

A Lute on Broadway

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Introduction

An eager tension filled the air of the theater as showgoers meandered toward their seats, tickets and playbills in hand. Section by section, the patches of empty seats disappeared, their silence replaced by the growing hum of chatter, murmurs of anticipation, and the occasional burst of laughter. Below the stage, the pit orchestra was warming up: a cacophony of strings, brass, and winds snapped to attention by the piercing tone of an oboe, and the chaotic dissonance unified into a pillow of harmony. The house lights dimmed, and a wave of quiet rippled through the audience: it was showtime. The conductor arrived at the podium, a spotlight on her back, raised her arms, and gave a decisive downbeat. The orchestra came to life with an iconic overture, and the audience applauded the magical sounds emanating from beneath the stage. There I was, sitting behind a guitar, surrounded by some of the best musicians in the world. Nothing else existed for me at that moment—the entirety of my attention alternating between the black dots on the score and the expressive, dance-like motions of the conductor.

That night was May 8, 2010, at the Durham Performing Arts Center. I was sixteen years old, sitting in the watcher's seat while shadowing the guitarist for the national tour of *Wicked*, Stephen Schwartz's megahit musical about the Wicked Witch of the West. Invited by a loose family acquaintance, I was not nearly skilled or experienced enough to play that book, but the experience was one of the most transformative moments of my life. The excitement and magic of the orchestra enveloped me, and in that moment, I knew that I would dedicate my life to becoming a professional musician.

Thirteen years later, I found myself sitting in my first Broadway chair at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater. What I couldn't possibly have fathomed was that it would be the lute that finally got me there. For a gigging musician in New York City, working on Broadway is a highly coveted job due to the relative flexibility, predictability, and pay. The industry is also notoriously difficult to break into, often depending on "who you know" (Cohen). So, when I was first contacted by the contractor for this gig in October 2022, I thought it might have been a scam. An email arrived in my inbox: "Hope you are doing well. I'm a

music coordinator on Broadway. I was very impressed by videos of you I've seen online. Wanted to ask if you would have any interest in playing on Broadway. If so, would love to speak at your convenience."

Fortunately, it was no scam. After a short Zoom interview, some reference-checking, and a few long weeks of waiting to hear back, I was offered the job: guitar/lute/mandolin chair for the revival of Lerner & Loewe's *Camelot* at Lincoln Center Theater. The opportunity was both thrilling and daunting, as I had many questions about how to adapt the lute part for a modern Broadway production.

This article serves both as a defense of the musical and stylistic choices I made in adapting the lute part for the 2023 Broadway revival of *Camelot* and as a broader argument for "historically informed anachronism." Anachronism is an inevitable part of lute playing in the modern era, and expanding our understanding of what a lute can be helps to widen our audience and expand our artistic and professional boundaries.

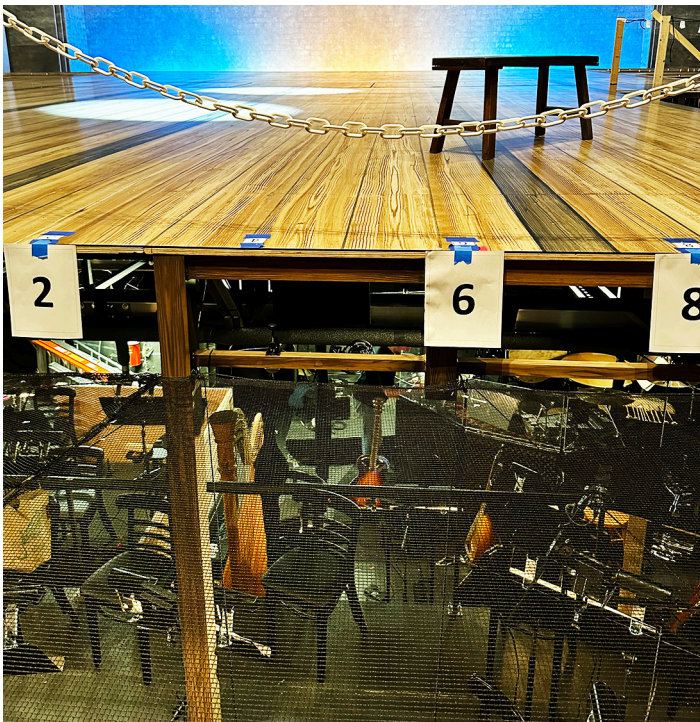
Why Lute?

