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Translations in Time, Similarities in Touch

Transcribing Vihuela and Lute Music for Guitar

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(Översättningar i tid, likheter i anslag: Att transkribera vihuela- och lutmusik för gitarr)

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This paper focuses on the process of transcribing for guitar the music written for vihuela and lute in the Renaissance. Its aim is to highlight the benefits for the transcriber of engaging in this kind of work and to explore both the challenges one faces in the process and some of the options one has when presenting this music in modern notation. It concludes that the craft of transcribing is simultaneously a way to develop one's understanding of the style and a concrete means to the very practical task of checking the authenticity of musical text.

In transcribing, one actively engages with the music away from the instrument and is confronted with the clash between notational systems, between two different musical aesthetics. It is in this role of mediator that we find ourselves as performers, attempting to bridge the art of the Renaissance and the ears of a modern audience.

Key words

transcription; guitar; Renaissance; music notation; tablature

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Introduction

The classical guitar is an instrument of translations. By no means does this downplay the importance of its original music—both guitarist and non-guitarist composers have undoubtedly made inestimable contributions to our repertoire. Nonetheless, a large portion of the music we play consists of arrangements, including some of the most frequently played and highly regarded works in the repertoire—think Isaac Albéniz’s *Asturias*, Manuel de Falla’s *Siete canciones populares españolas*, J. S. Bach’s solo violin and cello works, to mention but a few.

It follows, then, that a classically trained guitarist will sooner or later be faced with the challenges of performing arrangements and perhaps of making arrangements themselves. In several cases, the challenges start already when trying to perform the notes written in the original—music for piano, for example, frequently uses textures that are too dense for the classical guitar to perform, and even the Baroque lute often had a larger *tessitura* than its modern cousin. The first and often largest obstacle to be cleared in these cases, then, is fitting the music to the guitar so that it is playable, and possible solutions are extremely varied, from trying different keys to inventing new types of accessory equipment.¹

There is, however, another kind of translation that guitarists must engage with; a kind of work that is more subtle but, I sustain, equally rewarding, and which this paper discusses—namely, transcriptions of vihuela and six-course lute music from the Renaissance.² These instruments are similar enough to the modern guitar in terms of range and tuning that a classical guitarist can play their repertoire without any need for changing notes. In fact, with a slight retuning of the third string, one can play this music on the guitar with the exact same fingerings as it is played on the original instrument.³ Where, then, lies the aspect of ‘translation’ or ‘transcription’ in this process?

Renaissance music for vihuela and lute was written in a family of notational systems called tablature. Different composers and especially different regions of Europe used different varieties of tablature, but all of these systems have one thing in common—unlike modern music notation, they do not convey directly what the music should *sound* like, but how to *play* it. In other words, the tablature shows which string should be played and on which fret it

¹ Katalin Koltai, "Breaking the Matrix: Transcribing Bartók and Ligeti for the Guitar Using a New Capo System," *Soundboard Scholar* 6 (2020), doi.org/10.56902/SBS.2020.6.7.

² The vihuela is a plucked-string instrument with generally six courses; (i.e., six pairs of strings), characteristic of the Spanish Renaissance. It was similar to the lute, which by the sixteenth century [also generally had six courses](#). The instruments were differentiated by their construction and geographical distribution, but their intimate relation to one another can be gathered from Francesco da Milano’s *Intavolatura di viola o vero lauto*, whose title indicates the music was supposed to be performed on either one of those instruments. See Diana Poulton, "Vihuela," *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.29360>; and Klaus Wachsmann et al., "Lute," *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40074>.

³ For those who are not familiar with the tuning of these instruments, the vihuela and the six-course lute had six courses tuned in perfect fourths, with one exception—the third course was tuned a major third above the fourth course. In comparison, a modern guitar has six strings, which are also tuned in perfect fourths with one exception—the difference lies in that it is the second string that is tuned a major third above the third string. Therefore, if the third string of the guitar is tuned a semitone lower than usual, one can get the same intervallic relation as the one most commonly found in the vihuela and six-course lute.

should be stopped. In **figure 1**, the same passage is shown in Italian tablature and in a transcription to modern notation.

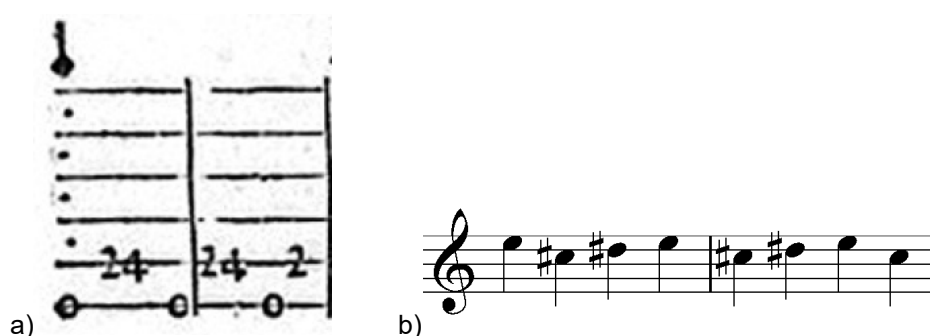


Figure 1. A passage from Alonso Mudarra's *Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico*: a) Italian tablature, b) modern notation assuming a first string tuned to E.⁴

As mentioned above, vihuela and six-course lute music from the Renaissance can be performed on the guitar with the exact same fingerings as the original. Therefore, if the performer in question can read music from tablature, there is no 'practical' need for a transcription. A transcription of such music needs virtually no *instrumental* adaptations, but it is instead a transcription of *medium*—in other words, the challenges for the transcriber lie in the representation of the music, not in its performance.

And yet, I strongly believe that it is highly beneficial to go through the process of transcribing this music to modern notation in order to perform it, regardless of how fluently one can read tablature. That is because each medium has its own idiosyncrasies, and in the process of transferring the music from one notational system to another and making decisions regarding its representation, we are confronted with questions regarding the very nature of this music—how it is organised, how it develops.

Purpose

The aim of this paper is therefore to highlight the benefits for the transcriber of engaging in this kind of work and to explore both the challenges one faces in the process and some of the options one has when presenting this music in modern notation. I strive, therefore, to uncover what is gained from such work.

In order to explore the topic, I will first briefly relate my own experience with this kind of transcription and my reasons for doing so myself and for encouraging others to do the same. I will then describe some of the challenges and decisions facing transcribers of this music,

⁴ Tablature extract taken from Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de musica en cifras para vihuela* (Sevilla, 1546), 1:13v. The transcriptions in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are my own and will assume a first course/string tuned to E in order to facilitate reading on the guitar. This is a 'literal' transcription for illustrative purposes; decisions such as the ones discussed throughout this paper could give way to a different transcription, as will be shown below.

providing examples from the repertoire and discussing their impact on one's understanding and interpretation of the music. In this discussion, I will compare my own decisions with those by other transcribers of the same repertoire and reflect on the outcomes of each approach.

My aim is to promote a better understanding of Renaissance music in general, especially the vihuela and lute repertoire, and to help other guitarists in making more informed decisions when producing their own transcriptions, while also becoming better equipped to assess others' transcriptions of this music. By engaging with the conversation regarding transcriptions from tablature to modern music notation, I also intend to provide a few insights on the impact that the way we notate music has on the performer and, consequently, on the performance. Any musician could surely benefit from examining our notational system with a critical gaze and performing the music with the joy that comes from looking at it from the inside.

Background

The issue of transcriptions of vihuela and lute music for guitar has been discussed before, though the specific lens of how the process itself can benefit a transcriber-performer is not usually explored in detail. Most literature about the topic lies in introductions to published transcriptions and in works of scholarship that nevertheless include transcriptions, and so their focus tends to be on the end result—in other words, they are usually organized as a defence of that specific transcription.

Two of the most detailed analyses of vihuela music are found in Thomas Lee Harder and John Milton Ward.⁵ Ward's take on the value of a transcription for the performer is in contradiction with the claim advanced by this paper: "For the vihuelist tablature has obvious advantages which are lacking for those who read it without instrument in hand; transcription into pitch notation serves the latter and is without particular value for the player."⁶ Ward referred to the vihuelist, not the guitarist, but throughout this paper, I will provide arguments and examples of how transcription can be extremely beneficial to the performer, whether vihuelist, lutenist, or guitarist. Ward's approach to the different features of each notational system, however, are in tandem with our discussion: "Breve and semibreve, proportions and barring, compás and tiempo have changed in meaning and require of an editor, not fidelity, but equivalence. Those who transcribe tablature already translate; to balk at intelligible renderings is to misunderstand the entire mechanic of transcription."⁷

On the other hand, Harder confers with this paper's view that transcription can benefit even those who can read tablature:

⁵ Thomas Lee Harder, "The Vihuela Fantasias from Miguel de Fuenllana's *Orphénica Lyra*: Introduction and Guitar Transcription of Nine Representative Works" (doctoral diss., Arizona State University, 1992), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses; John Milton Ward, "The Vihuela de Mano and Its Music (1536–1576)" (PhD diss., New York University, 1953).

