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Julian Bream

INTERVIEW WITH JULIAN BREAM

—by Victor Coelho, *JLSA* Editor-in-Chief

It seems appropriate that an issue of this Quarterly, of this Society, should acknowledge the contribution to the lute of Julian Bream, for I think it safe to say that without him, many of us might well be in another line of work. I was able to catch up with Mr. Bream in February, 1990 in Paris, while I was teaching a seminar on 17th-century Italian lute music at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Mr. Bream was at the end of a European tour and, after concerts in Athens and Nuremberg, had arrived in Paris to play two recitals at the Salle Pleyel (Salle Chopin). His program was a typical Bream lute/guitar recital: works by Francesco da Milano, John Dowland and Robert Johnson on the first half; guitar works by Giuliani, Toro Takemitsu and Bach after intermission. At the concert I attended, the audience would not let him leave until he played three encores, and the rhythmic clapping continued long after Bream indicated politely that he was through, as it was by then nearly 11:30 pm.

This interview took place on 14 February, after his final concert in Paris. We spoke in his room at the Pullman-Windsor Hotel, just off the Champs Elysées near the Arc de Triomphe.

Coelho: *Let's start off with a fairly broad question: You've been playing lute now for thirty years...*

Bream: Forty, in fact.

How have your feelings toward the instrument changed from the time when you were perhaps the only one making recordings and doing concerts, up to now, when many lutenists are making a living at it and you too are still touring and making records?

Bream: Well, my feelings for the lute haven't changed since the days when I took it up. I've always been passionately fond of the lute. Of course the guitar has always been more important in my professional life, but the lute has not been by any means an appendage to it, nor even a secondary channel for my musical ideas. It's a complementary instrument for me, and I find that it's a very refreshing instrument to play because the music is so beautiful. It's wonderfully honest music whereas the guitar repertoire is largely full of charming conceits...and deceptions! And I find it so refreshing to go back to the lute and play contrapuntal fantasies and the dance music, which has such wonderful rhythmic vitality. The instrument has a spirit, which reflects an attitude of life that is almost totally alien in our twentieth century, and to go back to the lute is like having a fantastic cold shower after the tropical humidity of the guitar.

The instrument's voice is pure and, as you said, refreshing...

Bream: And honest.

Take us back a little bit to when you were making your first recordings and when you began to discover the lute. Was it a question of you going to the British Library and figuring out tablature by yourself? How did you get started?

Bream: My first introduction to lute music was when my father brought home a copy of Thomas Morley's *First Booke of Ayres*. As you know, it was published by Stainer & Bell and edited by Dr. Fellowes in the 'twenties in England. Just after the war it was very difficult to get sheet music and he found a copy somewhere, in some obscure shop, and I looked at the tablature and was absolutely intrigued by this extraordinary way of writing music. And I was fascinated by the music of the songs. Somehow I felt very much drawn to this volume of music, and as I had always been interested as a boy in Elizabethan history, it was only natural that I should want to pursue an interest in it because the lute, as we know, was the instrument that so characteristically sums up that whole period. And then my father, who was an amateur musician, very keen on the guitar and kindred instruments, brought home a lute which he bought in the street off a sailor who was having to go on his ship and leave.



That instrument must be worth remembering.

Bream: My father bought this instrument for £2, and it was one of these German guitar/lutes. In the 'twenties and 'thirties the Germans mass-produced a great many lutes with guitar stringing. They were factory-made, but very well made, and so I started playing the lute on this guitar-lute. Then, I met a very famous harpsichord maker, Thomas Goff, who could see that I was very interested in the lute and he offered to build me one, but in the meantime, he converted this guitar/lute into a proper lute with seven courses. And that's how I got started.

Then, of course it was very difficult to get music, so I worked for many, many hours in the Reading Room of the British Museum—this was before the photocopying period—and I enjoyed this very much. I could read and hear tablature and that was very fortunate, because I could actually choose pieces that I thought sounded good. In those early days—I'm now talking about the late forties—it was very difficult to find work as a classical guitarist, and as the BBC Third Programme started up after the war with serious music, there seemed a demand, particularly on programs of a historical nature, for a lutenist. Although there were one or two players who played the lute at that time, it never seemed to me as though they were really professionals. It seemed to me that they *happened* to play the lute instead of *really* playing it. Well, I musn't be disrespectful, because it would have been impossible in the 'thirties to have even begun to have made a career playing the lute. Anyway, so I began to get a little work from the BBC, and so in a sense, as strange as it may seem, there were somewhat commercial reasons why I also took up the lute.

