

THE DOWNLOAD

A Renaissance man, in tune with technology



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Victor Coelho is a lute player and Boston University scholar specializing in music created four centuries ago.

By Cindy Atoji Keene | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 01, 2016

Technology might seem antithetical for Renaissance musicologist Victor Coelho. But this lute player and early music scholar finds no discord in tuning for 16th and 17th century music scores with an iPad. A Boston University educator and performer,

Coelho discussed integrating art with the latest digital mediums.

It's not incongruous to use technology to study and play early Italian music?

Renaissance studies is a field where technology is most useful. There are voluminous amounts of information — so much art and music — but now we have tools to manage and search through all this material. It's the perfect period for which to use new technologies in different ways.

You're an accomplished lute player, yet you use more digital aids for the lute than your electric guitar.

With my electric guitar, it's just a matter of picking it up and amplifying the sound. But tuning for renaissance music is very different. There's a different kind of mathematic tuning system that is appropriate for 16th and 17th century. When I play in an ensemble with another lute, harpsichord, organ, and singer, it can take a lot of time and finesse to tune with the other instruments. Instead we use Cleartune, a chromatic tuner that is more precise than visual or analog tuners. It's accurate, readable, and cheap. This doesn't mean that we don't continue to tune by ear, though.

You spent three years as a doctoral student in the '80s in Italy, Germany, and France going through old archives. All that is online now. Is that helpful?

There's something to be said about actually handling the physical material, with the crumbling binds and pages falling out. But now we are in a new wave of scholarship: the digital humanities. There are high-res digital facsimiles available and applications that allow us to compare and search data. We are like scientists in that sense, producing new findings more quickly and able to find large-scale connections between Renaissance artists,

locations, and manuscripts. Everyone from my generation had to make that shift, to either embrace or reject technology. It's not possible to have a noncommittal view.

You read music on your iPad while playing an ancient instrument, the lute?

I use forScore, a music reader for iPad. I can load PDFs of scores into it, and during performances, turn the page by either pressing the screen or using a foot pedal like AirTurn, a Bluetooth controller that allows you to turn the pages on a tablet by pressing this pedal. So I don't have to carry a binder of music anymore. I put my iPad up on the stand, and it also eliminates the need for a light. The trouble is when the technology breaks down and the iPad crashes during the performance. Then you're in trouble.

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