⁶ Ward, "Vihuela de Mano," 113–114.

⁷ Ibid.

While performance from tablature requires of the performer an ability to give the music the correct rhythmic and polyphonic interpretation, this ability can be acquired, assuming a basic knowledge of sixteenth-century literature and style. Nevertheless, transcription of tablature into modern notation has three important benefits: 1) it facilitates analysis of the music; 2) it presents the music in a familiar format for those unable to read tablature; and 3) it gives the performer a potentially more revealing presentation of the music from which to learn and perform. However, transcription of vihuela tablature poses several problems which require solutions on the part of the transcriber.⁸

This paper focuses its examples and musical analysis on five pieces for vihuela or Renaissance lute, comparing different choices made by different transcribers when engaging with these works. The original tablatures⁹ for each piece were essential to the comparative analysis since they provide not only a starting point, through their role as primary source, but also because they allow for the comparison of musical notations and performance practices. Furthermore, direct comparison was made with Emilio Pujol's transcription of Alonso Mudarra's *Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico*,¹⁰ Ruggero Chiesa's transcription of Francesco da Milano's fantasias nos. 1 and 16 in book 3 of *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*,¹¹ Arthur J. Ness's transcriptions of the same two da Milano fantasias,¹² Per-Olof Johnson's two transcriptions of Luys de Narváez's *Canción del Emperador* (itself an intabulation of the four-voice chanson *Mille regretz*, attributed to Josquin des Prez),¹³ and David Nadal's transcription of John Dowland's "Come Heavy Sleep."¹⁴ Additionally, Harder's transcriptions of Fuenllana's fantasias were also used to foment discussion on the use of barlines.¹⁵

Personal background

My first encounter with Renaissance music as a performer was with a galliard by the English lutenist and composer John Dowland. It was my second year of training in classical guitar, and my teacher suggested that I play Dowland's *The Round Battle Galliard* in Frederick

⁸ Harder, "The Vihuela Fantasias," 56–57.

⁹ Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de musica en cifras para vihuela* (Sevilla, 1546); Antonio Gardano, ed., *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3 (Venice, 1562); Luys de Narváez, *Los seys libros del Delphin de música de cifras para tañer vihuela* (Valladolid, 1538); John Dowland, *The First Booke of Songes or Ayres of Fowre Parties with Tableture for the Lute* (London, 1597).

¹⁰ Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de música en cifra para vihuela* (Sevilla, 1546), transcribed by Emilio Pujol, (Instituto Español de Musicología, 1949).

¹¹ Francesco da Milano, *Opere complete per liuto*, transcribed by Ruggero Chiesa, vol. 1, *Composizioni originali* (Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1971). The fantasias discussed here are numbers 10 and 20 in Chiesa's publication.

¹² Arthur J. Ness, ed., *The Lute Music of Francesco Canova da Milano (1497–1543)*, 2 vols. (Harvard University Press, 1970). The fantasias discussed here are numbers 30 and 40 in Ness's publication. This is not a transcription aimed specifically at guitarists, and so it assumes G-tuning and notates the music in two staves.

¹³ Per-Olof Johnson, *The Golden Age: Music for the Vihuela in 16th Century Spain*, trans. Dorothy Irving and Anna-Lena Telander (University of Lund, 1991/1993).

¹⁴ David Nadal, *Lute Songs of John Dowland: The Original First and Second Books Including Dowland's Original Lute Tablature* (Dover Publications, 1996).

¹⁵ Harder, "The Vihuela Fantasias."

Noad's edition.¹⁶ I had no experience whatsoever in reading French tablature then, so a modern edition was certainly needed. I practiced it for six months and performed it for classmates, but I could not shake the feeling that the music was foreign to me. It was not that I did not like it or thought it was of low quality, but instead that I could not find the "right way to play it," as I might have put it back then. In retrospect, I struggled to find a rhetoric for the music—as if I was reading a sentence, knew what the words meant, but could not make sense of its syntax and so could not figure out which intonation to use when reading it out loud.

One or two years later, I ventured to play Dowland again—this time two of his most famous songs: "Come Heavy Sleep" and "In Darkness Let Me Dwell." My interest in Renaissance music grew tremendously after performing these. The oddness I had felt before lessened to a degree that made it instigating instead of alienating. I then learned how to read Italian tablature while performing vihuela music and became gradually more comfortable with the musical language of the Renaissance.¹⁷ I would often listen to Renaissance music and became fascinated most of all by the sound of its vocal polyphony.

My curiosity culminated in the final written project for my bachelor's in music—an arrangement for solo guitar of Josquin des Prez's entire *Missa la sol fa re mi*. This was, of course, a wildly ambitious endeavour (as diligently pointed out by my supervisor and blatantly obvious to all but me). I first had to learn a third notational system—mensural notation—in order to engage with the primary sources. I then examined a critical edition of the work as well as another arrangement of it by a Renaissance vihuelist in order to find possible errors and misprints in the original and familiarize myself with *musica ficta*.¹⁸ Then, I had to somehow adapt the original to the guitar (since my goal was to make a new arrangement and not to reproduce the one for vihuela) and deal with all the challenges regarding tessitura, texture, and technical difficulties. The Mass is, after all, written in four voices, with abundant imitative counterpoint and voice crossings—which, all together, make up a recipe for disaster on the guitar. Finally (though this stage was conducted concomitantly to the previous one), I had to write my arrangement in modern notation.

This, I must say, is *not* the type of transcription I will be discussing in this paper. Arranging a fully-fledged four-voice mass for solo guitar has, first and foremost, challenges of a technical nature. In other words, the musical content needs to be adapted, not only its presentation. Nonetheless, my arrangement of Josquin's work did touch on some of the challenges of this other kind of transcription, which I discuss here. Because I was dealing with different notational systems, some of the elements that are clear in one system might not be in another, and some of what would be taken for granted in the first might need explaining in the second.

I then returned to playing vihuela and lute music on the guitar, and the differences between notational systems became clear to me. After my experience with transcribing vocal

¹⁶ Frederick Noad, ed., *The Renaissance Guitar* (Ariel Publications, 1974), 43.

¹⁷ It is of course a generalization to talk about *one* musical language of the Renaissance. Nonetheless, my experience was indeed of gradually growing accustomed to these styles simultaneously, with one musical experience feeding into another.

¹⁸ *Musica ficta* here refers to the common practice of the Renaissance in which accidentals were often not notated and performers were expected to be familiar enough with the style to add the accidentals themselves. When the work is transcribed to tablature, however, the nature of the notation makes the accidentals intended by the arranger explicit, providing invaluable insight into the performance practice of the time.

polyphony for guitar, I was very aware of the contrapuntal nature of much Renaissance music. Vihuela and lute tablature, however, does not explicitly show counterpoint. I could, for the most part, gather the contrapuntal movement of the voices from their register, but in passages where the counterpoint was not as obvious to me, I would often feel the need to attempt to clarify it by writing it out in modern notation, so that I could visualize it.

The purpose of this ‘writing out’, then, was not to make adaptations to the original so that it was playable on the guitar; it was instead to go through the process of writing the counterpoint so that I could engage with it in a more detailed manner and so interpret the piece better.

After realizing how beneficial this was to my interpretation and understanding of the music, I developed the habit of transcribing entire pieces to modern notation, rather than only the passages I felt were not clear to me. And to my surprise, other passages that had felt straightforward at first suddenly showed deeper layers—in other words, my initial understanding of the pieces was put to the test.

In this lies the real takeaway from the process of transcribing vihuela and lute music for the guitar—being ‘forced’ to make explicit the way one understands the music, and by doing so, either confirm or reassess those views. In writing out the counterpoint, grouping notes together, and deciding whether (and where) to use barlines, we actively engage with the music away from the instrument and are confronted with the clash not only between notational systems but between two different musical aesthetics—that of today’s Western music tradition and that of the Renaissance. It is in this role of mediator that we unavoidably find ourselves as modern performers of early music, attempting to bridge the art of the Renaissance and the ears of a modern audience.

Questions

Based on my previous experience with transcriptions and noticing the different ways transcribers have treated this repertoire, I decided to formulate the following questions:

- What does a performer gain from transcribing from tablature to modern notation?
- What kinds of challenges and decisions must be faced when one translates music from one form of representation to another?
- How does the transcriber deal with idiosyncrasies present in each system and how do these shape the process of transcription?

Method

In order to engage with and answer these questions, I selected five works from the Renaissance, all of which I had transcribed and performed myself. These pieces were selected for their stylistic range within the period in question and because they were illustrative of the decisions inherent to this kind of transcription. I then decided to conduct a comparative analysis between the published transcriptions of these works, the original tablatures, and my own transcriptions. This comparative analysis focused on pitch representation, counterpoint interpretation, and rhythm (specifically the choice of note values and the use of barlines) in order to compare and observe the challenges, decisions, and idiosyncrasies present in each system.