Camelot is based on T. H. White's 1958 novel *The Once and Future King*, itself rooted in the legend of King Arthur. According to most sources, the Arthurian legend is set in the late fifth and early sixth centuries.¹ The western lute, however, was centuries away from this era. Its predecessor, the Arabic 'ūd, would not have been introduced to mainland Europe until at least two centuries later, following the Moorish conquest of Andalusia around the eighth century (Harwood & Poulton). In *The Lute in Britain*, Matthew Spring notes that "contrary to popular belief, the lute was never the natural instrument of the troubadour or trouvère" and "does not feature in French or English iconography or literature before the thirteenth century" (Spring, p 1).

The original arrangers of *Camelot*, working in the 1950s, were likely unaware of the historically informed performance (HIP) movement, which was still relatively young. Lacking the nuanced understanding of historical authenticity that is cultivated in early music performance practice today, they probably sought something that sounded vaguely medieval. Lutenists are acutely aware of the temporal misconception of the lute as an icon of any variety of old music, so one might question my rationale in attempting to use a historical instrument that wouldn't belong in this fantasy era anyway. Indeed, when I spoke with several veteran Broadway guitarists in preparation for my role, most advised me to simply ignore the lute and use a classical guitar instead: nobody would hear the difference, they argued, so just simplify it. This felt like an unsatisfying answer to me; perhaps the true answer lies in the very nature of the production I was invited to join.



The 2023 revival of *Camelot* was a tale steeped in the fantastical and idealistic. This production featured a new script by Aaron Sorkin, who dispensed with the literal magic and wizardry of the original production. Sorkin clarified that his *Camelot* was grounded in a “real place in a real time,” the transition from the middle ages to the renaissance while borrowing enlightenment ideas of idealism, rationalism, and democracy (Culwell-Block and Wiltbank). Accepting that this “real time” spans literal centuries, anachronism is inherently woven into the story—a feature, not a bug. Sorkin’s *Camelot* is deliberately vague in its temporal setting, covering a wide range from roughly 1450–1750, exactly the period that saw the lute explode in popularity in Europe. While the lute may not belong in the prototypical Arthurian era, it certainly belongs in Sorkin’s *Camelot*. Indeed, my inclination to perform using a real lute honors the fantastical—and anachronistic—nature of the story itself.



The pit under the stage

The Instrument

So, what is a “real lute” anyway? Now that I have established my rationale for using a lute in the revival of *Camelot*, the next step was to find the perfect instrument that could meet the unique demands of a modern Broadway production while staying true to the character of a lute. First and foremost, the instrument needed to be a lute and evoke the sound and character of a lute: the idea of using a nylon string guitar or some sort of guitar-lute was out of the question. It also had to be loud enough to project clearly within a thirty-piece orchestra. This was particularly important because ours was an open pit, with no in-ear monitors: this meant the audience could see into the pit and hear the orchestra’s acoustic sound, and so could we. Although every instrument was

miked and sent to the house audio mixer, the open pit allowed for the orchestra’s internal sound balance to be organic, like chamber music—a rare treat in the modern Broadway world of multi-channel personal monitor mixing.

Additionally, the instrument needed to be “guitarist-friendly” as I would need substitute players. Due to the demands of the rest of the show, my subs would be primarily guitarists, likely without any experience on the lute. While about 35 percent of the score called for lute, the rest of the book consisted mostly of acoustic rhythm guitar in the style of Freddie Green, with a moderate dose of mandolin during the first act. I wouldn’t expect most lutenists to be comfortable playing aggressively with a pick, and I wouldn’t expect a guitarist to transpose to G lute tuning or play contrapuntal music on doubled courses. Thus, an instrument that could be easily picked up by a guitarist was crucial.

My search for the right instrument led me to explore many options: a high-end renaissance lute, a theorbo, a sturdily built guitar-lute with metal frets—none of which quite accomplished what I was looking for. One promising option was the Liuto Forte, a controversial instrument among purists. A company as well as a type of instrument, Liuto Forte was established in the 1990s by lutenist André Burguete, luthier Günter Mark, and acoustical engineer Benno Streu, with the objective of combining “the clarity and nobility of the old lutes with the warmth and wealth of color of the Spanish guitar.” These instruments draw inspiration from early lute designs but incorporate modern modifications aimed at enhancing volume and projection. Although various models with distinct features are available, these modifications generally include modern bracing, single-strung courses, fixed metal frets, a contemporary bridge design, and machine tuning heads. However, with a yearlong waiting list for a new Liuto Forte, I needed to search the used market for a suitable instrument.

