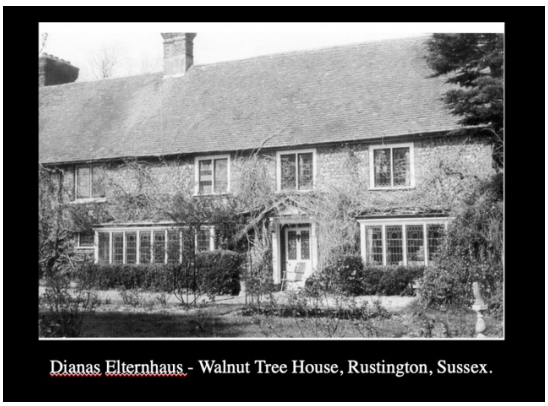
DIANA POULTON 1903 – 1995

An English Lute Pioneer

Edith Eleanor Diana Chloe Kibblewhite was born on 18th April 1903. Her childhood in Walnut Tree House, on the Sussex coast seems to have been idyllic, apart from the absence of her father, Gilbert whose violent behaviour brought her parents' marriage to an end in the year that she was born.



Dianas Elternhaus - Walnut Tree House, Rustington, Sussex.

Diana und ihr Bruder Peter mit ihrer Mutter

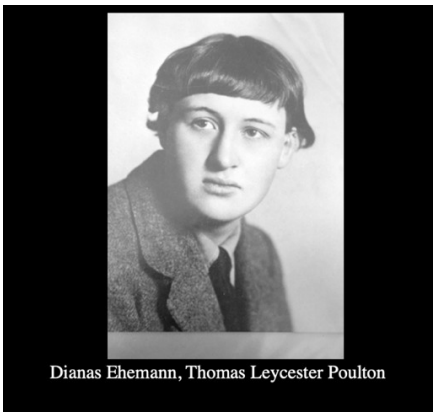
Her mother was a close friend, and probably the mistress, of the poet and philosopher T E Hulme, who died in France in 1917. Together, they hosted a *salon* at the family's London home, 67 Frith Street, on the corner of Soho Square. Their friends were the *avant-garde* artists, writers and politicians of the day – Jacob Epstein, Gaudier Brezska, Ezra Pound - and Arnold Dolmetsch.

In 1918, just 15 years old, Diana entered the Slade School of Fine Art. She won prizes for head and figure drawing and expected to become a professional artist like her mother and her aunt. She was known as one of the great beauties of the Slade. The writer, Stephen Potter was desperately in love with her. He wrote in his journal –

> Her face was pale, her profile pure, her hair done in the new Eton-crop manner . . . Her slow, reasonable voice made her seem wonderfully poised. Yet, in a second, her face could be transformed with feeling, quickness of response; she flushed easily, laughed with marvellous abandon.

Dianas Erwartung war, dass sie Künstlerin werden würde, wie ihre Mutter und ihre Tante Dora

While she was still at the Slade, she met and married a fellow student, Thomas Leycester Poulton.



Dianas Ehemann, Thomas Leycester Poulton

They had two daughters, Alethea and Celia. When she was 8 years old, Alethea died after an operation for appendicitis which carried out on the kitchen table.

Celia and Alethea Poulton

Tom was a gifted flamenco guitar player and had met the young Andrés Segovia. Diana wanted to play like him but her hands and nails were too soft to produce a good sound; and in any case she soon fell in love with the lute.

Diana spielt Gitarre

She tried changing the stringing of her guitar to lute tuning, and then a lute-guitar which her mother had bought on a visit to Germany. One day, she saw a 'proper' lute in a London shop window and bought it for £25. When she examined the label, she saw that it had been repaired by Dolmetsch.

The Kibblewhite and Dolmetsch families often met in Rustington, where Mabel, Arnold's third wife, took the children to bathe and play by the sea. Diana soon began to accompany her mother to hear Arnold's recitals in the Art Workers' Guild in London. In later life she recalled –

> . . . of all the music we heard, for me it was always the lute which captured my imagination . . . Dolmetsch . . . (when he played music within his technical capacity) . . . was able to produce a sound of such extraordinary beauty and moments of such enchantment that I was completely captivated.

