

Structural Problems

Structural problems on a theorbo will generally be obvious - the bridge has come off, the neck has come off, the soundboard is lifting, or there's a large crack somewhere. If your theorbo has one of these problems please take it to a qualified maker, and don't attempt to fix it yourself unless you ARE a qualified maker. Many repairs are made more difficult and expensive by well-meaning amateur woodworkers tackling the job with the wrong tools, and especially with the wrong glue.

Some such problems develop over a long time, and it is useful to be able to recognize the warning signs. The following advice is offered as guidance only, with the assumption that each person will use common sense and due caution when evaluating any problem on their own instruments. The author cannot be held responsible for any damage caused by inappropriate actions of instruments' keepers.

Cracks in the soundboard.

Cracks ALONG the grain are often not serious. Many professionally owned lutes and theorbos (including some of my own) have been played for years with large or multiple cracks in the soundboard. They only become a problem if they cause buzzes when the instrument is played. Such cracks are usually the result of the wood reacting to climatic changes, and will often close up when the weather is relatively wet, and reopen when it is drier. There is no cause for alarm, and if the instrument is not buzzing there is really no cause for action. Cracks ACROSS the grain are extremely bad news, and usually occur as the result of an impact or pressure. Detune the instrument immediately and totally, and take it to a maker.

Cracks elsewhere

Superficial cracks can appear in many places, where decorative or protective veneers react to climatic changes. Small surface cracks in the neck, extension and pegbox veneers, and even in the fingerboard, are usually not serious, as long as they are only in veneer, and not in the core wood of the neck or pegbox. Cracks in the ribs are sometimes not serious if they run along or between the ribs, but are much more serious if they are across the rib. Cracks along a rib can be secured temporarily with a strip of sticky tape over the crack, and if the instrument has remained stable and in tune there is probably no need to detune it. Generally speaking, large cracks should be dealt with to preserve the structural integrity of the lute body, while small ones can probably be safely left. It is wise to keep checking them in case a crack continues to open. If your instrument has a crack across a rib, detune it and take it to a maker as soon as possible, before the wood has time to move in inconvenient directions. Otherwise, I suggest you keep an eye on the crack, tape it up, and get it fixed when the instrument next visits a maker.

Bridge lifting off

Bridges occasionally come unglued, even those on instruments by the best makers. If any part of your bridge starts to lift, no matter how minimally or slowly, detune the instrument immediately and take it to a maker. A lifting bridge is often a minor repair,

whereas if a bridge tears off completely it often damages the soundboard beyond repair.

Soundboard lifting off

Sometimes the glue joint holding the soundboard to the bowl comes unglued. This is especially common at the point where the weight of the theorbo rests on the player's leg. If any of the area behind the bridge (in direct line with the string pull) comes unglued, detune the instrument immediately and - yes, you guessed right - find a maker. If another area comes unglued this will also need attention, but is not quite so urgent and you may be able to leave the instrument tensioned. If in doubt detune the instrument and seek advice.

Upper neck coming forward

Most theorbos experience a small amount of extension creep, especially when they are first strung up, and most makers build in an allowance for this when they set the height of the upper nut. To keep torque on the instrument to a minimum, the diapasons should run as close to the theorbo's soundboard as possible. On a well set-up instrument they will lie in the same plane as the stopped strings. If the diapasons are more than a centimetre or so forward of this, the upper nut could probably be reduced with some benefit. If the diapasons are even further forward, the upper nut should definitely be reduced, and if there is no room to manoeuvre on the nut, the neck extension may need to be removed and re-set. Such movement in the diapasons is usually a slow and gradual process occurring over years. If the neck suddenly comes forward, it probably means that the joint is giving way, and in such cases the instrument should be detuned and repaired.

Upper pegbox coming off

Historical theorbos were usually constructed with a complicated joint fixing the upper pegbox to the extension, and the string tension helped to pull the joint together. Some modern theorbos, especially cheap instruments, may have a simple glued butt joint which can give way, especially if the pegbox is banged on a ceiling. If the pegbox is still attached, detune the diapasons, detach the strings from the upper pegbox, and either coil them at the bridge or remove them from the instrument. If the neck-extension joint is not compromised, you can safely leave the stopped strings tensioned.

Water damage

Theorbos and water don't mix, and prevention is much better than cure. If you have an outdoor gig, negotiate alternative arrangements in the event of rain BEFORE the event, so you are not honour-bound (or contractually obliged) to play in the rain. If your theorbo has to travel in wet weather, take precautions to make sure the rain can't get into the case, and dry off the outside of the case and especially around the lid seal before opening it, so water can't run onto the instrument. If the instrument does get wet, wipe off any surface moisture as soon as possible, and as thoroughly as possible, leave the case open in a safe place so the instrument can air, and allow it to dry out slowly. Most lutes are put together with water-soluble animal glue, so if the

instrument was really wet inspect its joints carefully, and if in doubt detune the strings and consult a maker.

Finding a maker

Some players will already have a favourite or local maker. Otherwise, finding the nearest maker is best done through the various lute societies, all of which maintain lists of makers. Whatever the inconvenience, it is really worth making the effort to find a lute maker, rather than the local violin or guitar repairer, because of the delicacy and peculiarities of lute construction. If you are worried about your theorbo and are unable to take it directly to a maker, it may be worth contacting the nearest one anyway, and asking if he or she would be willing to advise on the basis of photographs of the damage. This may sometimes help in ascertaining whether the damage needs urgent attention, or whether the instrument can still be played.

Compiled by Lynda Sayce