

# 1. Introduction

## Sources of Baroque Guitar Music

### Printed books

It is helpful to have some insight into the printing process and the way in which music was published and distributed in the seventeenth century to understand the difficulties which composers experienced when publishing their music.

There were two ways of printing music – from moveable type or from engraved copper plates. Printing from moveable type requires a font of suitable type which is used and then dispersed at the end of the print run. Engraved plates are more permanent – they can be kept, altered and re-used. They are also more versatile as anything that can be written out by hand can be engraved, whereas with type every symbol has to be cast separately. The plates were however more costly and time consuming to produce and the printing process required a special type of press and was slower.

A small number of guitar books were printed from moveable type – not very satisfactorily. Most baroque guitar music is printed from engraved plates. This method allows for a certain amount of “do it yourself” effort. The composer would usually have to produce a manuscript copy of the whole work. This had to be sized up so that the music would fit conveniently onto the plates. The music was first drawn on the plates using a steel point pen and then engraved with a burin. Both these processes involved working with a mirror image and are the equivalent of hand copying the whole work twice. This leaves plenty of scope for making mistakes! It seems that guitarists sometimes did their own engraving – which is why guitar tablatures are often rather messy. They weren’t always very good at it. An example of this is Sanz’s **Instruccion de musica** which he says he engraved himself. Several of the plates have a note at the bottom reading “Gaspar Sanz inventor sculpsit”.<sup>1</sup> Guitarists also sometimes owned the plates from which their books were printed and were able to re-use them. The best example of this is the Italian guitarist and lutenist - Foscarini. As far as we know his well known guitar book was the first to be printed from engraved plates - in about 1630.<sup>2</sup> For each subsequent edition of his work Foscarini re-used his original plates, adding more pieces with each re-printing. Some of the titles and dedications of the pieces have been changed so that none of the surviving copies are identical.

Earlier books which are entirely in *alfabeto* were often printed using ordinary letterpress. One of the advantages of *alfabeto* notation is that it can be printed in this way. Today we regard this sort of notation as inferior to staff notation but it is actually very practical both for the player and the printer.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Sanz – Instrucción de música (Zaragoza : 1674).

<sup>2</sup> G.P. Foscarini – Li 5 libri della chitarra alla spagnuola (Rome : 1640).

Copyright as we understand it didn't really exist in the seventeenth century. The "Powers That Be" exercised various kinds of control over the publication of printed matter including music, but this seems to have been easy to avoid. Officially printers had to obtain a **Licence** to print and were granted a **Privilege** protecting their copyright for a specified period of time. Corbetta was granted a privilege for five years for the book which he published in 1671<sup>3</sup>, and for six years for the one printed in 1674<sup>4</sup>. However, a lot of guitar books don't have licences and seem to have been produced and financed by the composers themselves.

## Manuscripts

There are two types of manuscript. Fine manuscript copies were sometimes made specifically for patrons and these will usually be clearly and accurately copied. However, many manuscripts are just individual player's notebooks. They may be rather sketchy because they were intended as an *aide memoire* rather than as a permanent and accurate version of the music.

## The tip of the iceberg

It is important to bear in mind that what has survived to the present day is only the tip of what was probably a very big iceberg. It is difficult to determine how representative what has survived is of the scene as a whole and we should therefore be careful not to draw simplistic conclusions from the available evidence. The information which all these sources include is useful but it is not necessarily the whole story. In the seventeenth century writers were selective when writing their books in the same way that we are today. Like us, they sometimes also make mistakes! Many of them specifically recommend finding a good teacher – a written source can never replace practical hands on advice.

## General Observations on Guitar Notation

Baroque guitar notation evolved over a considerable period of time as the style of music composed or arranged for the instrument developed. It does therefore vary considerably from source to source and from period to period. There are however certain conventions which seem to have been widely observed.

Two types of notation are used in baroque guitar sources – lute tablature and guitar chord notation.

## Lute Tablature

Two types of lute tablature are used for guitar music – Italian and French.

