

Cases

The best way to maintain your theorbo is to buy or make a custom-fitted hard case for it and USE it – not just when you store the instrument between practice sessions, but in the breaks during rehearsal, when you carry the instrument from one room to another, and when you need to put the instrument down to write something on the music. The case should support the instrument so that it cannot move inside the case. As theorbos age, their neck extensions often come forward, to the point where the case can put significant strain on the instrument when the lid is closed. Keep an eye on the fit of the upper pegbox in the case, and be prepared to have the upper nut taken down if the neck comes forward.

Many cases are not perfectly watertight, in that they will shrug off a light shower, but will allow water into the case if you are caught out in a downpour. This can be disastrous for the wood, the glue and the strings. A simple solution is a dry-cleaner's evening dress bag, usually available for the asking. It is simply a vast polythene bag about 2 metres long, heat sealed at one end. It weighs nothing and will squash up in the case when not needed, but you can slide the theorbo into it before putting it in its case if a wet journey looks likely.

The external colour of the case greatly affects the protection it offers to the theorbo. Dark-coloured cases will absorb more heat than light-coloured cases if they are in sunlight. This heat is transmitted directly to the instrument inside, affecting its tuning, the tension of the strings and thus the stress on the instrument, and – in extreme cases – even the integrity of its glue and varnish. A pale-coloured case may have much to recommend it if you live in a hot, sunny climate. I find that they make a significant difference to the health and tuning stability of my theorbos, even in cloudy Britain.

Case modifications

I have found these small modifications invaluable for hauling theorbos around the world. I hope some pictures will follow soon...

Strap hooks, for carrying a theorbo case on a shoulder strap. A couple of D rings and a strong strap are all that you need. Good quality padded straps with strong metal clips are widely available for laptop bags. I would advise against straps with plastic clips often found on cheap luggage. I know of two instruments which have been damaged

when such clips have broken. Unfortunately I have never found any effective way of carrying a theorbo case with backpack-style straps: the cases are just too long.

Extra handle: I have an extra handle fitted on the neck extension part of the case, on the surface facing you when you carry it on your shoulder (normally the same face as the regular handle) and within comfortable reach of your hand. This is very useful for pulling the case upright to negotiate narrow staircases, revolving doors, lifts, crowded places, etc. It also offers an additional gripping point for sliding the theorbo in and out of cars.

Feet: Two rounded metal feet are attached to my cases, at the point where the body end rests on the ground when you lift up the neck end by the extra handle mentioned above. This enables the theorbo to be towed easily along the aisle of an aircraft without lifting the whole thing to shoulder height. It is also handy for crossing acres of carpet in large hotels, concert hall foyers, etc. The metal feet slide smoothly and silently on carpet and many other surfaces, and are much easier to fit and less obtrusive than wheels. I am indebted to my colleague David Miller for this suggestion.

Soundboard reinforcement: some case makers will reinforce the soundboard area of the case with a layer of kevlar or fibreglass, which I find reassuring. It adds a small amount to the weight and cost of the case, but gives significantly greater protection over the most critical part of the instrument. The flat expanse of the soundboard area is otherwise the weakest and most vulnerable part of the case.

Humidity issues

If you HAVE to work in an environment which is dry enough to endanger your instrument (such as air-conditioned theatres and concert halls), you can create a micro-climate in the case, to rehumidify the instrument between rehearsals or overnight. I use [Oasis](#) case humidifiers, and find that two in a big theorbo case will keep the instrument healthy. One is sufficient for a lute or guitar.

Case Makers

Theorbo cases normally need to be custom-built because there is no standardization of sizes. Most luthiers can advise on cases and a few make their own. With the exception of a couple of cases made by the

instruments' makers, I get my cases from the [Kingham MTM Case Company](#), based in Essex in the UK. Another company in Italy producing custom-made lute and theorbo cases is [RCH di Chiaramoni Roberto, Rossano & C](#), though I have no personal experience of their products.