Arnold Dolmetsch, außerhalb seines Hauses - Jesses in Haslemere

As you see here, Dolmetsch is playing with his little finger just behind the bridge, as shown in many paintings and evidenced by wear marks on several surviving

instruments. There is a discussion of this in the latest edition of *Lute News*, the quarterly magazine of the Lute Society.

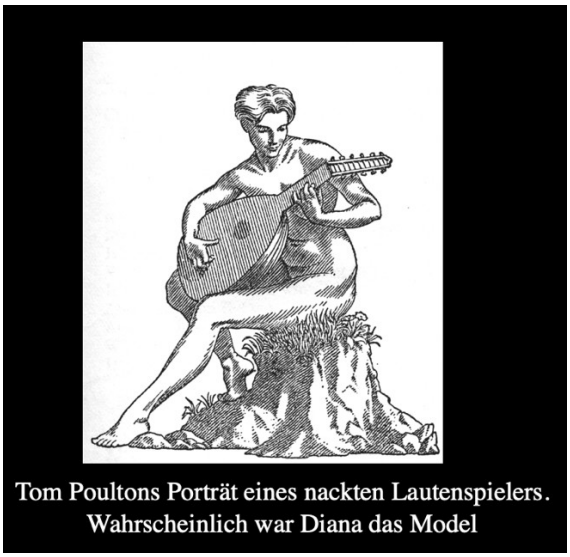
He has, outrageously, added a treble rider to turn it into a ten-course lute, and shortened the neck for his own convenience (he was a very small man). The overall length when it left Harton's workshop in 1598, was as Dolmetsch himself reported in 1904, 86.4 cms, but is now only 77 cm.

Diana taught herself to play from the tablature her mother had transcribed for Dolmetsch from manuscripts in the British Museum and the Cambridge Library. Soon she was able to take lessons from Dolmetsch. But he was a bad tempered and impatient teacher and would shout at her in French when she played badly, "*Idiot! Imbecile!".* Her lessons often ended in tears and she gave up playing.

Six months later, Arnold's eldest son Rudolph, who was a close friend, advised her to study the manuscripts from which his father had learnt –Mace, Mersenne, Le Roy and Robert Dowland's compilation, *A Varietie of Lute Lessons*. Soon she was playing fluently enough to give demonstrations (unknown to Arnold) at the Haslemere Festivals.

Das Musikzimmer bei Jesses. Diana spielt Laute,
Mabel Dolmetsch und Celia tanzen

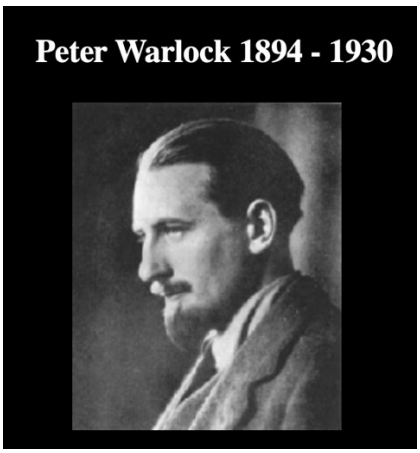
One day she found that he had been listening to her perform and thought he would be angry, but he was impressed by her playing and from that time he was kindness itself, lending her instruments and supporting her in every way. She took part in every Festival after that (except for 1932 – the year that Alethea died). Often, she was accompanied by her husband, who sang beautifully, and later by her younger daughter who performed as a dancer.



Tom Poultons Porträt eines nackten Lautenspielers.
Wahrscheinlich war Diana das Model

In 1931 Thomas Poulton's drawing of a naked lute-player appeared in *The Weekend Book,* published by the Nonesuch Press. The hand-positions are recognisably Diana's.

By 1927, Diana had begun to develop a career as a lutenist and was planning a series of recordings with the baritone John Goss. Together they visited the composer, Peter Warlock in the hope of finding new material.



Warlock's book *The English Ayre* (which contained a short biography of John Dowland) had just been published, but he had never heard anyone play the lute; John and Diana performed some songs for him, and he was enchanted with the subtle relationship between the voice and the instrument. When, in return, he played *Lachrimae* for them on his piano, Diana was equally enchanted. As their visit ended, Warlock pulled a box of papers out from under his bed and gave it to her – it contained copies of Dowland songs, which he and Philip Wilson had made at the British Museum. A treasure-trove of tablature. In an interview for the Lute Society, Diana said –

> From this wonderful collection I was able to include, in broadcasts and recitals, songs which . . . were not available in modern editions, or if they were the tablature was not included. For some years after this it became 'the thing' to have music of the period for broadcast productions of Shakespeare's plays and, either alone, or with the younger members of

> the Dolmetsch family, I took part in many performances. I played at Stratford-on-Avon, at the Old Vic, and in several period plays in the West End. With all this work coming in, my painting began to take a less important place in my life and eventually my lute-playing took over entirely.