Case studies

The comparative analysis, as mentioned, will be based on five representative works from the period discussed; namely, Alonso Mudarra's *Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico*, two fantasias for six-course lute or viola¹⁹ by Francesco da Milano (nos. 30 and 40 in Arthur J. Ness's referential edition), Luys de Narváez's intabulation of "Mille regretz" (often called *Canción del Emperador*), and John Dowland's lute song "Come Heavy Sleep."

Drawing from the original tablatures I will compare and contrast the following transcriptions to establish a comparative analysis:

1. Emilio Pujol's transcription of Alonso Mudarra's *Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico*²⁰ in comparison with my own as yet unpublished transcription of the work (2025).
2. Ruggero Chiesa's transcription of Francesco da Milano's fantasia no. 1 in book 3 of *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*,²¹ Arthur J. Ness's transcriptions of the fantasia,²² in comparison with my own unpublished transcription of the work (2019, revised in 2025).
3. Ruggero Chiesa's transcription of Francesco da Milano's fantasia no. 16 in book 3 of *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*,²³ Arthur J. Ness's transcription of the same fantasia,²⁴ in comparison with my own unpublished transcription of the work (2019, revised in 2025).

¹⁹ *Viola da mano*, i.e. vihuela.

²⁰ Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de música en cifra para vihuela* (Sevilla, 1546), transcribed by Emilio Pujol, (Instituto Español de Musicología, 1949).

²¹ Francesco da Milano, *Opere complete per liuto*, transcribed by Ruggero Chiesa, vol. 1, *Composizioni originali* (Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1971). The fantasias discussed here are numbers 10 and 20 in Chiesa's publication.

²² Arthur J. Ness, ed., *The Lute Music of Francesco Canova da Milano (1497–1543)*, 2 vols. (Harvard University Press, 1970). The fantasias discussed here are numbers 30 and 40 in Ness's publication. This is not a transcription aimed specifically at guitarists, and so it assumes G-tuning and notates the music in two staves.

²³ Francesco da Milano, *Opere complete per liuto*, transcribed by Ruggero Chiesa, vol. 1, *Composizioni originali* (Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1971). The fantasias discussed here are numbers 10 and 20 in Chiesa's publication.

²⁴ Arthur J. Ness, ed., *The Lute Music of Francesco Canova da Milano (1497–1543)*, 2 vols. (Harvard University Press, 1970). The fantasias discussed here are numbers 30 and 40 in Ness's publication. This is not a transcription aimed specifically at guitarists, and so it assumes G-tuning and notates the music in two staves.

4. Per-Olof Johnson's two transcriptions of Luys de Narváez's *Canción del Emperador* (itself an intabulation of the four-voice chanson *Mille regretz*, attributed to Josquin des Prez)²⁵ in comparison with my own unpublished transcription of the intabulation (2025).
5. David Nadal's transcription of John Dowland's "Come Heavy Sleep"²⁶ in comparison with my own unpublished transcription of the song (2024).

Results

After the comparative analysis of the transcriptions, which is detailed in the section "Discussion" below, several challenges and possible solutions were identified in the representation of the music in modern notation. These included decisions regarding how to notate pitch (including the use of key signatures), counterpoint, and rhythm (note values and barlines).

Such challenges stem from the inherent differences of the notational systems involved—while lute and vihuela tablature functions as a direct representation of *how* to perform the music, modern notation attempts to represent *what* the parameters of the music are. Consequently, much of what is implicit in tablature must come to light when transcribing to modern notation, and so it rests on the transcriber's shoulders the responsibility to analyse the music and represent it in the mould of modern notation without fundamentally changing its essence.

What a transcriber of this music gains, then, is the opportunity to peruse the music and get in touch with its inner workings. In exploring different ways to notate pitch and use key signatures, one is forced to ponder over the characteristics of a piece's mode and how these can shape one's interpretation of it. In dealing with the essential differences in how rhythm was represented in the Renaissance and in modern times, details of tempo, accent, and structure come to light. And most importantly, in working out the counterpoint intrinsic to this repertoire, a transcriber not only gets a closer look at this essential feature of Renaissance music but also gains access to concrete evidence for the comparison of sources and the spotting of errors in the tablature.

As such, the craft of transcribing this music is simultaneously a way to develop one's understanding of the style and a concrete means to the very practical task of checking the authenticity of musical text.

²⁵ Per-Olof Johnson, *The Golden Age: Music for the Vihuela in 16th Century Spain*, trans. Dorothy Irving and Anna-Lena Telander (University of Lund, 1991/1993).

²⁶ David Nadal, *Lute Songs of John Dowland: The Original First and Second Books Including Dowland's Original Lute Tablature* (Dover Publications, 1996).

Discussion

The actual process of transcribing or arranging music will inevitably look different for every person—the order in which elements are taken into consideration, how many stages one goes through in order to produce a ‘final’ version, and most of all the decisions made during this process. A transcription, like the performance of a piece, is a form of interpretation. For that reason, there is no right answer, no one correct way to transcribe.

Consequently, this paper does not intend at any point to provide readers with a ‘how-to’ or to push specific decisions as superior to others. What is intended, however, is to discuss some of the crossroads at which we often find ourselves while performing this type of work and analyse some of the options available to the transcriber. In displaying examples of my own transcriptions, I of course lay bare what I prioritized in my own work and which decisions I made myself (and since one cannot wholly escape one’s own perspective, the discussion will inevitably centre around the options I have considered). But it is nonetheless important to state that this is not a recipe I am prescribing—if anything, what this paper intends to prescribe is that transcribers and performers of this music engage with these decisions themselves. After all, the real benefit of this kind of transcription lies in the process—in analysing the music, weighing the options, and making decisions.

It is also beyond the scope of this paper the listing of every single challenge or decision one faces in transcribing this music. Instead, I will focus on some of the most recurrent issues, mainly the ones whose pondering over I have found particularly illuminating. These are organized below in three subsections: issues related to pitch notation, to counterpoint, and to rhythm. Such an organization suits a research paper well enough, but it should be noted that, during the transcription process, issues of different ‘nature’ can and will impact each other, and so cannot be wholly separated.

Pitch

Historical context

The tuning of the vihuela and the Renaissance lute, as discussed above, can be replicated on the guitar with the retuning of the third string. That is to say, however, that the interval relationship between courses/strings can be replicated, but the question of actual pitches remains unanswered.

Historical evidence shows that no absolute pitch was used for the tuning of these instruments and that instruments of different sizes were employed. Luys Milán gives incredibly imprecise instructions for choosing string thickness for the vihuela: “If the vihuela is large, have a first course that looks thick rather than thin. And if it is small, have a first course that looks thin

rather than thick.” He then continues: “Having done that, you should tune the first course as high as it tolerates.”²⁷

Per-Olof Johnson summarizes it thus: “No exact tone-level can be stated when discussing correct intonation.... This means that the *absolute tone-level* depends on the *quality* and *dimension* of the strings, the *measure* of the instrument and to some extent the *temperature* and *humidity* at the time of tuning.” He goes on to show that, in different pieces, vihuelist-composers would imagine a specific tuning for the instrument (A tuning, G tuning, and E tuning, for example), based on which modes they were using. This, however, was the relative tuning imagined by the composer, but did not necessarily reflect the actual pitch the instrument was tuned to.²⁸

Use of capos and their notation

In guitar transcriptions of this repertoire, then, one should not take the use of capos²⁹ as a golden rule for a faithful reproduction of the original instrument’s pitch—relative pitch as well as the range of instruments used back then make this attempt at fidelity flawed from the start. This is not to say, however, that capos should not be used when performing vihuela and lute music on guitar, only that they do not necessarily equate an ‘authentic’ performance. Instead, this is a decision that a transcriber or performer must make while engaging with this music.

There are a number of factors to consider when making such a choice, and different aspects end up pointing towards different solutions. On the one hand, the search for a timbre on the guitar that is closer to that of the vihuela or the lute would suggest not using the capo, since the different string tension of the modern guitar when compared to its predecessors is made starker by the use of a capo. On the other hand, a capo does help in making the counterpoint clear by making better use of the guitar’s higher register, and the shorter neck length also makes it easier to keep the original fingerings when it comes to left-hand stretches.

Among the factors to be considered, it is also important not to ignore the very fact that capos have become the norm in playing Renaissance music on guitar, regardless of their true authenticity. Music making happens both in the act of performing and in the act of listening, and the expectations of a modern audience are as much part of the decision making as the historical evidence, whether one wants to meet them or subvert them.

²⁷ “Si la vihuela es grande / tenga la prima más gruesa que delgada. Y si es pequeña / tenga la prima más delgada que gruesa: y hecho esto / subireys la prima tan alto quanto lo pueda sufrir”; Luys Milán, *El maestro* (Valencia, 1536), fol. 3v. Translations of quotes in this paper are mine except when noted otherwise.

²⁸ Per-Olof Johnson, *The Golden Age: Music for the Vihuela in 16th Century Spain*, trans. Dorothy Irving and Anna-Lena Telander (University of Lund, 1991/1993), 7–10. With ‘tone-level’, Johnson is most likely referring to ‘pitch’.