This brings us to your many recordings of lute music. While you play just about everything on guitar, from Baroque to contemporary to the great Spanish works, your focus in lute music—whose repertory is so much larger than that of the guitar, amounting to almost 30,000 individual pieces—is towards Francesco, and particularly Dowland and the Elizabethans.

Bream: Well, it's simply that I like the truth of counterpoint, and the Renaissance lute to me is the "classical" lute. As much as I like the Baroque lute, I don't particularly enjoy playing it, although I have played it. I always enjoy hearing other people play it, and I think it has a great charm. I just feel that it is the instrument that has the charm [in Baroque lute music] and not always the structure of the music that satisfies me. There is a looseness which is quite beautiful about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century lute music, and a texture of sound that is sometimes really ravishing. But I'm a sort of a meat-and-potatoes person, you know, and I really like the music that's got the structure and the bones; I'm not interested in the artifice.

Compare that, however, to the great lute airs you've recorded, which use extraordinary poetry and tend to stand at the crossroads. It's sometimes hard to say whether Dowland is the greatest Elizabethan songwriter or one of the greatest seventeenth-century monodists. In other words, is there not something else to lute songs than just 'meat and potatoes'? Is there not culture and conceit, as well as artifice? How did the recordings with Peter Pears come about, and how did that bring you into another area of lute music?

Bream: I met Peter Pears—not by accident—when he was asked to sing a few songs at a memorial concert for Dr. Fellowes, who died I think in 1951, and I was asked if I would accompany him, which I did. I mean, it was purely a professional engagement; we had never met before. We did two or three songs of Rosseter and one or two from the *First Booke of Ayres* of Dowland, as I recall. Of course, I had heard of Peter Pears and knew that he was a celebrated singer. It was in many ways the beginning of a very fruitful relationship. Although I had studied music at the Royal College of Music, studying piano, cello and composition, my music, or musicality, such as it is, has come from experience. I always had a very good general academic musical training, but my feelings for music on the guitar and the lute have been partially instinctive and partially gleaned from my experience from working with other people, and observing, and listening. When eventually Peter Pears asked me to do a few recitals with him, I was absolutely delighted, and it was indeed the beginning of something which was of tremendous musical value to me, because I learned a lot about the linear conception of music from Peter Pears, how to phrase, how to breathe. So that really was an auspicious occasion, meeting him. We then did our first recording I think in 1955 or '56, and our relationship went on for many years thereafter, giving concerts all over the world.

How did you and Peter Pears choose the songs you would eventually perform and record?

Bream: Peter chose them. He loved these songs in a very passionate way, because some of the great songs of this period, in terms of word-setting, are some of the finest in the English language. And it was the poetry and the setting of poetry which so impressed him, you see...

And he was so active in folk songs as well.

Bream: Oh yes, I mean he loved words. And of course if you love words, the period of the English lutenist-songwriters is from an English point of view the richest for art or folk songs.

Your activity with the Julian Bream Consort was another great revelation, after your first record came out. Suddenly people were introduced to yet another great English tradition that had no equal on the Continent. The forming of this particular ensemble must have been problematic at the beginning.

Bream: The great inspirer for me and many of my contemporary colleagues in early music was Bob Thurston Dart, and I think in England we were very fortunate to have a wonderful musicologist as well as a really practical musician. He was after all quite a performer on keyboard instruments...

And a big fan of the lute.

Bream: And a big fan of the lute, and he knew a lot about the lute and its music. I was greatly encouraged by Thurston Dart. It was he who actually got together a group to record the *Consort Lessons* for the BBC; I think that was in 1952, and that was my first introduction to the *Consort Lessons*. I thought they had a most wonderful musical texture, and I thought—particularly some of the Alison settings—that this was extraordinary music. To me it was also most unconventional music—almost wild in a way.

The rhythmic complexities and so forth?

Bream: Yes, and the harmony, too. And so the sound of the broken consort was in my ears from the very first years of my lute playing, and it was only a question of time before I would form my own group to perform these pieces. So in '59 or '60, I'm never quite

sure, I got together a group of instrumentalists to do it. There were many problems—sorting out how best to use the flute, for example, which is a frustrating problem that is still with us in the *Consort Lessons*. I experimented with all sorts of flute players, but the rest of the ensemble fitted into place. I wanted to use a treble viol but in those days the players that I had heard made such a dull sound, and considering that this was after all the melodic line, one needed a *real* musician to play that, not an old music racketeer. So I asked a very good violinist friend if she would join the group to play the treble viol part but playing the violin and using an eighteenth-century bow. And that, in those days, was also something that was rather unusual. And that's how the group really got started. We then toured quite a bit and made a record or two. It just seemed to me that the richness and diversity of the broken consort was such that it could provide an entertaining and musically fulfilling concert.