Intrigued by Warlock's brief biography, Diana began a long period of research to find out more. She told an interviewer, "Right from the start [Dowland] was the composer who most touched me."

But it would not be until 1972, 45 years later, that her biography of John Dowland was finally published. The book received wide acclaim, and attracted interest from the general public as well as from scholars.

A few days after the biography appeared, she picked up the telephone and heard a man's voice announce that he was "John Dowland". For one awful moment she thought that he was ringing to complain that she had got some detail of his life and work completely wrong! But in fact, **this** John Dowland, was researching his family history and was asking if he might be related to the great English composer.

On another occasion a plumber who was working in her house asked if he could listen to the radio, because John Dowland was 'Composer of the Week'.

She came across taxi-drivers who, on hearing that she played the lute asked, "Know any Dowland do you?" And one who asked her to take out her lute and play something for him as they drove.

She sometimes felt that Dowland was stalking her through the streets of London. Her total absorption in his life was noted by the eminent Shakespeare scholar, John Dover Wilson who attended a series of her recitals and lectures in Edinburgh. He explained to the audience, "I think Miss Poulton must wonder why I have been following her around Edinburgh, but I find it fascinating the way she talks about these Elizabethan composers as if she were going to take tea with them after the lecture."

But, however much research she did, she could not find a portrait of Dowland. Paul O'Dette says that at a lute meeting in Holland, he came down to breakfast and overheard a conversation between Diana and Michael Schäffer. Michael was telling her about a dream, in which he had offered a nylon lute string to Dowland, to replace one the great lutenist had just broken; but he had woken up before Dowland could tell him what he thought of the new material. Diana became terribly excited, said O'Dette, and kept asking Schäffer, "What did he look like?"

Schäffer told her that he couldn't remember, but Diana kept asking questions, "How tall was he? What colour were his eyes?" and so on.

Workers of the World Unite!

DAILY WORKER

No. 1 WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 1, 1930 One Penny

WOOLLEN WORKERS TAKE THE FIELD

REVOLUTION IN INDIA GROWS

Congress Chiefs Feel Mass Pressure

PRINCE'S JAUNT

To Travel Into Impenetrable Jungle—By Train

WITH HIS VALET!

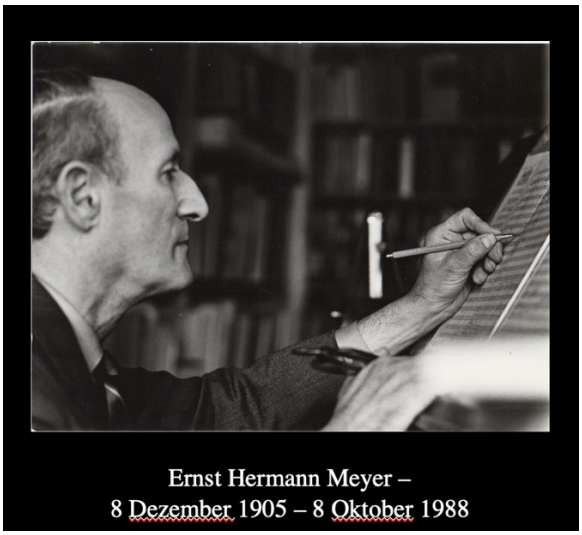
MASS STRIKES AGAINST WAGE REDUCTIONS

Police Attack Pickets

ALL WORKERS SOLID AND DETERMINED TO WIN FIGHT

Diana and her husband were members of the Communist Party, possibly recruited through connections with the Art Workers' Guild and the Communist Faction of the National Guild League. She was known to sell copies of Daily Worker, (the Party newspaper) outside tube stations in London. Perhaps they were among the 7,500 who joined in 1926, during the National Strike. She didn't resign her membership of the Party until 1956, the year of the Hungarian uprising.