²⁹ *Capo*, or *capo tasto*, is a device that presses strings down on a certain fret, essentially making the vibrating portion of the strings shorter and therefore making the pitch of open strings higher. Musically speaking, it is used to “facilitat[e] upward transposition without altered fingering”; Ian Harwood, “Capo tasto,” *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.04851>.

When it comes to the transcription process, if a decision is made to perform the music with a capo, one would next need to ponder over how to notate it. In this, however, there seems to be almost absolute consensus among guitarists—music with capo is notated not at sounding pitch, but rather as if no capo has been used, or in other words, as a transposing instrument. This has the very obvious advantage of greatly aiding readability of the transcription and reflecting the way a guitarist would think while playing with a capo (at least in the first positions).

There are, however, a few drawbacks in this approach when it comes to performing songs with a vocalist, for example. In these cases, the vocal melody is written, naturally, at sounding pitch. If the accompaniment with capo is then notated as customary, the result is that melody and accompaniment are notated *in different keys* (or perhaps more adequately when dealing with the early sixteenth century, *in modes with different finale*).

In **figures 2** and **3**, this is exemplified by two versions of the opening of “Come Heavy Sleep” by John Dowland, transcribed for guitar with a capo on the third fret—the first version as is customary to notate it and the second with the guitar at sounding pitch. It is important to note that both versions should be performed in the exact same way and should sound the same, the only difference lying on how they are notated. The first version is of course much easier for a guitarist to perform from, and I would do as much as say that the second one outright fails if seen as an aid to performance. However, the second version lends itself much better to the analysis of the score and therefore to the understanding of the music. One can, for example, immediately see which interval the melody has in relation to the accompaniment. If we are discussing the use of transcriptions to explore the inner workings of the music one is to perform, it follows that experimenting with a transcription such as the second version below has its own benefits.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Voice, Guitar, and Lute. The Voice part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: "Come, hea - - vy Sleep the im - age of true Death;". The Guitar part is also in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It includes a marking "③ to F# Capo III". The Lute part is in a six-line staff with a C-clef on the first line and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains letter-based notation (a, c, d, e, b) and some rhythmic markings.

Figure 2. David Nadal’s transcription for voice and guitar of the opening of John Dowland’s “Come Heavy Sleep,” showing the customary approach of notating the guitar as if no capo has been used.³⁰

³⁰ Nadal, *Lute Songs of John Dowland: The Original First and Second Books Including Dowland’s Original Lute Tablature* (Dover Publications, 1997), 46.

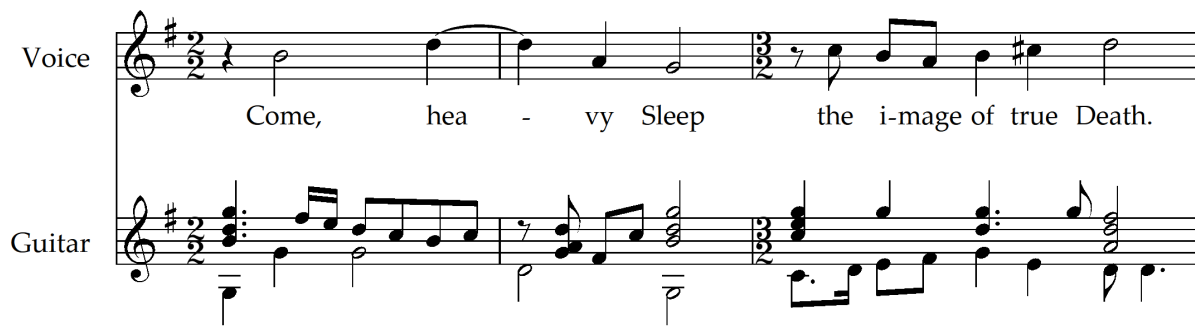


Figure 3. A copy of Nadal's transcription in figure 2, but with the guitar at sounding pitch.

Key signatures and Renaissance modes

Lastly, there is the matter of key signatures. As mentioned before, for most of the period discussed, composers had a quite different perspective on music when compared to tonality, so talking about a key in these pieces is only a sort of retroactive analysis of the music. Nevertheless, the key signature used in modern notation can be a way to engage with a little understood element of Renaissance music: modes or *tonos*.

In his intabulation of Josquin des Prez's famous chanson "Mille regretz" (the intabulation is often called simply "Canción del Emperador"), Luys de Narváez writes that the song is in the fourth mode,³¹ which was often called Hypophrygian. This mode, like its corresponding authentic mode (Phrygian), has *mi* as its finalis and has the upper semitone to the finalis (*fa*) as a defining characteristic. Unlike the Phrygian mode, however, its tenor note is *la* (as opposed to Phrygian's *do*). This last trait of the mode can be clearly heard in the piece's expressive final phrase, with the bass alternating between the tenor note and the finalis. Therefore, an ending that to modern ears could sound like a plagal cadence to the minor dominant chord is in fact the defining characteristic of the mode from a Renaissance perspective.

When it comes to transcribing this piece, a decision must be made regarding the key signature used. The first option would of course be not to use one at all (**figure 4**)—a key signature is usually connected to a key and therefore to tonal music, so not using one highlights the piece's non-tonal nature. A modern performer might at first mistake the absence of a key signature to mean that the piece is either in A minor or C major, but a quick glance at the musical content of the piece should be enough to dismiss that suspicion. On the other hand, this choice might downplay too much the importance of certain pitches in modal music—after all, the finalis might not be a tonic, but their roles in their respective styles are quite similar. Furthermore, the addition of all accidentals to the notes themselves might draw too much attention to notes that are in fact part of the mode's hexachord, giving the impression that they have been chromatically altered.

³¹ "Here start the French songs and this first is one they call song of the Emperor of the fourth mode by Josquin" ("Comiençan las canciones francesas y esta primera es una que llaman canción del Emperador del cuarto tono de Jusquin"); Narváez, *Los seys libros del Delphin*, 3:40r.



Figure 4. Ending of Luys de Narváez's *Canción del Emperador*, transcribed with no key signature. Notice that, since a first string tuned to E is being assumed here, F# is displayed as a chromatic alteration, even though it is part of the mode's hexachord.

This therefore opens the door for other choices, which could reflect in some way the mode being used in the piece. One such option is to use the key signature related to the note representing the finalis. In other words, if we assume a first string tuned to E, the piece is written in the Hypophrygian mode on B (a mode with a minor third), so the key signature for B minor (two sharps) could be used (**figure 5**). An immediately evident advantage to this approach is the highlighting of B as the central pitch and the clarification of the piece's final passage as a cadence to the finalis and not to a minor dominant. It also removes the over-emphasis on some of the notes that are part of the mode—the F# mentioned above is not marked at every occurrence as a chromatically altered note but belongs instead to the key signature as it does to the mode's hexachord.



Figure 5. Ending of Luys de Narváez's *Canción del Emperador*, transcribed with a two-sharp key signature.

Still, this solution does take the risk of displaying the music as if it was tonal music, in B minor, instead of what it actually is: in a mode with the finalis in the pitch of B. It might appear to be a minor drawback, but tonal and modal music do work in different ways, as exemplified by the fact that this piece, while having B as its finalis, does not contain a single A# as a leading tone to B. Another noteworthy downside to the two-sharp key signature is that the *mi-fa* interval that is so characteristic of the Phrygian and the Hypophrygian modes is not represented in the key signature. It therefore looks as if C# is the chromatic alteration and C# the diatonic note, when the music functions the other way around.

This leads us to a third option, then—using a key signature with one sharp only. Its advantages can be inferred from the discussion above: F# is in the key signature while C# is not, making for any chromatic alterations in the music to be notated in the transcription as such, while preserving all diatonic notes of the mode in the key signature. This is the solution chosen in every transcription consulted, including Per-Olof Johnson's, which was used as basis for comparative analysis of this piece (**figure 6**).



Figure 6. Ending of Per-Olof Johnson's transcription of Narváez's *Canción del Emperador*.³²

In terms of misrepresenting the piece as tonal, however, this solution is probably the most risky of the three, since a one-sharp key signature can readily be connected to the key of E minor, and to a modern ear that is not keenly familiarized with Renaissance modal music, the music itself might not sound too distant from a tonal work in that key. It would certainly display the final cadence of the piece as visually indistinguishable from a tonal plagal cadence to a minor dominant in E minor.

In my own transcription, after considering these options, I made the choice to use one sharp in the key signature, mirroring Johnson as well as several other transcribers. But as mentioned above, the aim of this paper is not to present the right solution, especially given that such solution does not exist. To this day, a slimmer of doubt persists in my mind regarding this choice, as I am very aware of its limitations. It is in the weighing of the options, however, that lies the purpose of it all. By analysing what different key signatures would mean for the representation of a piece's mode, the transcriber unavoidably becomes more accustomed to this element of Renaissance music that is usually just beyond the grasp of our tonal-centric ears.