When you began to give recitals on lute and guitar, did you have any problems in reconciling the differences in technique needed to play the two instruments? You have an intuitive sense about Renaissance music, as you have with the guitar, but you must approach these instruments differently in performance, no?

Bream: Yes, I do. In the early days I didn't so much, because playing lute music was as natural to me as drinking water. I never had any problems in interpretation. It just seemed to me the most natural thing to do in the world. But since I'm so more or less self-taught on the guitar, and my technique, such as it is, has been based on trial and error, I've always kept an open-ended attitude in technical matters. I adapt it for my own use, and I hear the music in my head as I hear the expressive possibilities of the music.

But now, of course, my lute is much more authentically set up, and I have a totally different technique of playing it, even to the point that I don't play with a footstool. I suppose in the late 'seventies, I began to concentrate on the guitar, and I virtually stopped playing the lute for ten years except for the odd consort engagement, and I felt that there was so much going on with the guitar in contemporary music that I really was wise to concentrate on that. I knew that I would always come back to the lute, but I knew that I couldn't go back to the old instrument that I played because there had been in the 'seventies and 'eighties a tremendous evolution in the pursuit of historical musical practices. And as much as I enjoyed playing the lute and the instrument that I played, I really felt that I must make an effort to evolve my own playing in such a way that it was, well, more historically in line.



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That's a very interesting point. So you were, in fact, inspired by the early music "movement" rather than put off by it.

Bream: Yes, I thought it was a marvelous movement, and I knew that I would have to stop playing the lute for some time in order to come to terms with that movement and what it revealed, and yet also retain my own musical personality. So, I had an instrument built which I think is a good instrument. I've always wanted 10 courses—I played an 8-course instrument originally—and then I thought well if I'm going to play the lute again, I'll probably just use it as a consort instrument. So I asked Luc Breton, the Swiss maker, to build me a lute which would be a really good and powerful consort lute, and I wanted particularly a good top string. He made this instrument and I had to get used to a much slacker string tension, and then of course using tied frets is another way of life, as you know. To me it's a totally different instrument and so I thought "I'm not going to get mixed up between the guitar and the lute. I'm going to change everything," so the way I sit is indicative of all the changes I wanted to make within myself so that I could adapt myself more fully to the lute—not in an adaption from the guitar, but in a way so that I play the lute as a lute and not adapted from my habits as a guitarist.

At one time you were, in fact, making instruments, or at least supervising their construction. Is that still going on?

Bream: Yes, to a certain extent. I'm very interested in musical instruments, their design and their acoustical properties, but mostly in terms of the guitar. The lute is an instrument that is always open to question in terms of its design, shape, and stringing, and there are varying views on what is the right instrument to use for a given period.

And a performer such as yourself—any performer—has to reconcile what is right with what is practical. Authentically speaking, you should have used three lutes for the first half of your program in different combinations of octave and unison tunings. This would have required you to travel with four instruments, including guitar, not to mention keeping them in tune, and this is impossible.

Bream: Well it is, and in any case I've always been a rather practical musician. My feelings are such that first I'm a musician and a performer, and I want to give people the sense of the depth of the music and pleasure. I mean, I'm really a performer and naturally I have to compromise, and in the artistic world compromise is not an ideal way of looking at things because one must do things with a passionate integrity.

Actually, recent work has shown that there was more compromise and more variety than even exists today, particularly with regard to tone color and the use of lutes of all different sizes. Some players admitted the use of nails, while archival documents have suggested that even Francesco used them, though this particular issue is a bit vague. Nevertheless, did you ever feel at some point that there was a generation of lutenists that saw your playing as archaic, and which placed you in a cramped historical position somewhat like

that of Wanda Landowska?

Bream: Yes. I would say yes, that did affect me. That's why I put my lute in the cold storage.

A reevaluation period?

Bream: I was interested in that. Of course, all these things are in a sense ephemeral; they are fashion, and fashion is cyclical. Therefore, if you hang about long enough, hopefully they get back to you.

