

## INSTRUMENT AS INSPIRATION: THE IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION OF HANS NEUSIDLER

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### *Introduction*

In the late fifteenth century the role of the lute in European music began to change. In earlier times, in keeping with its Middle-Eastern origins, the lute was played with a quill held between thumb and forefinger of the right hand in order to pluck the strings. This technique enabled the lutenist to play melodies, often with rapid scale passages, and pluck adjacent strings together as chords but is limited when it comes to performing polyphony. As a result the lute was most often used in ensemble with various combinations of instruments, or to accompany the voice. Surviving scores from the fifteenth century suggest the combination of lute and gittern was popular, with one performer Pietrobono Bursellis (1417-1497) of Ferrara being widely acclaimed. In Germany (the adopted



German singer accompanied by lute. Guillaume Caoursin, *De Casu Regis Zysym*. Ulm, 1496

home of Hans Neusidler) the ‘Sprecher’, singers of narrative poetry, would frequently accompany themselves with the lute.

With the rise of polyphonic music which began in the fifteenth century the standard lute technique changed. In order to replicate the sound of imitative counterpoint on the lute, performers adapted their right hand technique so that the fingers and thumb of the right hand plucked the strings. This enabled them to play non-adjacent strings and chords in rhythmic unison. At this time they maintained the same hand position resulting in the thumb – under technique, whereby the thumb passes under the index finger travelling into the palm of the hand when the string is struck.

In some of the earliest published works for lute solo there are hints of the old plectrum style of playing. In the example below dated to about from the Lute Book of Vincenzo Capirola (1474 - circa 1550), aside from the decorative charm of the publication, the use of rapid scale passages juxtaposed with two-part counterpoint aptly demonstrates the transition between the two styles.



Page from Vincenzo Capirola's 'Lute Book', about 1515.

### *Hans Neusidler*

Hans Neusidler was born in Pressburg in Bohemia, now Bratislava in Slovakia, around 1508. A region of the city was then called Newsiedl, which may give a more specific location to his origins. Nothing is known of his life before he arrived in Nuremberg in 1530, possibly fleeing an invading Turkish army, and established himself there. Town records indicate that Neusidler married and took up citizenship in Nuremberg in 1531 and was esteemed as a lute teacher, performer and lute maker. None of the instruments he made have survived. Neusidler fathered as many as eighteen children by his two wives and a surviving document relates to his appeal to the town council for financial assistance to provide for them. Two of his children became renowned lutenists themselves, Melchior (1530-1590) and Conrad. (1541-c.1603)

Neusidler was a prolific publisher of lute music. Between 1536 and 1544 he produced eight volumes which contain a rich variety of repertoire including arrangements of German and French songs, madrigals, and motets for solo lute; along with Italian and German dances, many with descriptive titles (*Der Judentanz*, *Unser Küchen kan ser wol kochen*) and free improvisatory preludes. Neusidler's first book *Ein newgeordnet kuenstlich Lautenbuch* (1536) has a specifically didactic purpose and contains a detailed lute tutor along with graded pieces aimed at the autodidactic lute student. He was among the first to include fingering instructions and information on rhythm and holding notes, something absent from lute tablature generally. Neusidler's books were printed in German Tablature, in example 2, a system advantageous for early printers but time consuming to learn to read fluently. This has hindered the acceptance of Neusidler's music among contemporary performers.

I.  
Nile regrez.

4nc3g3cn4d0d04 | 5cod4n4d0d4d0d0d4d  
f f e |

oo | nuenn | cppp | E5od4nc35 | 4i0i4i05Epp  
33d4 | 2B+B | gccc | o f d | c 4  
ff | C B | + +g 2 | e g g

E5od4d05Epp | E5od4nc35od4nc3g | 5odo | 4  
n c | 3 3 | c3cn  
2 g | f f

4i05Epp9p9pE5 | E5od4nc35 | 5oi4iod4  
4 n c3cn4d05 3 3  
c 2 g f f

nc3cn4io | 5555 | ood | 4444 | 44  
d dd | 33n0d0d4n | cccc | 33g4nc4ncn  
e ee CC | +ggg 22e

E5oi4i05E5EppE5E | ps | E5EppE5E  
4 4 | cc3cn4n4i0i05 | 3 34  
f f | gg f 6

99p | pE5E5E5E5E5E5E | 55 | 3c3g bgb2b | 4n  
cc4 | n c f | nuc | f | OS | gg  
eef | f | OS | +

Ee uy

Example 2. German Tablature,

By the early sixteenth century, certain rules of composition were already in place which were to be influential until the twentieth century. Derived from vocal and instrumental part-writing these included avoiding the diminished fifth interval melodically, not writing parallel octaves and perfect fifths between parts, though lines could be and often are doubled at the octave in lute music and other sources; and the use of tonal imitation, where melodic sequences which begin on a different pitch from the original melody have their intervals adapted to fit the key of the piece. Dissonant intervals are only employed in passing on weak beats, or having been prepared by holding a note from a previous harmony to create a suspension. These conventions are much in evidence in compositions by contemporaries of Neusidler, especially the works of Francesco Da Milano (1497-1543) perhaps the most famed lutenist of his day.