In Narváez's intabulations and those of the vihuelists, it is common to find explicit mentions of a piece's mode. That is certainly not the case, however, for every piece in the vihuela and lute repertoire. Take Francesco da Milano's Fantasia no. 1 in volume 3 of *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, for example. In the original source, there is no mention of the piece's mode, and our modern ears could easily mistake it for a tonal work in A minor.³³ A closer look at the pitch content of the fantasia, however, shows frequent use of F#, the major sixth from the finalis. In fact, in the first half of the piece, F# is used in mere three instances, only then becoming more common and eventually occurring with similar frequency to F#. This not only could, for ease of reading, point towards adding F# to the key signature, but also help identify the piece's mode. Taking into consideration the pervasiveness of the major sixth above the finalis, as well as the recurring emphasis on E (the fifth from the finalis) but not on C (the third from the finalis), a strong case can be made for the first mode, Dorian. The eventual role F# plays in the piece

³² Johnson, *The Golden Age*, 122.

³³ Assuming a first string tuned to E.

does not invalidate this analysis, since it was also common to flatten the sixth above the finalis in the Dorian mode.³⁴

One could ask what the benefit is of knowing the mode of a piece. Admittedly, the topic of modes in Renaissance polyphony is famously confusing. According to Camillo Angleria:

Many have written about the formation and recognition of the modes, but one is confusingly different from another; and for this reason many cannot perceive in what mode a composition might be, when seeing it, and much less when only hearing it.³⁵

The Renaissance mode system is in fact an inheritance from the Medieval use of modes, which were applied to monodies. Their use for polyphony is an adaptation, and a messy one to say the least. And yet, vihuelists in the sixteenth century thought it important to classify their purely instrumental works into these very modes and explicitly inform readers of that. In doing so, they linked their music to an old system that was often analysed as carrying implication of affect and made even more evident their art's vocal origins. In pondering over the question of modes, we as transcribers and performers gain a new perspective into the music of the Renaissance, and by analysing how and where one piece either follow or breaks the conventions of the system, we can identify expressive possibilities in our interpretation of it.³⁶

Counterpoint

Historical context

Perhaps the most obvious piece of information we expect to find in modern music notation but that is missing in tablature notation is counterpoint. This is particularly evident in Renaissance music for vihuela and lute, since so much of this music was inspired by the vocal polyphony of the time and is thus composed in a polyphonic texture. Imitative counterpoint is common, which contributes to the fact that the performer must be completely aware of the contrapuntal movement of the different voices.

It might be surprising, then, that such an important element of the music was altogether absent from the notation used to record it. But it points instead to the fact that polyphony was the norm of the time, so ubiquitous that it would be expected of the performer to be able to discern the counterpoint without it being explicitly notated. In the introduction to his vihuela method, Luis Milán writes:

This book's intention is to show music for vihuela de mano to a beginner that has never played before.... For someone who wants to learn to play vihuela through this

³⁴ Howard S. Powers, "Dorian," *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.08032>.

³⁵ Camillo Angleria, "Della cognitione de tuoni, secondo l'uso moderno," chap. 22 in *La regola del contrapunto, e della musical compositione* (Milan, 1622), 80; translation as quoted in Elam Rotem and Oren Kirschenbaum, "Modes in the 16th and 17th Centuries," posted May 13, 2017, by Early Music Sources, https://youtu.be/lyq48eybjZw?si=lFz_i5o7gD7_QD0e.

³⁶ Rotem and Kirschenbaum, "Modes."

book, it is thus extremely necessary that they first learn *canto de órgano* until they can, through singing, understand how one should bring about the tactus and the measure [of the music].³⁷

Here it is interesting to see that a beginner learning how to play the vihuela is expected to learn the basics of mensural notation through singing first. Even more striking is his use of the term *canto de órgano*. This is how Grove Music Online defines the term:

A term for mensural music, i.e. polyphony, as opposed to ‘canto llano’ (plainchant), used in Spain from the 13th or 14th century to the 18th. Juan Bermudo (*Declaración de instrumentos musicales*, 1555) defined *canto de órgano* as ‘harmony or melody that can be measured’. The term ‘canto figurado’ also referred to polyphony, but ‘canto de órgano’ is found more often in theoretical treatises.³⁸

Now, it must be said that Milán was probably using the term here to mean the figures used to notate mensural music, or in other words, the notation of rhythm. He never explains what those figures mean in his method, so the student should, as he points out, learn it via singing. But it is noteworthy that he uses the term *canto de órgano*, since this term is closely related to vocal polyphony as opposed to the older *canto llano* (plainchant).

Vihuelists of the time were also aware of the tablature’s limitations in showing part writing, and when it was necessary to show it explicitly, they could come up with ingenious solutions. Alonso Mudarra’s third volume in his *Tres libros de música en cifras para vihuela* contains intabulations of works intended for voice and vihuela. In almost all of these pieces, Mudarra writes the vocal melody in mensural notation on top and the lute part in tablature below. The first of these intabulations, however, is of Adrian Willaert’s *Pater noster* in four voices, and Mudarra does not add a vocal staff to the tablature. Instead, he adds little markings (see **figure 7**) to some of the notes in the tablature, which are explained in his introduction to the three volumes: “In the third book, of works to be sung and played, one will be faced with a little mark in front of some of the notes [*cifras*] ... which implies that the note that has it in front will be the voice that one could sing if they want, [but] which should also be played.”³⁹ The voice in question is the tenor voice of Willaert’s work, and in order to highlight this foundational element of the motet, Mudarra supplements the notation with the extra markings as well as the lyrics below the tablature.

³⁷ “La intención deste presente libro es mostrar música de vihuela de mano a un principiante que nunca huviesse tañido.... Por esto es muy necessario al que por este libro quiere saber tañer de vihuela que primeramente aprenda de *canto de órgano* hasta que sepa cantando entender como se ha de traer el compas y la mesura” (our italics); Milán, *El maestro*, fol. 3v.

³⁸ Grove Music Online, “Canto de órgano,” January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.04787>.

³⁹ “En el tercero libro de las obras pa cantadas y tañidas toparán delante de algunas cifras un rasguito ... que da a entender que la cifra que le tubiere delante será la vox que se puede cantar si quisieren la qual a de yr también tañida”; Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de música en cifras para vihuela* (Sevilla, 1546), 14, <https://bnedigital.bne.es/bd/es/viewer?id=3862a6fd-9b9b-4f74-a56c-8190d58299c2>.



Figure 7. Alonso Mudarra's solution to highlight a voice in his intabulation of Adrian Willaert's motet.

Representation of counterpoint in modern notation

This, however, is an exception to the overarching rule that lute and vihuela tablatures do not show contrapuntal writing explicitly, and even in this rare example, only one voice of four is marked differently so that it can be sung as well as played, leaving the other three for the performer to figure out. Conversely, in modern transcriptions of this music it has become the norm to realise the polyphony on the page. This comes perhaps from the fact that polyphonic writing does not come as naturally to a modern performer as it did to one in the Renaissance—the centuries in between them have done much to replace polyphony with homophony as the dominating texture in Western music—but it certainly also stems from a very practical reason: modern music notation *can* show contrapuntal writing, while tablature *cannot*.

Figure 8 shows a passage in three different versions—the original tablature, a literal transcription of the note durations in the tablature, and a contrapuntal interpretation of the passage.

It is evident that a performance of figure 8b as written (with each note lasting only for its exact duration in the tablature) would be a disservice to the music, completely losing the imitative counterpoint that defines so much of Francesco da Milano's music. That is, however, what the tablature explicitly shows, since “the value of only the shortest of the notes to be played simultaneously could be notated precisely.”⁴⁰ If the counterpoint is to be shown in a transcription for modern music notation, then, the transcriber is responsible for understanding and displaying it.

a)

⁴⁰ Thurston Dart, “Tablature,” *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.27338>.



b)



c)



Figure 8. Francesco da Milano, Fantasia (no. 30 in Ness's catalogue), *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3, no. 1, *tactus* 1–5: a) Italian tablature, b) literal transcription, c) contrapuntal interpretation.

The passage by Francesco da Milano above, of course, does not present a major challenge to the transcriber, since the counterpoint is made perfectly clear from the register of the voices and especially from the strict imitation they realize. Still, slightly different interpretations of the counterpoint are technically possible. More to the point, cases do emerge in which the counterpoint is not a given, and the realisation of the counterpoint enters more decisively into the realm of interpretation.

Given the interpretative nature of writing out the counterpoint, it could be argued that a literal transcription such as the one in figure 8b is preferable, not as a faithful rendition of what should be performed but as a representation of what the composer wrote down in the tablature, leaving the interpretative task to the performer. Here, I would like to give three arguments for realising the counterpoint already when transcribing this music.

The first argument is specific for this paper—namely that its express aim is to discuss and encourage the use of transcriptions as a way to gain further insight into the nature of the music being performed. If the process of transcribing music is supposed to grant access to its secrets, it follows that one should go through the process in order to obtain its benefits.