I think that most lute players these days who perform a lot are conscious of their role as performers and have come to terms with "authenticity" and practicality. One can't play an entire concert of hexachord fantasies today and get away with it. Players also by and large use nylon trebles in performance, though gut is still preferred for recordings, where conditions are ostensibly more controlled.

Bream: You see in the old days, a player like Dowland would probably have had, for each performance, two lutes set up. I mean, if a string broke, which it must have fairly often, another lute would probably have been passed through the crowd, eventually arriving on his lap.

I once played, a couple of years ago, in a [restored] castle in Denmark where Dowland played, I've forgotten where it was. And it was just wonderful to see this room, and I could see the whole musical event going on in this wonderful hall, with a great fire going, candlelight, and a lot of light around the lute player—people sitting, people standing in the shadows. And I could just visualize a lute string breaking and somebody else passing another lute through the crowd, quickly.

You paint a lively picture; you might be correct.

Bream: I just had this feeling, because he couldn't have stopped playing, and we know that when he went to Italy and crossed the Alps, I believe I read somewhere that he probably took two lutes with him, and so on either side of the horse you can imagine a lute.

Many of our readers who aren't professional lutenists or guitarists might be interested in your thoughts about some fundamental technical issues. Now that you're changing your technique a little...

Bream: A lot!

Could you reveal a little about your lute technique at present?

Bream: The way I play the lute now, I draw the sound out of the instrument by plucking along the strings rather than across them.

So your arm comes across the lute horizontally, in a more relaxed position.

Bream: Yes, that's right. And I find that that produces the best sound out of the lute, and is a sure way of getting both strings plucked together. I do occasionally change positions for passage work when you go from the top string to the second course, which is doubled, in order just to get one course, so that there is an evenness in texture and articulation throughout a passage.

The trebles that you are using now are the Japanese carbon strings, which have been gaining more acceptance. Why these?

Bream: They're true, for a start, and I'm not particularly keen about rectified nylon. There is a flabbiness about rectified nylon which I feel is not sympathetic to the touch, and these carbon strings I think are very good. They're also thinner gauge; you get the equivalent tension of a nylon or gut string, but it's a finer gauge, and I find that rather attractive. And, they're true. You have to be a bit careful if you're a nail player because there's a tendency for the sound to be slightly stressed towards the upper partials of the harmonics of the sound. And if you don't use the right stroke with the nail, it sounds rather thin. Ideally, it's a flesh player's string, and because of its characteristics—high in its harmonic potential, as it were—it helps flesh players; it just gives a little more edge to the treble sound. But for a nail player you have to be very careful.

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I read in the concert program last night that you have greatly reduced your touring schedule to around 40 dates a year, and all small halls of your choice at that...

Bream: Yes...I try, but I'm not always successful.

And, correct me if I'm wrong, your last recording project with the lute was an interesting disc in which you play Dowland works along with recitations of Shakespeare by [the late] Peggy Ashcroft, an actress...

Bream: A great actress, the greatest English actress, I think.

It appears that this particular recording was a very personal project.

Bream: Yes. I've always been associated with poetry readers because when I was very young, I used to do a lot of evenings of poetry and music. The guitar was a wonderful instrument for this sort of entertainment because it's an introverted instrument, and because of its insular nature, it does not protrude its character in a strong way. I'll put this another way, the instrument is so sympathetic to the human voice that it can reflect on a poem without necessarily stridently engaging its own personality.

Like an alter ego, maybe?

Bream: Yes, it's a reflective instrument. It can reflect in music very closely and accurately a poem. I've always been fond of poetry, and if there is one aspect of my playing at its best that I think is of some use and value, it is its poetic quality. So, poetry is a very important thing for me. And because there was a little organization in the 'fifties in England called the Apollo Society, which put on these poetry and music concerts, I was engaged with a host of very remarkable actors and actresses, and it was just wonderful finding the right bit of music to fit a poem; and then to *hear* the poem beautifully read gave one such an incredible insight into poetry. Instrumental music is so remarkable because it's a language and yet we don't have words and grammar, and so musical sound has an added dimension which enhances the poetry.

I've worked particularly with Peggy Ashcroft, who, apart from being a great actress, has *the* most beautiful voice. We have worked a lot together, and it seemed to me that there were these two great Elizabethans crying out to be combined...expressively.

Shakespeare and Dowland?

Bream: Yes, and the amazing fact is that they were exact contemporaries.

In fact, the preface to Dowland's Second Booke of Songs was written from Helsingör, the site of Hamlet's castle.

