



BAROQUE PRACTICE

Putting Your Own “Spin” on Strings

by Charles Asch

I recently learned that the early strings used in tennis were nearly the same as the gut strings used for string instruments well until the late 1800s! From the website of Babolat, the French racquet sports manufacturer, comes the following quote on the origin of the famous Babolat tennis gut strings:

“1875: Babolat enters the fray

A specialist in processing natural gut for sausages, surgical thread, harmonic music strings, and archery, Babolat & Monnier, under the direction of Pierre Babolat, invents the first natural gut strings for racquets, one year after Walter Clopton Wingfield devised the rules of lawn tennis, and not long after producing its first badminton strings.”

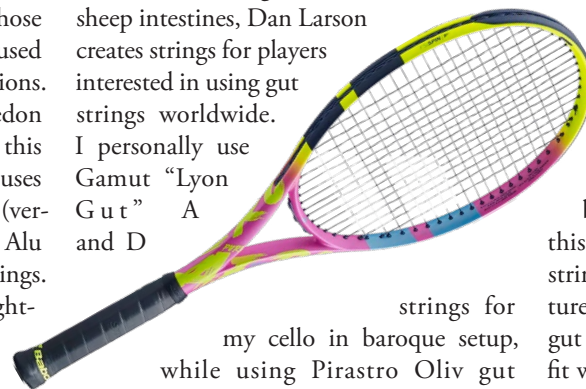
Converting part of their production from the manufacture of musical strings, Pierre Babolat decided to embrace the growing sport of “lawn tennis.” The first Lawn Tennis Championship was held at Wimbledon, England, in 1877 using those Babolat strings, which continue to be used to this day in tennis racquets of champions. Novak Djokovic, seven-time Wimbledon Men’s Singles Champion, including this year’s 2023 win over Carlos Alcaraz, uses Babolat VS Natural Gut in his main (vertical) strings, and polyester Luxilon Alu Power rough strings in the cross strings. Roger Federer, a recently retired eight-time Wimbledon Champion, also used Wilson Natural Gut strings in his vertical strings, with Luxilon Alu Power in the cross strings. Rising star Carlos Alcaraz does not use gut strings, and simply uses Babolat’s more modern “RPM Blast” polyester strings. Some pros use both gut and polyester; others only use polyester strings.

This mixture of gut and polyester strings is today called a “hybrid” setup, using the flexibility, touch and power of the gut strings in conjunction with the stiffer, snappier qualities of the modern polyester strings. This is perhaps not unlike many modern instrument strings being

manufactured today, many of which, such as the “Passione” line by Pirastro, employ a modern silver or aluminum coating to a natural gut interior, bringing together qualities of both steel and gut strings. Recently a student of mine switched her strings to a full set of Passione, and has found her cello to have a warmer, more responsive quality, while keeping the power associated with steel strings. Companies such as Warchal have their “Amber” line, which was “developed with the aim of achieving the sound quality of the best gut strings without any tuning instabilities.” D’Addario Strings has started manufacturing a string called “Pro-Arté,” which contains a synthetic core, which is said to offer more flexibility and elasticity than one might find in the steel strings developed since the 1960s by companies such as Jargar and Larsen strings of Denmark.

In our very own state of Minnesota, based in Duluth, Gamut Strings are amongst the best gut strings manufactured in the world. Using beef serosa and sheep intestines, Dan Larson creates strings for players interested in using gut strings worldwide.

I personally use Gamut “Lyon Gut” A and D



strings for my cello in baroque setup, while using Pirastro Oliv gut strings for the G and C strings. It is interesting to note that “Lyon” strings refers to the city in France where Pierre Babolat was based, where he made his fateful switch from primarily being a manufacturer of musical strings to producing for the tennis market.

I would describe the feeling of gut tennis strings to be very akin to gut musical strings, in terms of elasticity and touch. One is able to get the feeling of “sinking” more into the string bed on gut strings, in a similar way to how gut tennis strings enable greater feel for the ball. One difference is

that while the high impact and tension of tennis racquets translates into more power at impact using gut strings, gut strings on musical instruments do not result in a louder sound than steel strings. However, as a professional musician, I have found that making the switch in tennis to gut strings on the mains and polyester strings on the crosses has resulted in a reduction of wrist and arm pain/impact, in addition to a greater sense of touch and easy power. An intense spring season of playing tennis on exclusively polyester strings resulted in wrist pain by the summertime! Since making the switch to hybrid setup, there has been no issue going back and forth between the cello and the tennis racquet.

I sometimes wonder if I could string my tennis racquet with cello strings, or vice versa, string my cello with gut tennis strings. When I look at my 17-gauge gut strings, I see astonishing similarities to the cello D and A strings. This is an experiment which I would love to try sometime, and I certainly encourage interested musicians to experiment with different string combinations to find what they are looking for in their instrument. (Just a note: on modern setup string instruments, pure gut strings would be placed at a higher angle and tension than with baroque setup with a lower bridge, so this would affect tonal adjustment and string selection—please ask the manufacturer or your luthier for information. Pure gut strings are also typically not meant to fit without some “finagling” into the housing of a modern tailpiece and may require an increase in the width of the bridge and saddle notches.)

Dr. Charles Asch performs on both a baroque and modern cello. On the baroque cello he has performed with Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Bach Society of Minnesota and Bach Roots Festival. He completed his D.M.A. at University of Minnesota, his M.M. at Juilliard, and his B.M. at Northwestern University. He has studied with Tanya Remenikova, Hans Jørgen Jensen, Richard Aaron and Jaap ter Linden. †