Secondly and dealing now with transcriptions of this music as a whole, one should take into the account the aforementioned centuries-long gap between composition and performance. Between the Renaissance and our time, almost every element of performance practice has changed—performer, listener, instrument, notational system. There is no illusion of blind faithfulness to the original here, and while it is paramount that we investigate closely what can be gathered from the musical context of a piece and take it into account when transcribing and performing this music, it is equally important to realise that it is being performed in a different context altogether. In other words, if it were possible to reproduce

this music today exactly as it would have been performed back in the sixteenth century, it would still not sound the same as it did then, because our musical references as listeners are not the same. Similarly, an exact copy of the original music does not render the same understanding in a performer today than it did five hundred years ago.

Lastly, there is a pleasant side effect that comes with this writing out of the counterpoint; the detailed view it gives of this music may be a tool with which to resolve issues in the original text. If printing errors are still relatively common in the music publishing industry, in the Renaissance they were a constant element; those were, after all, the early years of the printing press. Below are a few examples of how understanding the counterpoint can help in resolving these issues or, at least, provide further information for an informed decision.

The role of transcribing counterpoint in the handling of source disagreements and the identification of printing errors

Figure 9 shows *tactus* 30–34 in a fantasia by Francesco da Milano in the original tablature and transcribed with the counterpoint realised. In this passage, a clear sequence is found in the middle voice (which takes over as the lowest one in *tactus* 31). The sequence starts on the last note of *tactus* 30 and consists of a syncopated note followed by a stepwise descent of a perfect fourth (D-C♯-B-A in its first iteration). This sequence, however, is broken in *tactus* 32, with the low B being tied to the next *tactus*. The first clue that there is an error in the passage is the breaking of the sequence, whose identification is aided by writing out the two voices

But this is of course not enough to state with certainty that the original tablature has a mistake; after all, da Milano could have simply decided to add a slight variation in the third iteration of the motif. The decisive argument comes again from the counterpoint: the passage as it stands, has an unresolved dissonance in the form of the major ninth between the suspended low B in *tactus* 33 and the C♯ of the soprano. In Renaissance counterpoint, this suspension would have to resolve downwards to A, but it instead leaps up to an E.

The correction, which is presented in **figure 10** below, clarifies what caused the error: the sequence should have continued as usual, with F♯ in the lower voice syncopated and descending by step to C♯, but either in the manuscript stage or in the printing process the ‘0’ was placed on the second course instead of the third. Another early source for this piece (the Siena Lute Book) has the corrected version as well.

a)



b)

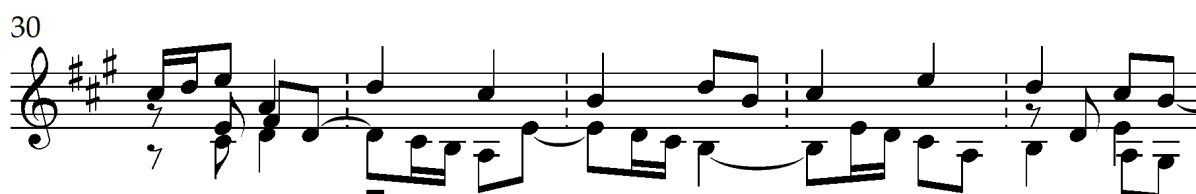


Figure 9. Francesco da Milano, Fantasia (no. 40 in Ness's catalogue), *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3, no. 16, *tactus* 30–34: a) Italian tablature, b) contrapuntal transcription.

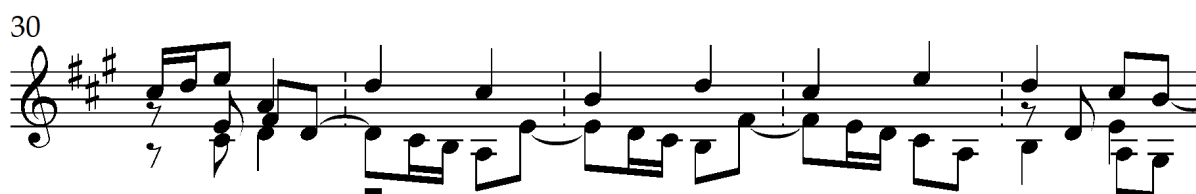


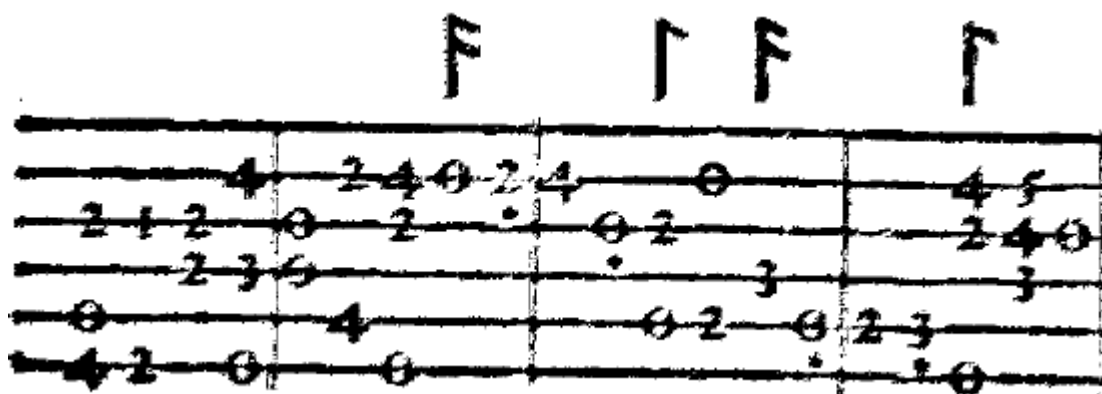
Figure 10. Corrected version of Francesco da Milano, Fantasia (no. 40 in Ness's catalogue), *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3, no. 16, *tactus* 30–34.

The same fantasia provides another example in the passage that precedes the one above.

Figure 11 shows the tablature and a transcription of the passage. In this passage, the D $\natural$ of the bass voice in *tactus* 28 creates a false relation with the D $\sharp$ of the soprano. Both contemporary sources consulted have the false relation, but transcriptions of this music have changed the D $\natural$ to an A, assuming the same sort of mistake as that of figure 9, in which an open string would have been notated on the wrong line in the tablature. **Figure 12** shows Ruggero Chiesa's transcription of the passage in question with the modification of D $\natural$ to A, and Arthur J. Ness makes the same change in his transcription of the piece.⁴¹

⁴¹ Arthur J. Ness, ed., *The Lute Music of Francesco Canova da Milano (1497–1543)*, 2 vols. (Harvard University Press, 1970), 124–125.

a)



b)



Figure 11. Francesco da Milano, Fantasia (no. 40 in Ness's catalogue), *Intabolutura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3, no. 16, *tactus* 27–30: a) Italian tablature, b) my own contrapuntal transcription.



Figure 12. Francesco da Milano, Fantasia XX (no. 40 in Ness's catalogue), transcribed by Ruggero Chiesa, bars 49–60.⁴² Note values and barring in Chiesa's edition differ to those of my transcription in figure 11b, so that *tactus* 27–30 in my transcription are shown in bars 53–60 in Chiesa's. The modification in question is here shown in bar 55.

Here again we may use counterpoint to assess the validity of each option. The modification proposed by both Ness and Chiesa is prompted by the harshness of the false relation in the version found in the tablature. False relations were an element of certain styles in Renaissance music, but its isolated appearance here may have been seen as out of character for this piece. The modified version follows the rules of counterpoint in the Renaissance, and even though the melodic independence of the bass line is weakened by the leap down to A, there is nothing to say this couldn't have been what the composer intended.

⁴² Francesco da Milano, *Opere complete per liuto*, transcribed by Ruggero Chiesa, vol. 1, *Composizioni originali* (Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1971), 116–117.

On the other hand, a close study of the individual lines could back the original version. In the tablature version, which was kept unchanged in my own transcription, the bass voice descends by step from E to C#, with each step being approached from below (E-D#-E-C#-D#-B-C#). Melodically speaking, this is a more elegant and independent line than the one in the modified version (E-D#-E-C#-A-B-C#), and it is briefly mirrored in the middle voice by the line B-G#-A-F#. The bass voice's insistence on the ascending second also gives birth to the bass line in *tactus* 28-29, which is then imitated verbatim by the soprano. The use of the false relation is not necessarily out of character either—Franco Pavan, discussing another fantasia by Francesco da Milano, has linked false relations to his more mature period.⁴³ In fact, the false relation, together with the evaded cadence to E in *tactus* 28 (bars 55–56 in Chiesa's edition), helps in the intensification of the music as it enters its final section before the codetta.

It is not possible to affirm with all certainty whether the D# represents the composer's intention, but the process of writing out the counterpoint gives us more insight into the music, thus avoiding an uninformed 'correction' of the original solely on the basis of our modern ear's unfamiliarity with the false relation it creates.