Bream: That's right, and it just seemed a beautiful and most suitable project to do.

What about your current recording projects? Are these reduced as well?

Bream: No...I've got a number of things that I want to do, but these are not with the lute, because the one before the Peggy Ashcroft CD was with my consort. So I've done a couple of good lute CDs. Now I'll concentrate on something else.

Is the integrity of the lute, for you, contaminated by taking the instrument out of the Elizabethan Age and requesting, say, the equivalent of the Nocturnal for the lute?

Bream: Well, anything is possible, particularly if it sounds good! I don't see the lute as an instrument that can express contemporary music in the way that contemporary music has evolved in the last 100 years. I don't see why it shouldn't be used, but it's not something that has attracted me, personally.

It's true that Britten was very careful when he composed the Nocturnal for you by starting out with variations, and then ending with the theme. Because this theme was originally played on the lute, he made sure that the last thing we hear is the sound...

Bream: Of the lute.

... even though it is played on the guitar, in which all these fragments that he's used throughout the piece are finally reunited as a whole. I think that he recognized the importance of the fact that this piece was based on a lute song.

Bream: Yes, and it was a particular lute song, "Come Heavy Sleep." I think what really intrigued him was the fact that the opening of the second part of the song has an interval of a perfect fourth, and what intrigued him about the guitar was the tuning, and the fourth and, therefore, it made sense. I think he might have written it for the lute—he loved the lute and thought the guitar was a rather Hispanic and exotic instrument. But he realized that it had to be a guitar piece, but in the back of his mind it was also paradoxically a lute piece. So, this was the way he could bring his feeling for the lute into the guitar. It also changed his music. Before the *Nocturnal*, Britten had a very attractive compositional habit of using major triads in juxtaposition, or using them in a harmonically pivotal way. When he had to write for the guitar he had to think in fourths, and from then on, in all his compositions, that pivotal triad disappears. He suddenly could find that playing the open strings on the guitar, for him, particularly the inside strings, was like C major. He uses those open strings as he would have used a major triad. The whole piece is just full of fourths, and it was the falling fourth of the second part of the song which particularly attracted him.

Turning to the Francesco recordings, which are on The Woods so Wild, you again demonstrated this marvelous ability to pick the best pieces out of an enormous repertory. Did you start by reading through Arthur Ness's edition?

Bream: Well, I played Francesco already in the 'fifties in concerts,

and I think it was Chiesa's edition in which I saw them complete. Then Arthur Ness sent me his versions of the pieces. And I saw them all there, and I thought well there's something so beautiful about these pieces, and my idea was to somehow reveal this perfect music.

Exactly. Francesco is the perfection of the Renaissance, like Josquin for the lute.

Bream: That's right, or Palestrina. They are so perfect that I wanted to reveal these to the general music public. In fact, if I have had a purpose in my life it has been to reveal things that have attracted me. Therefore, the recording that I did was a wonderful way of doing that, and I enjoy compiling records. So I thought, well there are these perfect gems of counterpoint, how can we set them up? Then I thought of those English folk tunes.

You see, even Dowland's music is lutenist's counterpoint; even in "Lachrimæ" it's not the sort of counterpoint that was so beautifully made by William Byrd in his consort pieces. The "Lachrimæ" when played by viols always sounds to me like a lutenist's piece, really. But with Francesco, that's real counterpoint, and that is really the difference. The English have always been rather less academic or less abstract than their continental counterparts.

Well, you aren't in that same category! On a recording made not long ago by Paul O'Dette, he uses one of your ornamentations in his performance of Johnson's "Carman's Whistle," which you played last night. He took it off one of your recordings and acknowledges you in the jacket notes, saying that it is difficult to think of this particular piece without Julian Bream's ornamentation.

Bream: Does he? Good! I'm very flattered! Well, ornamentation is an instinctive thing for me; it probably wasn't academically correct. I just felt that it needed some ornamentation. I'm not one for elaborate ornamentation, but I like to hear other lutenists use it. It gives great character to the music. I think some players tended to ornament more than others.

This is definitely what the manuscripts show...

Bream: Well yes, and in fantasies I generally don't ornament. It is lovely to be able to do it in an extempore way. It can lift a performance as well as give textural grace to the music. It's only an embellishment to the music, but it has got to be done convincingly, not just put in, and I find that sometimes rather hard to do. Occasionally, I put a few things in, but by and large, my playing is rather plain...but who knows, maybe I'll add another vegetable to my meat 'n potatoes one day!

Paris, 1990