In example 3, from a Fantasia by Milano, we see how a skilled lutenist composer adapts the imitative melodic style of vocal polyphony to the lute, giving the impression of multiple entries while the music stays mostly in two parts, except at the cadence. Parallel movement is always in consonant intervals, in this case tenths but alternatively thirds or sixths with only mild dissonance being heard either in the form of melodic passing notes or the prepared suspension at the cadence. This elegant sophisticated composition could easily be adapted for another polyphonic instrument or arranged for ensemble without any of the music's qualities being lost. In the following example from Neusidler, example 4, however, the idiomatic qualities of the music would make it very difficult to adapt to another instrument while maintaining the character of the music.

In this example 4, from Neusidler's *Der Gassenhawer* (a name for a popular ballad), the chords are set with no attention to correct voicing, so when transcribed from the lute tablature to convention notation above, the use of parallel fifths and octaves become obvious. However when played on the lute, these chord voicings give the greatest sonority and warmth of sound as well as being the most technically straightforward to play. The repeated notes, which could begin to sound tedious, are given greater interest by the strong weak effect

of the thumb-under lute technique which gives the down-stroke with the thumb a strong accent and the index finger up-stroke a lighter articulation.

In example 5, from *Ein kuntsreicher Preamblel oder Fantasey* (1536), Neusidler again writes a sequence of parallel fifths which demonstrates that what sounds sonorous and fits neatly on the fingerboard of the lute is often in defiance of the conventional sounds that polyphonic writing was expected to take. If transcribed to a trio of wind instruments these progressions would have been considered to sound weak and unconvincing but on the lute the effect is sonorous and moving.

As well as writing music that shows a harmonic sense, idiomatic to the lute and in contrast to the conventional ideas of the time, Neusidler displays a unique melodic sense, especially in the ornaments he adds to his intabulations of vocal models. In this passage from Neusidler's setting of Josquin DuPrez's famous chanson *Mille Regretz*, example 6, he adds a chromatic twist to a familiar rhythmic ornament often applied to a cadence in this period that would eventually evolve into the standard cadential trill of the Baroque.

This unique form of the *gruppò* ornament is found on several occasions in Neusidler's music and while adding piquancy to an otherwise simple melodic line also has a foundation in the layout of the notes on the fingerboard of the lute. To play the conventional E natural, instead of the E sharp, would require an awkward left-hand stretch to the fourth fret of the fifth course of the lute which would risk stopping the held A of the bass. The E sharp however is played as the open fourth course, the same course as the fretted G and F sharp, resulting in a more fluid melodic line, which allows the bass to be held, and avoids a technically difficult stretch. Neusidler's willingness to adapt musical concerns to the possibilities of the instrument here creates a unique and original motif.

In the example 7 from *Ein kuntsreicher Preamblel oder Fantasey* the bass line shows repeated use of the diminished fifth interval in a melodic sense and also harmonically as the foundation of a sequence of chords. As well as the parallel octaves in bar two we see the bass line moving from E flat to A and back to E flat. This upsets the listener's expectations as the implied

Phrygian cadence fails to materialise and eventually the music cadences into C via a suspension.

It could be suggested from these examples that Neusidler, rather than being inventive in his exploration of the possibilities of the lute, was merely poorly educated and was unaware of the conventions of his time, his music being the outpourings of a gifted instinctive instrumentalist. Against this the range of his musical output must be raised and the breadth of composer's works he arranged for lute. Neusidler intabulated works by leading composer from throughout Europe including Josquin, Obrecht, Ghiselin, Isaac and Senfl in some of the most skilful and imaginative lute arrangements of the time. Thus, his knowledge of notated music must have been wide-ranging. In addition, his publication of arrangements of street songs and dance tunes suggest a musician at home with the everyday music-making of the populace. Finally, to illustrate Neusidler's awareness of convention an example from his arrangement of Hofheimer's *Nach Willen Dein* which, though liberally ornamented, obeys the rules, in example 8.

### *Bibliography*

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Musical notation for Example 3, measures 1-5. The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The first system (measures 1-4) shows a treble clef with a melody of quarter and eighth notes, and a bass clef with a bass line of quarter notes. The second system (measures 5-8) starts with a measure rest in the treble clef, followed by a melodic phrase in the treble and a bass line in the bass clef.

Example 3

Musical notation for Example 4, measures 1-6. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. The first system (measures 1-5) features a treble clef with a melody of eighth notes and a bass clef with a bass line of chords. The second system (measures 6-8) continues the melody in the treble and the chordal bass line in the bass clef.

Example 4

Musical notation for Example 5, measures 1-3. The score is in 4/2 time and B-flat major. The first system (measures 1-3) shows a treble clef with a melody of quarter and eighth notes, and a bass clef with a bass line of chords.

Example 5

