

## **Lutes & More – 1**

presented by Early Music  
Vancouver

Sunday, August 5, 8:00pm

UBC Recital Hall

by Colin MacDonald

One of the rewards of living in a multicultural city is the opportunity to hear the traditional music of different societies in a single event. The fourth concert of the Vancouver Early Music Festival 2001 presented 18<sup>th</sup> century music from Germany and Persia, played on instruments that were collectively named lutes.

The lute family includes any instrument with a sound box that has strings strung over the top of the box and attached to an extended neck. Lutes appeared in the Middle East, and were imported into Europe at the time of the Crusades, around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-1700's, the European instrument evolved into the *13-course lute*, with the familiar pear shaped body and an extended neck for many independently tuned bass strings. At the same time in Persia an instrument known as the *tar* was being played, with a squat body, long neck, and three paired strings. Any similarity between the two lutes ended beyond the simple elements of construction.

American lutenist Robert Barto played the first half of the program with music from the height of the European lute tradition. The 13-course lute has a soft, delicate tone, physically unable to produce a really loud sound, particularly when it is played with the fingertips. Because the sound was so fragile the audience was forced to collectively hold its breath, so that not a single element of Barto's quietly nuanced playing would be missed. Despite the low dynamic range, his tone was direct and

penetrating, and the clarity of his articulations allowed even the most rapid passages to be heard easily.

Barto played three works by Sylvius Leopold Weiss, the full *Sonata no. 5 in G major*, and excerpts from *the Sonata no. 46 in A major* and *Sonata no. 42 in A minor*. Weiss was a contemporary of Johann Sebastian Bach, and his music was composed in a similar contrapuntal style. This is not music that arouses passionate outbursts, but rather imbues the listener with a sense of order and purity, the feeling that every note is carefully chosen and precisely placed. Barto was able to maintain a clear sense of melody through the counterpoint, and his exquisite ornaments had an almost subliminal character, trills and turns fading off into silence. The *Locatelli Variations* and *Sonata in D minor* by Bernhard Joachim Hagen exhibited more virtuosic playing in a pre-classical style, and Barto thrilled the audience with his fleet fingerwork.

Local musician Amir Koushkani performed the second half of the program with a selection of traditional music that he called *Shur-o-Nava*, accompanied by Hamin Honari on hand drums. Metal strings gave the Persian lute, or *tar*, a much brighter sound, and Koushkani's rapid tremolo picking infused the music with a vibrant energy. With only three strings, the tar was used to play single-line vocal melodies, which became highly ornamented under the performer's expressive stylings. Uncertain where one song stopped and another began, the audience sat in rapt attention as Koushkani played, breaking into enthusiastic appreciation after a continuous 30-minute set.