Another of Francesco da Milano's fantasias provides a few more examples of how the study of a piece's counterpoint can be used to check the original for errors. In the passage where da Milano writes a *stretto* imitation of his characteristic *mi-fa-mi* motif (**figure 13**), there are four notes that are arguably printing errors.

a)



b)



⁴³ Franco Pavan, "The Compositions of Francesco da Milano in the Castelfranco Veneto Manuscript: Further Considerations," in *The Guitar and Plucked String Instruments* (blog), May 4, 2022, <https://theguitar-blog.com/?p=3447>. An Italian version of the article can be found in Pavan's own website: <https://www.francopavan.com/franco-pavan-texts>.

Figure 13. Francesco da Milano, Fantasia (no. 30 in Ness's catalogue), *Intabolutura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3, no. 1, *tactus* 41–46: a) Italian tablature, b) contrapuntal transcription.

Firstly, the soprano's ascending scale run is broken when the expected A (*tactus* 43) is replaced by an E. This creates an awkward counterpoint, however, since the soprano's E is followed by a B and each of these notes makes an octave with the note below them, essentially creating audible parallel octaves (though not theoretical ones, since the two lower notes are in different voices). Furthermore, the G-E-B-E line in the soprano is most strange for a composer as accomplished in voice leading as da Milano.

Secondly, the soprano's quarter-note E in *tactus* 43 also creates a perfect fourth with the middle voice that is never properly resolved, as both voices leap as they exit the dissonant interval. Immediately after, in *tactus* 44, the soprano again has a strange line (B-E-B). These two issues are resolved when one analyses the motivic content of the passage. The last B for the soprano in *tactus* 44 should instead be in *tactus* 43. This corrects the *stretto* passage, giving the soprano the *mi-fa-mi* motif, and solves the issue of the perfect fourth.

Lastly, there is the low A in *tactus* 45. While the two modifications above are present in Chiesa's and Ness's transcriptions as well as mine, Chiesa has kept this low A unchanged in his transcription, as it does fulfil the descending perfect fourth leap after the *mi-fa-mi* motif that is found in the beginning of the passage. However, it is possible to postulate that the open-string A should have been an open-string D. This would result in the bass imitating the contour of the middle-voice's variation of the *mi-fa-mi* motif (B-C-B-A-G $\sharp$ -A). **Figure 14** shows the passage with all these modifications in my own transcription, which mirrors Ness's in this case.



Figure 14. Francesco da Milano, Fantasia (no. 30 in Ness's catalogue), *Intabolutura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3, no. 1, *tactus* 41–46: a) Italian tablature, b) contrapuntal transcription.

Rhythm

Historical context

The representation of rhythm in transcriptions for guitar of vihuela and lute music is a challenging topic, and its treatment has varied greatly among transcribers. The main reason being simply that, in the Renaissance and especially in the plucked-string repertoire, the

symbols used for rhythmic notation are very familiar to modern musicians, but their meaning back then differed to what we have come to expect. To make matters worse, the exact degree to which their meaning differed is not perfectly clear—it is a perfect encapsulation of the relationship between the modern guitar and its Renaissance cousins: closely related, and yet not the same.

Such a phenomenon happens in language—Walter Benjamin writes of the words for “bread” in German and French: “In ‘*Brot*’ and ‘*pain*,’ the intended object is the same, but the mode of intention differs. It is because their modes of intention that the two words signify something different to a German or a Frenchman.”⁴⁴ The terms and symbols used for rhythm in the Renaissance are generally in the same situation when compared to their use nowadays—their object of meaning might be the same, but they signify something different to us than what they signified to those in the Renaissance.

Note values in transcription

The first issue to be considered is whether to adapt note values. Over the centuries, shorter and shorter note values have become more common in music notation, so that while in the early Renaissance symbols such as the *breve*, the *longa*, and even the *maxima* were used with some frequency, nowadays we may write music with thirty-second and sixty-fourth notes. The vihuela and lute repertoire stem mostly from the sixteenth century and the longer note values were no longer commonly employed, but overall the rhythmic figures we find in tablatures were still much longer than those we usually use today. Let us explore Mudarra’s *Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico* as an example once more (see opening in **figure 15**). In this piece, which is marked to be played “quickly” (*apriessa*), we observe *semibreves* (whole notes), *minimas* (half notes), *semiminimas* (quarter notes), and a very few *fusas* (eighth notes), as well as the customary *breve* (double whole note) ending the piece.



Figure 15. The opening of Alonso Mudarra’s *Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico*.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Steven Rendall, “The Translator’s Task, Walter Benjamin (Translation),” *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction* 10, no. 2 (1997), 151–165.

⁴⁵ Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de música en cifras para vihuela* (Sevilla, 1546), 1:13v.

All of these note values have equivalents nowadays, of course, and it is perfectly possible to notate the music with them. And obviously, note values only have relative durations, so that a half note is neither short nor long—it can be any duration, as long as it is half the duration of a whole note.

That being said, compare two versions of this opening, one transcribed with the equivalent note values and another with shorter ones (**figure 16**).

a)



b)



Figure 16. The opening of Alonso Mudarra's *Fantasia que contrahaze la harpa en la manera de Ludovico*: a) transcribed by Emilio Pujol with equivalent note values to those in the tablature,⁴⁶ b) my own transcription with note values four times shorter.

Regardless of the very rational understanding that one transcription does not sound quicker than the other, there is no doubt that the psychological effect of each transcription is different. As a transcriber, one must be aware of the visual cues given to the reader and what effects they will cause (even when the performer is the transcriber). An interesting example of this comes from a twentieth-century composition by Georges Auric. In his *Hommage à Alonso Mudarra*, a humoristic work, Auric shows his awareness of this psychological effect by writing with longer note values, as Mudarra did, but adding a blazingly fast tempo marking of a half note equals 100bpm (see **figure 17**). As a result, most recordings of the work are under-tempo, and even some rhythmical misreadings slip in due to the piece's challenging writing style.

⁴⁶ Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de música en cifra para vihuela* (Sevilla, 1546), transcribed by Emilio Pujol, "Parte Musical" (Instituto Español de Musicología, 1949), 16. Pujol assumes a first string tuned to G.

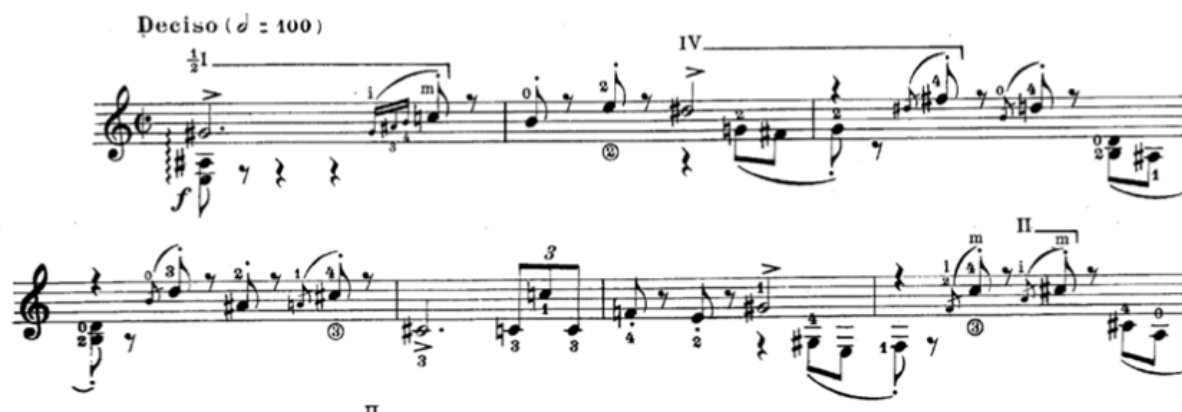


Figure 17. Opening of Georges Auric, *Hommage à Alonso Mudarra* (G. Ricordi, 1988; repr., 1961).

Now this does not mean that note values *must* be reduced when transcribing to modern notation. It is yet another choice to be made by the transcriber, and each solution has its own advantages. While my version with shorter note values makes the rhythm easier to read and the tempo and character of the piece easier to grasp, Pujol's choice bears the stamp of Renaissance music from the start, with its use of longer note values. In dense polyphonic writing, the use of longer note values may also aid the reading of the counterpoint, given that the score is not overly crowded by the shorter notes' stems and flags.

Use of barlines

The other major decision to be made in regards to rhythm is whether and how to use barlines, and that is perhaps the thorniest of all. In Renaissance music for vihuela, one can see vertical lines in the tablature that look just like barlines. Each group of notes between these lines is a *compás*, which is the modern Spanish term for 'bar'. And yet, *compás* in the Renaissance was equated with the *tactus*,⁴⁷ which was a concept much closer to 'beat' than to 'bar' (even though the term has found its way into several Germanic languages as the term for 'bar' as well). If that was not enough, the *tactus* did not function exactly as a beat does in modern music either, and the concept was used for different (though interconnected) roles in mensural music theory, composition, and performance.⁴⁸ In other words, the meaning of these terms changed over time, from a broad concept in the Renaissance that is hard to pinpoint nowadays (and has thus been discussed greatly in scholarship) to a much more defined idea today. This combination of familiarity and non-equivalence has made the use of bars and barlines in transcriptions of this music a very inexact science.