Diana worked for some time at Lawrence and Wishart, the London publishing house known as 'The Party Press', and Tom was an associate of the known Communist sympathiser, Francis Meynell of Nonesuch Press. Arnold Dolmetsch's son Carl, whose own political views were far to the right of theirs, said that despite their political beliefs, he remembered them both as highly cultured and intellectual.



Ernst Hermann Meyer –
8 Dezember 1905 – 8 Oktober 1988

While working at Lawrence and Wishart, Diana became friends with the German composer Ernst Hermann Meyer who shared her love of early English music. A committed communist, he left Germany in 1933, and settled in London where he lectured and attempted to complete his book *English Chamber Music* (published in 1946). His research papers and notes had been abandoned in Germany, making the editing and checking of details very difficult. Meyer returned to Germany in 1948 where he founded the Handel Festival, in Halle. Perhaps it was his enthusiastic reports of the positive aspects of musical life and culture under Communist rule in the GDR which persuaded Diana that things were not as bad inside the Soviet bloc as reported in the press, or on the BBC.

Meyer's Marxist theories are expressed in his preface -

> It was . . . the works of some English historians, especially those of Tawney and Trevelyan, which made the facts of the history of music appear to me in a new light, and it was my study of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels which finally led me to attempt to represent a period of musical history as a natural part of a general social development.

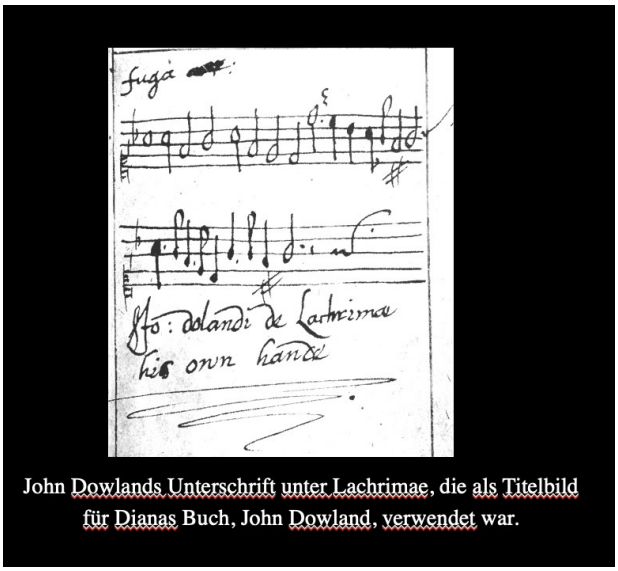
The early years of the 20th century were also a period of great political and cultural change. New artistic forms were difficult for non-experts to appreciate and judge. In art there were the expressionists, such as Kirschner; the Dadaists; and conceptual artists such as Marcel Duchamp. In music there were the mysteries of jazz; the complexities of Stravinsky and Shostakovich. At a time when everything seemed uncertain, early music offered a logic and tonal values which seemed familiar and rooted in a more stable and historic past, while still offering the attraction of something new.

While Diana was struggling to complete her biography of Dowland and her edition of the complete works, she was asked to help Meyer with a revised

edition of his book. The second edition eventually appeared in 1982, with a revised title, *Early English Chamber Music.* Meyer's dedication praises Diana's assistance.

> I am greatly indebted to Diana Poulton for all the help she extended to me in making possible an up-to-date reissue of my book. . . . correcting errors and shortcomings which due to force of circumstances were bound to be contained in the original version of the book . . . I am honoured by the active and devoted interest displayed by her in supervising this new edition.

Her membership of the Party didn't stop the BBC broadcasting her recitals, but it did bring her and her music to the attention of the security services. She regularly exchanged tablature with Colonel Michael Prynne, a fellow scholar and lutenist, who was Military Attaché at the British Embassy in Moscow.



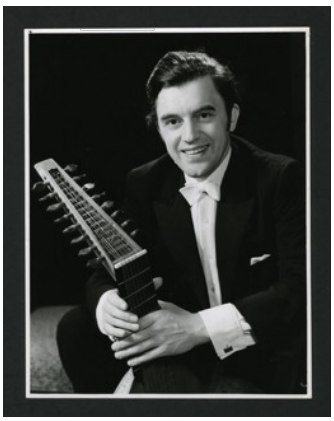
John Dowlands Unterschrift unter Lachrimae, die als Titelbild für Dianas Buch, John Dowland, verwendet war.

