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Baroque Lute Fingering

Interpretive Left-Hand Fingerings for Lute in Nicolas Vallet's *Le Secret des Muses* (1615)

Susan G. Sandman

Lute fingerings constitute a valuable and often overlooked source of information about the articulation of baroque music. Although not as commonly studied by scholars today as are fingerings in keyboard, viol, and violin music, they offer equally clear evidence of fingering choices that affect linear articulation. Fingerings for the left-hand, as indicated in Nicolas Vallet's *Le Secret des Muses*, are revelatory in this regard, and contribute to our deeper understanding of phrasing and of articulative nuance in early 17th-century music.

Le Secret des Muses, a two-volume collection of lute pieces using French tablature, was published in Amsterdam in 1615 and 1616, and subsequently in France in 1618 and 1619.¹ Ninety pieces (49 of them with fingerings)

¹The title of the first edition of Volume One published in Amsterdam in 1615 reads: SECRETUM MUSARUM, /IN QUO/ Vera et genuina testudinem / dextre simul et prompte pul- / sandi ratio ad amussim / proponitur. / Nicolao Valletto auctore. (Secret of the Muses, in which is exposed the true and natural manner to play the lute exactly, cleverly, and at the same time rapidly.) The music and pedagogical information of the second edition of volume one published in France in 1618 is the same, but the title is different, and refers to fingerings: PARADISUS MUSICUS TESTUDINIS, / in quo / Multae insignes et ante hunc diem inauditae, Gallicae, Germanicae, Anglicae, Hispanicae, Polonicae, cantiones; / Nec non /

appear in Volume One, thirty pieces in Volume Two. Vallet's fingerings have a particular value because of their completeness—they are in fact written out for entire compositions. Moreover, they appear in many genres, including dances (courantes, voltes, galliades, and a branle), and songs,² and so allow for the consideration of fingerings in numerous contexts.

Vallet's fingerings are not limited to showing the basic left-hand position for chords, as was typical of fingerings in lute treatises.³ Although occasionally contradictory and incomplete,⁴ his fingerings are nonetheless quite informative, and contribute significantly to our understanding of the relationship between performing technique and musical phrasing, in much the same way

Varia Praeludia, Fantasiae, Tripudia cōtinentur: / Praeterea punctis tum suprà [sic] tum ad latus singulis cuiusque tactus alteris / adscriptis, eorumque praemissa explicatione, docetur quibus tum dextrae / tum sinistrae manus digitis chorda tangenda puldanave sit, / AUTORE NICOLAO VALLETTO. (Musical Paradise of the Lute, containing numerous and remarkable French, German, English, Spanish, Polish, and not yet heard songs; and also various preludes, fantasies, dances; moreover, added fingerings, above, appearing next to each letter are explained first in the instructions which indicate which finger whether for the right hand or the left, the string which must be touched or struck . . .)

²The present study (which considers only the solo lute pieces, not the music for four lutes at the end of the collection) is based on the 1615 edition and on the *Oeuvres de Nicolas Vallet pour luth seul, Le Secret des Muses*, ed. André Souris (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1970). Biographical and critical details by Monique Rollin, "Étude biographique et appareil critique," appear in this volume, from p. xi. I would like to thank The Lute Society of America for the loan of a microfilm of *Le Secret des Muses*, and the reference librarians at Wells College for their assistance in obtaining research materials; also, for partial funding, I am grateful to The Wells College Advisory Committee Grants for Faculty Research.

³The fingering in teaching pieces can offer valuable information concerning phrasing. See my discussion of left-hand fingerings in English teaching pieces in "Thomas Robinson's Interpretive Left-hand Fingerings for the Lute and Cittern," *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 11 (1978): 26-35.

⁴In a few cases the ornaments (e.g. 64/52: 52; 65/53: 37; 86/78: 20) and the holds, or *tenués* (e.g. 65/53: 34-5; 67/55: 40; 77/67: 72; 78/68: 42) are impossible to execute if the fingerings are followed. E.g., 64/52: 52 refers to the Vallet (1615) manuscript page 64 and the Souris edition number 52, tablature measure 52.

as do studies of breathing marks in wind music,⁵ fingerings in early keyboard music,⁶ and bowing directions in string music.⁷

The fingerings (explained in a *Petit Discours*) are written in French tablature for complete pieces from pages 60 to 94 (the end of the first book) of the first edition.⁸ Right-hand fingerings are indicated throughout both books.⁹ Vallet uses from one to four dots next to the tablature letters to show the index, second, third, and fourth fingers of the left hand; one and two dots underneath the letters to indicate fingerings for the right hand. In addition, Vallet indicates held notes (*tenues*), bars, and ornaments with signs common to his époque.¹⁰

Left-hand fingerings

.b = 1st finger
 ..c = 2nd finger
 .d = 3rd finger
 .: = 4th finger

* = *barré*

⤿ or / = *tenue*

Right-hand fingerings

ç = 1st finger
 ç = 2nd finger
 c = thumb

⁵See Lewis E. Peterman, Jr., "Michel Blavet's Breathing Marks: a Rare Source for Musical Phrasing in Eighteenth-Century France," *Performance Practice Review* 4 (1991): 186-98.

