunes. One of these, “The Virgin Queen” from Playford’s *Dancing Master* takes things in terms of authenticity maybe more to the limits. I use a number of strumming and hammer-on and pull-off techniques that are reminiscent of English folk and hard rock guitarists such as Jimmy Page or Bert

Jansch. But that said, it is all possible in an historical instrument, and hammer-ons and pull-offs were certainly used by Scottish cittern players as can be seen from the *Millar/Mackalman* manuscript. We have to be careful not to be inhibited by conservatory aesthetics for music that existed before such regimentation.

I would add that it is easy to get into the realm of such clichés as “baroque rocks” or “Dowland was the first singer-songwriter,” and I think such reasoning can be quite superficial. There are a number of ways that people have tried to rediscover the more enigmatic aspects of early music performance. One has been to use so called “living traditions,” but it is becoming more and more apparent that a great deal of these “folk traditions” were in fact invented and often even “forged” in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>2</sup>

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But what I find fascinating is that the cittern was practically “re-invented” as the Irish Bouzouki in the 1960s and was later even renamed “cittern” by the luthier Stefan Sobell, who recognized it’s similarity to the historical instrument. It is this sort of trans-historical phenomena that I find interesting, another example of course being the re-invention of tablature by rock and folk guitarists.

**AH: Getting back to “The Shoemaker” for a moment — did you at any point try arranging it for lute?**

MW: No, I would certainly find that more difficult because you have so many choices. But funnily enough there is a version in the *Balcarres Lute Book*. I only found that out after we recorded the CD.

**AH: So what guided your choice to set this for cittern?**

MW: If I remember correctly, it was late at night and I was looking for something that was up-tempo for the new CD. I happened to have the cittern in hand, and the opening phrase just seemed to work well. Then I typed that into Fronimo and started working on the other sections. But often the first instrument choice is quickly thrown out in place of another.

The transpose and intabulation functions in Fronimo can be very useful. You end up tweaking almost everything, but you have a framework to work with.

**AH: How much of the choice is dictated by the different timbres or other qualities of the instruments?**

MW: I don’t think timbre is so much at the forefront of the instrument choice — often it is [the issue of] which [instrument] gives the most possibilities for variety or the fullest sound. It is something that I find difficult to generalize about. Cittern of course works well for up-tempo things, but can also sound very convincing in slower melancholic things.

**AH: Do you have any thoughts (or could you speculate) on how musicians and audiences in the Renaissance may have perceived the differences between the instruments and their respective sounds? Or how musicians may have gone about their instrument choice for performance?**

MW: If you are talking about “concert performances,” we have of course have very little to guide us, as the idea of concert in the modern sense did not exist in the renaissance. Liz Kenny’s very thought provoking article “The uses of lute song: texts, contexts and pretexts for ‘historically informed’ performance”<sup>3</sup> is a good starting point as it shows that professional performers in theaters took considerable liberties in the choice of the accompaniment

even in the lute song repertoire where the tablature lute parts are nowadays deemed irreplaceable. So we are perfectly HIP when we use a bandora or a cittern where a lute appears in the printed lute song book.

But in the private atmosphere citterns and lutes were the renaissance equivalent of iPods. They were often a solitary pursuit. It was important that you could play the music you wanted to experience, and I think they were willing to accept and even enjoy the limits that an instrument had. So basically you can “do what thou wilt,” but the question is what are you aiming to achieve and maybe which historical situation you want to reflect. Ironically what Liz Kenny describes as the “miniaturist aesthetic” that is often typical of modern lute song performances may reflect more the “amateur” experience of renaissance music making than a more dramatic approach that professionals used at the theatre or during performances of masques. Pantagruel’s performance aims at this more dramatic end of the spectrum.

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**AH: So, given the extensive amount of time you’ve spent with both gut- and wire-strung instruments — and the fact that you do end up carrying so many to your shows — can you share your insights into their relative strengths and weaknesses in either solo or ensemble performance? Why should musicians who study the lute bother with these other instruments?**

MW: I think it is dangerous to start talking about strengths and weaknesses, and I cannot think of any renaissance source that even compares gut and wire-string instruments except one from Francis Bacon, who says that metal strings are “sweeter.” I expect most of us would think the opposite, that gut strings have a sweeter sound.

As to why lutenist should bother to explore the cittern, there can only be one reason—because they want to! I think they should listen to what a cittern can do, and if they feel that it is a tool that can help them to achieve their goals, then away they go!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark notes, “I am especially grateful to Rob MacKillop for supplying me with copies of the Millar/Mackalman manuscript and the Robert Edwards Commonplace book.”

<sup>2</sup> Mark writes, “Some of these topics can be read about in Matthew Gelbart’s *The invention of ‘Folk Music’ and ‘Art Music.’ Emerging categories from Ossian to Wagner.* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).”

<sup>3</sup> Kenny, Elizabeth. “The uses of lute song: texts, contexts and pretexts for ‘historically informed’ performance.” *Early Music* XXXVI, May 2008. pp.285-300.