The authorities were suspicious of his contacts with a known member of the Communist Party, suspecting that the mysterious pages were in a complex code, rather than merely 'old music'. Perhaps someone knew that John Dowland had been suspected of being a Catholic spy, at a time when England was strictly protestant, and thought that history was repeating itself!

In 1974 Diana was invited to attend the American Lute Seminar to be held in Carmel Valley in California and organised by Donna Curry. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet her great friend and fellow Dolmetsch student, Suzanne Bloch.

But, when applying for a visa, she answered the question, “Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” truthfully and her application was refused. When she told the organisers they were horrified. Someone in the American Lute Society must have had influential connections in the State Department, because it has been suggested that it was Henry Kissinger himself who eventually approved Diana’s visa.

In 1994, a year before she died, her family realised that her papers and research notes would be of value to other scholars and musicians. Sixteen boxes of notebooks, manuscripts, books and letters were offered for sale by auction. The guide price was £2,000-£3,000.



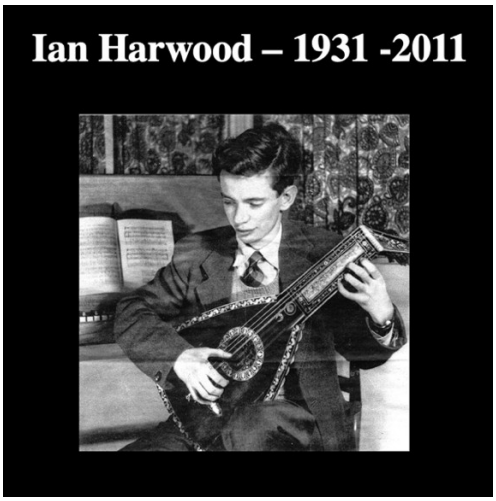
The buyer was Robert Spencer who would become President of the Lute Society after Diana’s death. The papers remained unsorted until shortly before his own death in 1997. Then, wanting a task they could complete together, he and his wife, Jilly went through them and decided which of the contents should be archived at the Royal Academy of Music, where Robert’s own material was to be deposited.

It isn’t easy to follow Diana’s lines of research. Her notebooks are undated, and she very often worked from the front of the book on one subject, and from the back on another. What is apparent is the breadth of her interest, and the many

paths she followed in understanding more about the lute, and the development of its music.

In an interview with Matthew Spring, for the BBC, which was never broadcast, Diana described how difficult her early research had been –

> [Those] working in the field of early music today can have no idea of the difficulties we had to contend with at that time. Microfilms had not been invented and photographic copies were almost prohibitively expensive so all my early collecting of lute music had to be done by hand. . . . I still have piles of notebooks in which I wrote out quantities of information gleaned from sixteenth and seventeenth century sources. For example, I still have all the instructions from Adrian Le Roy's, *A Briefe and Easye Instruction;* all those of *Thomas Robinson;* the Bessardus, *Necessary Observations*; large sections of Marin Mersenne and Thomas Mace, all in my own hand-writing. The works of Dr Wolfgang Boetticher and Ernst Pohlman had not then made the lutenists' life easier so the whereabouts of music had to be searched for in library catalogues, when they could be obtained.



Diana and Ian Harwood first met in 1953, when he visited her to return a lute which had been borrowed for an amateur Shakespeare production. As you can see, it wasn't really what we would call a lute today. But it was good enough to be used as a beginner's instrument and, when Ian said he wanted to learn to play, Diana sold it to him for £5 and agreed to teach him

Hans Neeman nach einem Foto von
Kurt Rottmann aus dem Jahr 1934

In the 1930s some German makers were producing good copies of baroque instruments – as seen in this picture of Hans Neemann. But the only lutes available in England, since Dolmetsch's death were the heavy and inauthentic wandervogel lutes imported from Germany, - essentially guitars in lute form.

Lacking the money to buy a 'proper lute', Ian decided to build his own instrument, basing it on one of Diana's, and on his examination of lutes in museum collections. That research, and his friendship, with John Isaacs, led to the building and sale of many instruments with the Harwood and Isaacs label, as well as the famous 'kits' from which amateurs built their own lutes.