That search eventually led me to an instrument that, while not an official Liuto Forte model, was built by Günter Mark in 2011, shortly before he parted ways with the company to focus on making historically accurate instruments. This hybrid design, based on a Gerle renaissance lute bowl with an angelique peg-box, immediately caught my attention. When I first played it, I was struck by its powerful volume despite its small size. With thirteen single courses (eight stopped courses at 62 cm, five diapasons at 82 cm), a swan neck, a cambered fingerboard, and modern bracing, it was a delightfully loud and comfortable instrument. The previous owner had successfully employed several tunings, including a thirteen-course archlute in G and a baroque lute in D minor, using it primarily with modern orchestras at A440 for ensemble works with exposed lute parts, such as J. S. Bach’s *St. John* and *St. Matthew Passions*. It was the perfect choice for *Camelot*, and I purchased the instrument without hesitation.

Getting the instrument Broadway-ready required many considerations that the average guitarist may not be accustomed to. Whereas guitar string tensions are standardized, lute stringing is more finicky: the correct gauge must be determined by calculating the desired tension for a string to produce a specific pitch in a specific temperament at a specific scale length (van Ooijen). These factors are variable enough that small changes have a substantial impact on tone and playability.

Fortunately, the 2011 Mark lute was flexible, with a modern bridge and bracing capable of handling higher tension strings. I found the optimal tension combination: a Nylgut first course, carbon second and third courses, and wound Nylgut basses. I settled on an eleven-course tuning: six stopped courses tuned like a guitar



in E at A440, with a gap between the lowest stopped course and the five diapasons, which were tuned to a descending scale from D to G. Setting up these strings also required careful fret adjustments. I meticulously applied different gauges of fret gut onto the lute to achieve a high enough action for a louder and more aggressive style of sound production and articulation. Essentially, I aimed for more headroom to push the instrument so that it wouldn't be overpowered by the orchestra, a degree of playability customization enabled by using gut frets.

This approach exemplifies the concept of historically informed anachronism. By choosing an instrument that combined historical elements with modern modifications, I was able to meet the practical needs of the production while respecting the lute's historical character. This balance between historical fidelity and modern functionality underscores the value of informed adaptation, even in unorthodox applications.

The Music

One of the selling points of the 2023 revival of *Camelot* was the use of the original 1960 orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett and Philip J. Lang, which featured a thirty-piece orchestra. However, because the production involved a new book, much of the musical material was reworked, repurposed, and shuffled around.

The task before me was to adapt the lute parts to fit the new orchestration and thematic direction of the production. In the original orchestration, the lute appeared in “I Wonder What the

King is Doing Tonight,” “The Simple Joys of Maidenhood,” “The Lusty Month of May,” “How To Handle a Woman,” and “Madrigal.” In each of these numbers, the lute writing was simple at best and unplayable at worst. I surmise that the arrangers, not familiar with the technical intricacies of the lute, simply wanted to give the players a rough idea of what to play, expecting them to complete the part on their own.

“I Wonder What the King is Doing Tonight” introduces King Arthur as a competent and powerful king who is nonetheless crippled by the anxiety of meeting his soon-to-be wife, princess Guinevere. The lute part simply mimicked the solo voice line in unison. I raised the melody an octave to allow it to sing and project more clearly, but didn't add any bass notes, harmonies, or divisions. Given the simplicity of the song and the dramaturgical custom of Arthur's role being talk-sung, I chose not to rearrange this extensively; Arthur had plenty of lines to get through in this number ... best to stay out of his way.

In the original orchestration for “The Simple Joys of Maidenhood,” the guitar plucked an exposed chord-melody style accompaniment in the introduction, then switched to the lute to double the vocal melody during the verse. The updated part given to me by the 2023 music team kept the chord-melody introduction but replaced the unison lute line with “Freddie Green” style rhythm guitar. I agreed with this decision and even orchestrated the counterpoint within the rhythm guitar texture. However, I suggested that the introduction be played on the lute instead; this is the first moment that Guinevere is introduced to the story, as she attempts to escape her arranged marriage with Arthur to pursue frivolity and courtship. Highlighting the lute in the exposed accompaniment passage at this moment reflects whimsy, romance, and the allure of forbidden love—themes that the lute will continue to evoke throughout the show.