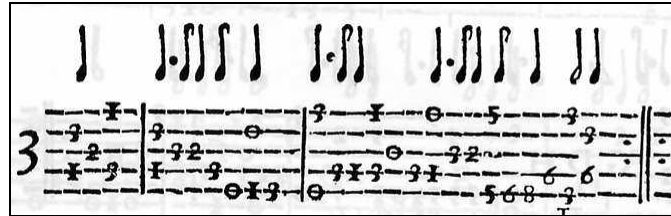
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<sup>3</sup> F. Corbetta – La guitarre royale (Paris : 1671).

<sup>4</sup> F. Corbetta - La guitarre royale (Paris, 1674).

In *Italian* tablature the *lowest line* of the five line staff represents the *highest* sounding course; the frets are represented by *Arabic numerals*, the unstopped course being 0, the first fret 1 etc.

**Italian tablature printed from moveable type**  
[Domenico Pellegrini – *Armoniosi concerti* (1650). Sarabanda, p. 38]



In *French* tablature the *highest line* of the five line staff represents the *highest* sounding course; the frets are represented by *letters*, the unstopped course being a, the first fret b etc.

**French tablature printed from engraved plates**  
[Antoine Carré - *Livre de pièces de guitarre* (ca.1677). Alemande, p.15.]



As a general rule, Italian tablature is used in sources originating in Italy, the Iberian peninsula and Latin America and French tablature is used in sources originating in France and other northern European countries, although there are some exceptions.

In Italian tablature the note values are placed above the tablature staff. If the chords are to be strummed, the stroke marks will be attached to the lowest line, downwards for down strokes (bass to treble) and upwards for up strokes (treble to bass).

In French tablature the note values are placed above the tablature staff only if the notes are to be plucked. If the chord is to be strummed, the note value will be placed on the staff with the tail down for down strokes (bass to treble) and up for up strokes (treble to bass).

In baroque guitar literature the terms *down* and *up* refer to the direction in which the right hand moves when the instrument is held in playing position, down towards the floor for a *down* stroke and up towards the ceiling for an *up* stroke.

## Guitar Chord Notation

There were at least three different types of guitar chord notation, *Alfabeto*, **Catalan** notation and **Castilian** notation. Of these *Alfabeto* was the most widely used and is the best known today. In each system the major and minor common 5-part guitar chords are represented by symbols, rather than notated in full in tablature.

In *Alfabeto* the chords are represented by **single upper-case** letters and a few other symbols.

In both **Catalan** and **Castilian** notation the chords are represented by **Arabic numerals** but arranged in different sequences; in Castilian notation two of the chords are represented by the symbols + and **P**. This makes it easy to distinguish one system from the other. They are used mainly in Iberian and Latin American sources.

Originally chord notation was used for simple strummed music. There are a variety of ways of setting music entirely in *alfabeto* out on the page, but the commonest way is to place the symbols on a single line with stroke signs attached to the line and note values, if any above.

### Alfabeto printed from letterpress

[Gio. Ambrosio Colonna – *Intavolatura di chitarra* (1637). *Aria di Firenze*, p. 31]



### Mixed tablature

Subsequently **alfabeto** was used for the standard 5-part chords in combination with tablature when notating more complex music. The commonest combination is that of Italian tablature with *alfabeto*. This is usually referred to today as **mixed tablature**.

### Mixed tablature printed from engraved plates

[Francesco Corbetta – *Varii capricci* (1643). *Sarabanda*, p.62]



*Alfabeto* is not used in combination with French tablature in printed books, but the same basic chords appear regularly in the music notated in tablature. *Alfabeto* is sometimes combined with French tablature in manuscript sources.

## Notating Rhythm

Time signatures, note values and barlines are often erratic, inaccurate – or simply missing altogether. There is no easy answer to the problems which this creates. Interpreting the music can only be a matter of common sense combined with musical insight and personal taste. Comparing different versions of the same piece can also be helpful. At least the time signature may be discovered. However, this is not a problem confined to baroque guitar sources and it is too complex to deal with in detail here.

## Right Hand versus Left Hand

Baroque guitar tablature is not just a placement notation for the left hand. The reason why it is so complex is because it is necessary to include a lot more information about what the right hand must do than is the case with ordinary lute tablature.