Harwood and Isaac laute

Today we recognise the faults and inauthenticity in the Harwood and Isaac lutes, at the time they were a revelation, and Anthony Rooley, founder of 'The Consort of Music' described them as, "so light they seemed to float".

In 1939 Diana's great friend and fellow-scholar, Richard Newton published - his influential paper, 'The Golden Age of English Lute Music'. In it he wrote -

> There can hardly be any important branch of English musical history that has been more completely and more unjustly neglected than our lute music.

Lesley Ward auf arbeit

Seventeen years later, in 1956 on a walk across the Sussex downs to visit the harpsichord maker Lesley Ward in the Dolmetsch workshops in Haslemere), Ian and Diana discussed the possibility of establishing a society dedicated to the lute. Diana was less enthusiastic than Ian, but eventually Ian wrote to 40 colleagues asking if they would be interested in joining. There were 32 positive replies, and the first meeting took place on 20th October 1956. Twenty people attended, including Carl Dolmetsch, Harry Potts, Desmond Dupré, Michael Morrow and Robert Spencer.

Harry Potts, suggested that in addition to collating and distributing music, promoting performance, publishing a journal and holding regular meetings which would include a recital, the aims should include the study of the structure of the lute itself. The meeting ended with a recital by Desmond Dupré, and Arnold Dolmetsch's eldest son Carl, gave the meeting his seal of approval – stating, "My father would have been overjoyed to see this gathering."

By 1962 membership of the Society had grown to 130, and today there are over 1,200 members. And I think we can safely say that today lute-music is no longer neglected.

Public performance couldn't provide enough income to fund the travel and museum and library fees needed for her research, and like many other practising musicians, Diana's income from teaching was crucial. Determined never to be as intimidating as Arnold Dolmetsch had been, she became a loved and valued teacher to many of today's professional players. In 1968 the Royal College of Music appointed her its first Professor of Lute. Among her first RCM students was the young Belgian, Albert Sundermann, who later became Professor of Lute and Guitar at the Brussels Conservatoire.

Dianas Haus am Wilton Square in London

A young Anthony Bailes travelled regularly from South Wales to Diana's home in London for his lessons. She lent him irreplaceable copies of tablature from her collection and, when she realised just how difficult it was for him to find the rail fares to attend his lessons, she provided him with delicious meals. In fact, all of the ex-students I talked to – from Nigel North to Chris Wilson, from Paul Beier to Jakob Lindberg, reported that she was an excellent cook. The meals they shared with her in her Wilton Square home included beef stew with red wine, roast lamb with whole garlic, tarte Provençale, lamb chops with cider and prunes, and vegetarian omelettes for Paul; and, of course there were always glorious cakes. Students who paid for a one-hour class, often found their 'class' might last three hours.

Chris Wilson mit Diana in ihrem Zimmer am Wilton Square

Chris Wilson remembers that he must have had as many as 150 lessons with Diana, and that she never considered his learning of a piece as 'finished', but would merely say that it was "coming on well". He recalls the generosity with which she lent him instruments, first her Dolmetsch vihuela, which was full of woodworm holes, and later her magnificent Buechenberg theorbo which had

originally belonged to Robert Thurston Dart. In an early performance for the BBC of Monteverdi's *Orpheo,* Julian Bream played the lute, and Diana played continuo on the Buechenberg. In the recording Diana can barely be heard, even though she is playing such a large instrument.

Matthias Buechenberg a Roma/ 1608.. (ex Thurston Dart, der es restaurieren ließ. 37 Rippen aus Kernholz/Splint-Eibe mit Ebenholzlinien dazwischen. (ex Thurston Dart, der es restaurieren ließ von Alec Hodson).