“The Lusty Month of May,” reaffirms Guinevere's flirtatious tendencies with a flamboyant and energetic dance. The lute is given a cute call-and-response with the vocal melody and a “boom-chick” rhythm. I preserved this texture and maintained the original voicings, which were mostly triads on the top three strings; I thought of this like a *battuto* (Eisenhardt, 22-23), strumming outward with the fingers, contributing to the flirtatious, dance-like nature of the song. There is a small lute solo in this number: in the original orchestration, the written part is an unplayable low-register arpeggio. I preserved the texture of the original writing but rearranged it to be in a comfortable register.

By far the most popular hit from *Camelot* is the romantic ballad “If Ever I Would Leave You,” sung by Lancelot as he declares his forbidden love for Guinevere, who is, of course, married to his best friend and king, Arthur. Preceding this iconic moment is “Madrigal,” where Lancelot delicately reads a love letter aloud to Guinevere, who can't help but admit her forbidden but reciprocal feelings. The original part was a unison octave with the vocal melody, like the textures described in “I Wonder What the King is Doing Tonight” and “The Simple Joys of Maidenhood.”

Because of the exposed and delicate nature of this moment, I rearranged the lute part to be more ornate, lute-like, and accompanimental. I accomplished this by raising the melody an octave, adding supporting harmonies, and introducing small divi-

sions at the climax of the phrase. My changes were heavily inspired by solo lute music, using voicings almost identical to those used in lute repertoire, such as the opening of Dowland's "Frog Galliard." These changes were so well received that the conductor decided to tacet the strings to highlight the lute—a decision that thrilled me as much as it terrified my subs!

"I Loved You Once in Silence" was originally sung by Guinevere in the moment that she and Lancelot succumb to their feelings and act on their infidelity. In the 2023 production, the song was instead sung by Lancelot, capturing the romance, peril, and shame of acting on a forbidden love, crossing a line that cannot be uncrossed (Higgins). The original orchestration called for rhythm guitar; this didn't feel contemplative enough for the weight of the story, so I opted to arrange a subtle countermelody for the lute that would better suit the complex solemnity of the story onstage.

Conclusion

During my time at *Camelot*, I felt an almost ancestral connection with lutenists who performed in early opera. I imagined them carrying their archlutes and theorbos into some grand Venetian theater to perform the latest opera by Monteverdi or Cavalli. They were performing the popular music of their time. They constantly experimented with new playing techniques and instrument designs to better integrate their playing into larger ensembles and better support the dramatic narrative. The mindset of a continuo player—adaptable, innovative, and deeply attuned to the needs of both the music and the drama—was central to my work on this production.

Adapting the lute parts for the 2023 revival of *Camelot* was both challenging and deeply rewarding. This article defends the musical and stylistic choices I made and advocates for the concept of "historically informed anachronism." Anachronism is an inevitable part of our lives as lute players in the modern era; embracing it can broaden our audience, expand our artistic boundaries, and open the door to new professional opportunities. I'm grateful for my tenure as lutenist in the court of *Camelot*, and even more grateful for the incredible lutenists who invited me into their world and have shown me tremendous mentorship and guidance: a special thanks to Daniel Swenberg, Laudon Schuett, Grant Herreid, Lucas Harris, and Dani Zanuttini-Frank.

Note

¹ Higham, Nicholas J. *King Arthur* (Yale University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7cjt7> For further reading, see chapter "The British Arthur."

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Nate Huvad is a New York City-based guitarist, lutenist, and fretted multi-instrumentalist specializing in theater, opera, and chamber music. Recent theater credits include *Camelot* (Broadway, 2023), *Chicago* (touring, 2022), and *Hair* (regional, 2023). He has performed with the Metropolitan Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, Mannes Opera, Spoleto Festival Orchestra, and Bridgeport Symphony. Nate holds degrees from Yale School of Music (M.M. '19, M.M.A '20) and Stony Brook (D.M.A '24) and is currently studying lute at Juilliard's historical performance program (G.D. '26).