A common decision made by transcribers of this repertoire is to simply keep the vertical lines of the tablature, as in Emilio Pujol's transcription of Mudarra's fantasia (figure 16a above). This approach might seem neutral at first, since it maintains a feeling of fidelity to the original; but when dealing with transcriptions, neutral choices do not exist—vertical lines in

⁴⁷ Diana Poulton, "Vihuela," revised by Antonio Corona Alcalde, *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.29360>.

⁴⁸ See Ruth I. DeFord, *Tactus, Mensuration, and Rhythm in Renaissance Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

modern notation will inevitably convey the idea of a barline and the metric implications that accompany it. A decision must be made as to whether this inevitable notion best represents the piece being transcribed. In the case of Mudarra's fantasia, the original vertical lines result in thirteen pseudo-bars with the same structural interval—in other words, the contrapuntal rhythm does not move at all throughout this time, which arguably goes against the piece's lively character.

A possible variation of this is to use a different style of vertical line, so that its non-equivalence with a barline is made clear, while keeping the groupings of *compás* found in the tablature. This can be done, for example, with a dashed vertical line or with a shorter tick above, below, or through the staff. My transcription of Luys de Narváez's *Canción del Emperador* uses this approach (**figure 18**).



Figure 18. The opening of Luys de Narváez, *Canción del Emperador*, an intabulation for vihuela of Josquin des Prez's *Mille regretz*.⁴⁹

Another option, which is approached by Thomas Lee Harder in his transcriptions of fantasias by Miguel de Fuenllana, is not to use barlines at all. His argument for doing so touches on the very discussion over the meaning of the *compás* in the Renaissance: “The placement of barlines and metric interpretation are related transcriptional problems which stem from an uncertainty as to the significance of the *compas* in tablature.... [In] the sixteenth-century fantasia, barring is perhaps more a hindrance than a help.”⁵⁰

Harder acknowledges the downside to this approach when it comes to dances, where metric organization is clear and stable, but in fantasias inspired by vocal polyphony the lack of barlines does seem to be in style. It also facilitates beaming over the tablature's *compás* lines, thus allowing for the representation of conflicting note groupings in different voices. A disadvantage, however, is that readability of syncopations and more complex rhythms can become difficult; and there is also a risk of the music seeming like a constant flow of unaccented music, which is not representative of all polyphonic music of the time—although a rhythmic organization analogous to a constant meter is not very common in the genre, several pieces still use rhythmic organization as a driving force for its musical drama.⁵¹

The third option to be considered, then, is an interpretative barring of the pieces, based on musical aspects. This has the advantage of allowing the transcriber to convey rhythmic

⁴⁹ Josquin's authorship of the chanson has been questioned by scholars, but no definitive authorship has yet been determined.

⁵⁰ Harder, “The Vihuela Fantasias,” 63–65.

⁵¹ Diogo Alvarez, “Regular Groups of Tactus in Vihuela Fantasias,” paper presented at the Symposium for Guitar Scholars, part of the 2024 Guitar Foundation of America International Convention and Competition, Fullerton, CA (USA), June 18–20, 2024.

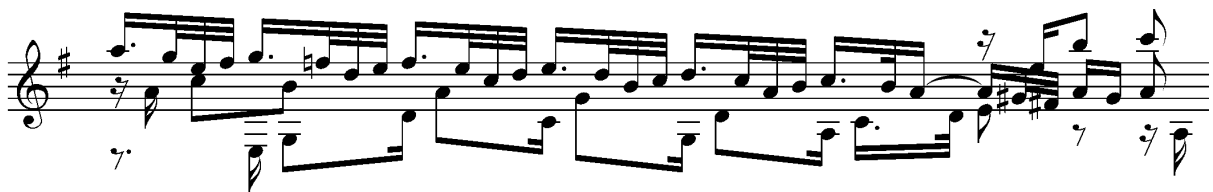
information in a way that suits the music, while also taking into consideration the characteristics of modern notation. In other words, the volatile rhythmic organization of most of these pieces can be represented by irregular barring, and the issue of *compás*es often being too short to represent a bar in modern notation can be bypassed altogether. This choice, however, puts a lot of responsibility onto the shoulders of the transcriber, given that it radically changes how the music is shown on the paper and depends on careful and unavoidably interpretative analysis of the piece's structure.

Polyphonic fantasias will at times suggest different accent patterns in different voices, though not as commonly as in vocal genres of the time. In these cases, however, notation becomes especially important to display the musical idea understandably. **Figure 19** shows such a passage in Francesco da Milano's Fantasia no. 30 (in Ness's numbering) in four different versions. This passage interrupts the duple organization of the beginning, with duet writing in which both voices are accented in groups of three. In the tablature, however, the vertical lines remain unchanged.

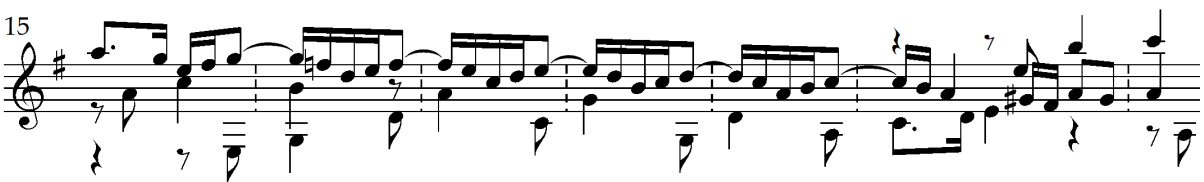
a)



b)



c)



d)



Figure 19. Rhythmically ambiguous passage in Francesco da Milano, Fantasia (no. 30 in Ness's catalogue), *Intabolatura di liuto di M. Francesco da Milano et Perino Fiorentino suo discipulo*, vol. 3, no. 1, *tactus* 15–20: a) dashed lines follow original tablature; b) no barlines are used, note values are shortened, and beaming shows accent patterns; c) irregular barring follows the accent pattern of the bass, with soprano in syncopation; d) independent barring for each voice.

Each of the transcriptions above prioritize a different aspect of the music. The first keeps the original's vertical lines (here represented as dashed lines) and could be said to highlight the passage's deviation from the previous material by displaying the music as crossing *compás* lines. Just like the *compás* lines in the original, it also aids readability. The second version reduces all note values further, so that beaming can be used to indicate the natural accents of each line—in here, we can observe how the two voices do not align until the end of the passage. In the third option, dashed barlines are used irregularly—they follow the accent pattern of the bass line, making the upper voice syncopated. This interpretation of the upper voice is a different and yet possible reading of the passage. Lastly, the fourth version attempts to recreate the independence of the voices in version 'b' while avoiding the overly crowded look of the latter's shorter note values—each voice is “barred” independently for the duration of the rhythmically conflicting passage.

While Ruggero Chiesa's transcription follows the first approach, with barlines matching *compás* lines in the tablature, Arthur J. Ness's transcription (**figure 20**) combines the use of beaming to represent the upper voice's accents with irregular barring. His bars are in fact irregular from the start of the piece and put three or four *compás*es together, depending on his interpretation of each passage. In this one in particular, his understanding of the counterpoint differs slightly to the one presented in my transcription, and he apparently also identifies the bass line as having a different accent pattern.

Figure 20. Arthur J. Ness's transcription of the same passage.

Once more, the key takeaway from this discussion is not the emergence of a single, more adequate way of notating the music. It is rather the discovery of the very elements of the music bringing about this discussion. The examples presented here and the options considered are evidently not extant, but they were selected precisely to cover a range of musical elements that are unearthed in the process of transcription and that make the study and performance of Renaissance music so fascinating.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the process of transcribing for guitar the repertoire for vihuela and lute from the Renaissance. This type of transcription is unique in the sense that virtually no changes have to be made to the actual music while transcribing—the pieces are playable on the guitar as they stand in the original. Nonetheless, a transcription of this music implies a change of medium, from the Renaissance lute and vihuela tablature to modern notation, and with this change come several challenges stemming from the inherently different nature of each notation. The task of the transcriber, like a translator, is to understand all the connotations embedded in the original text and strive to represent them in the grammar and cultural context of the target notation.

After a comparative analysis of different transcriptions and a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each option available to transcribers of this music, what is made clear is that, in the process of translating this music from one notational system to the other and taking into account their idiosyncrasies, one gains access to the inner workings of a composition. From the writing out of the counterpoint that lays bare this music's vocal roots, to the selection of a key signature that opens a door to the mysterious realm of Renaissance modes, and even to the discovery of printing errors, we are granted a way into the perspective of the composer. As put by Per-Olof Johnson: "The advantage of adapting to modern notation is that one is forced to reconstruct the rhythmical pattern in a polyphonic movement, which leads to a greater degree of consciousness in the performance of the music."⁵²

This "greater degree of consciousness" is after all what musicians so incessantly pursue. In dealing with a style centuries apart from our own and attempting to bridge such a gap, the close contact with the music that transcribing offers us is not only an invaluable tool, it is an inseparable part of interpreting and performing these works.

⁵² Johnson, *The Golden Age*, 92.

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