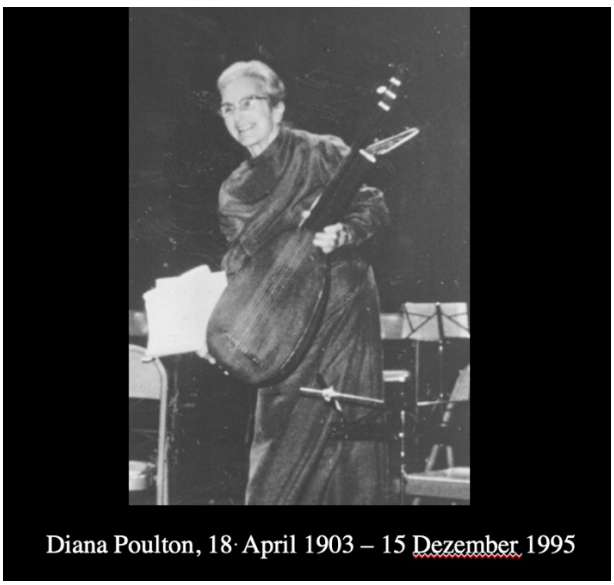
Chris Wilson said –

> . . . [It was] a magnificent theorbo with an original back by Matheus Buechenburg, its battered multi-ribbed yew body was enormous and Ian Harwood had sensitively restored it using a similar sized Buechenburg in the Brussels Collection as his model. The resulting lute had a vast string length of one metre; strung almost entirely in brass it had a beguiling sound but was very difficult to manage anything but the simplest chords on. I was lucky enough to have been able to borrow this 'monster' on a number of occasions, most memorably for performances of Monteverdi, a *1610 Vespers* in the Albert Hall, and for two seasons at Drottningholm, outside Stockholm for the *Coronation of Poppea.* A few years ago, you could still buy postcards with Jakob Lindberg and myself, almost totally disguised dressed in the obligatory eighteenth-century costumes and wigs of the orchestra, playing two theorbos of comically different size, one looking very much like the offspring of the other. The big one was of course Diana's Buechenberg.

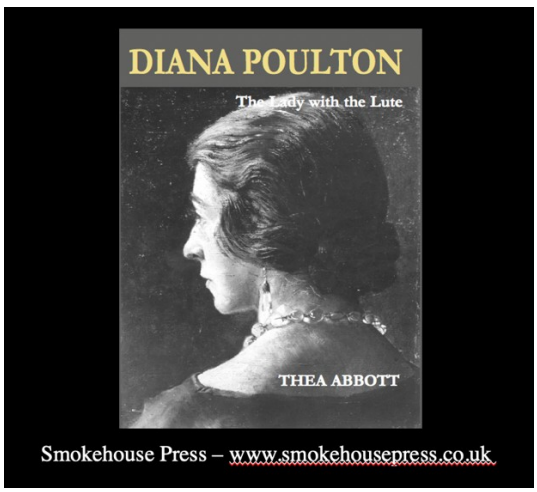
As you can see here, the bridge is higher than in the restored version so the string length was probably about 900mm. In these later pictures of the fully restored instrument the string length is a massive 990mm!

Years later, Tony Bailes, was one of four theorbists in a performance of the Monteverdi *Vespers*. He told Diana that he was worried the theorbos would not be heard above the orchestra and Diana comforted him by telling him that she had been inaudible in an earlier performance of the *Vespers,* even with the Buechenberg. When she told Michael Morrow (of Musica Reservata) how envious she was that Tony would be one of four theorbists in this performance, his response was, “Don’t worry Diana, they will be four times as inaudible as you were!”

Diana always believed that the lute should be played without nails, though initially few of her students were willing to follow her advice. Perhaps partly because recitals were often held in large auditoria, and playing with nails produced a larger sound; but also perhaps because, as far as we can tell from early recordings, the quality of the sound she produced herself did not provide a good example.



Diana Poulton's greatest legacy lies, less in her performance than in her meticulous and scholarly editing of the many and varied editions of lute music which her research uncovered, and her understanding of the sensibility of the composers she studied, and in her willingness to share and to pass on her understanding to the next generation of players and scholars. In 1909, just 6 years after Diana's birth, the critic and writer, Arthur Symons had written, "[Arnold] Dolmetsch is, I suppose the only living man who can read lute-music and play on the lute, an instrument of extraordinary beauty, which was once as common in England as the guitar still is in Spain." Thanks to the work of Diana and the other 20th century lute pioneers, today there are thousands of men and women around the world who can read tablature and play the lute.



If I have interested you in Diana and her life, you can read more in my book - *Diana Poulton: the lady with the lute.* Available direct from Smokehouse Press.

Thea Abbott, 20.11.2021

Die Toten sind wie Eulen, die aus der Dunkelheit zu uns schreien und darum bitten, erinnert und verstanden zu werden.