This is because in the seventeenth century guitar right-hand technique was different from that of the lute in at least one respect. Chords were usually (but not always) strummed – that is - instead of using separate fingers for each note of the chord in lute style, all the notes of the chord were struck with the fingers or in a single stroke, up or down. At the very least therefore, the notation needs to show

- a. whether the chords are strummed or played pizzicato
- b. the direction of the strums – down or up
- c. the note values or rhythmic pattern of the strumming

Some sources also differentiate between chords which are to be arpeggiated rather than strummed and some give information about whether the notes should be strummed with the fingers or with the thumb or with different combinations of these.

In lute style passages the notation will also indicate whether single notes are to be slurred – that is played only by the left hand - or played individually by separate fingers of the right hand. Some sources – e.g. Corbetta's **La guitarre royale (1671)** also indicate whether passages in two parts should be played using the thumb for the lower part and fingers for the upper part, or whether fingers only should be used.

Left hand fingering is also indicated in some sources using the system of 1-4 dots.

**1 dot = first finger**  
**2 dots = middle finger**  
**3 dots = ring finger**  
**4 dots = little finger**

Corbetta in **La guitarra royale (1671)** often puts a wavy line under the stave to show when a *barré* should be used both for chords and single melodic lines and Santiago de Murcia has copied this idea from him in his manuscript **Passacalles y obras (1732)**.

## Short Cuts

As anyone knows who has tried hand-copying baroque guitar tablature or even keying it into a computer, it is a very labour intensive to reproduce. For this reason in the 17<sup>th</sup> century a number of **shorthand devices** were used.

**These are not the result of an amateurish attitude to notation but a matter of practical common-sense. The fact that the notation is abbreviated is the cause of most of the problems which face us when trying to interpret the notation today. However, we should bear in mind that musicians in the seventeenth century can hardly have anticipated that their music would still be in circulation three hundred years later. They wrote for their own time and for players who would have been familiar with the conventions of the notation or who would have been able to seek advice from others who were. It is up to us to make what we can of it.**

## So what's the problem?

There are three areas in particular where the fact that the notation is abbreviated may cause problems.

- a. the unfretted or open courses to be included in strummed chords are not always indicated in the tablature. Instead of putting in the "0"s or "a"s, the lines are left blank. The player has then to decide which to include – or if you wish – which to leave out. This is usually fairly straightforward although inevitably there are situations in which it is impossible to arrive at a definitive answer. This would also have been the case in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it may have been up to the player to decide what worked best.

**It does not follow from this that the player has also to decide whether notes represented in the tablature by letters or figures should be left out. This would not save anyone any time or trouble!**

The obvious way of making it clear what both the left and right hand should be doing would have been to include the "0"s or "a"s – indeed the more carefully produced sources do tend to do that although they do not do so consistently.

- b. if the same chord is to be repeated, the chord or notes to be fretted will be shown once followed by the note values/stroke symbols only. This feature of the notation is complicated by the fact that when auxiliary notes are inserted into or between the chords, these may be shown as if they are single notes which are to be strummed. In some situations it will not be clear whether they should be

played as single notes or whether they should be included in the chord and if so whether the harmony remains the same or whether it changes.

- c. A clear distinction is not always made between chords which are to be strummed and passages which are to be played in lute style.

By definition a chord must consist of at least three notes and strummed chords should usually include at least three courses. It is possible to “strum” only two courses – i.e. to strike only two adjacent courses with a single finger or the thumb and occasionally this may be what is intended.

**It is however a contradiction in terms to speak of strumming a single note. The fact that single notes are often notated as if they were to be strummed is a notational anomaly. Rather than indicating a lack of precision in specifying how many courses should be included in the strum, it represents a failure to distinguish between two styles of playing. In music which is entirely in *alfabeto* the stroke marks do actually have more than one function. They indicate the direction of the strokes, but they also indicate how many times a chord should be repeated, how the strokes should be grouped – in threes or fours depending on whether the piece is in triple or common time - and in some instances the duration or time value of the stroke. Where single notes are inserted between chords these will also be given stroke marks. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a certain ambiguity, particularly in earlier sources, when indicating whether chords should be strummed or played in lute style. Foscarini in particular, does not always make a clear distinction between 2- and 3-part chords which are to be strummed and those which are to be played in lute style.**