⁶See the detailed discussion by Peter Le Huray, "English Keyboard Fingerings in the 16th and early 17th Centuries," *Source Materials and the Interpretation of Music: a Memorial Volume to Thurston Dart* (London: Stainer & Bell, c.1981), 227-57.

⁷See for example the discussion of Ganassi's bowing directions in Ian Woodfield, *The Early History of the Viol* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 163.

⁸Vallet omits left-hand fingerings for one piece, a *Gaillarde*, in *Le Secret des Muses*, 89; *Oeuvres de Vallet*, 188.

⁹Vallet's right-hand fingerings are consistent with those of contemporary lutenists. Generally thumb is used on strong beats and in alternation with the first finger. The second finger substitutes for the thumb in certain, often faster, passages. Right-hand fingerings for the second (*majeur*) finger are not indicated until p. 60 of *Le Secret des Muses*, p. 132 of *Oeuvres de Vallet*.

¹⁰Signs for *agréments* appear in *le Secret des Muses* from p. 50 and thereafter.

In a number of instances passages using the left-hand fingerings written by Vallet require a slight break between notes; in these cases the fingerings are interpretive, for they suggest and even dictate a light articulation. Although an individual performer today may choose to work toward eliminating such breaks in continuity brought about by a particular fingering for the left hand, the study of lute fingerings, with particular attention to their implications for phrasing, enables us to recapture many important details of Vallet's musical style.

Vallet employs two technical means for achieving articulative breaks: by calling for the same finger successively on two different frets; and by making use of a shift of hand position. Since other of Vallet's fingerings allow for legato, this implies that the detached fingerings are purposeful. Moreover, the breaks occur in particular musical situations, most notably the following:

prior to a strong beat
prior to an anacrusis
prior to an ornament

And in a broader sense these kinds of articulation were often introduced in order to emphasize or help clarify:

the dance rhythms (as in the *volte*, *courante*, or *galliarde*)
sequential patterns

The Break before a Strong Beat

Two excerpts from "Espagnolle" (Example One) will illustrate the articulation brought about by the repetition of the same finger on two different frets. Here in both instances the use of the fourth finger for the "d" and then the "f" fret creates a lift in the melody before the first beat of the measure.

Sometimes a break in articulation is caused by a shift of hand position required by the fingerings. In "La Princess" (Example Two) the substitution of the first finger for the fourth on the "d" fret creates a break before the dotted half-note on beat one, and the change to the second finger on the "c" fret after using the first finger on the "d" fret results in a brief silence before the half-note (in the bass part) on beat four.

Similarly, the fingerings called for in "La durette" (Example Three) cause a break, first in the melody notes b-flat' to c", then between e-flat' and b-flat in

the lower voice, and subsequently between *f* in the upper and *b* in the lower voice.¹¹

Example One, "Espagnolle" (71: 1-4 and 11-12)

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 1-4, and the second system contains measures 11-12. The notation is for a lute, with a treble staff and a bass staff. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. In the first system, a large bracket on the left side of the staves is labeled with the number '6'. In the second system, a large bracket on the left side is labeled with the number '3'. Fingerings for the left hand are indicated by numbers 1 through 4 placed next to the tablature letters. Fingerings for the right hand are indicated by one or two dots placed underneath the tablature letters. In the first system, a large circle is drawn around the first measure of the second staff. In the second system, a large circle is drawn around the first measure of the second staff.

¹¹Examples are from *Oeuvres de Vallet* (ed. Souris) and use the same format: 71: 1-4 means number 71, measures 1 through 4. Fingerings for the left hand are indicated by the numbers 1 to 4 written next to the tablature letters; fingerings for the right hand are shown by one or two dots placed underneath the tablature letters. Similar fingering directions occur in 60/49: 41-42; 63/50: 44-50; 64/52: 39-40; 65/53: 6, 37-38; 79/69: 4-5; 80/70: 1-2, 3-4, 18-19, 31-32; 80/71: 2, 11; 81/72: 11; 82/73: 14, 16, 20, 21, 25-26; 85/77: 39; 86/78: 18; 87/80: 26, 38; 88/81: 4; 92/87: 2, 10-12, 26; 93/88: 23-24. In the courantes a slight beak in articulation before strong beats occurs in 63/50: 59-60, 62-64, 84; 64/52: 39-40, 48-49; 65/52: 11-12; 65/53: 24-25, 29-30, 34-35; 68/56: 43-45; 69/57: 7-8; 71/60: 3-4; 72/62: 25-26; 73/63: 7-8, 24-25, 36-37; 74/64: 12-13; 77/67: 13-14, 51-52; 78/68: 1, 2-3, 23, 46, 47-48, 61-62; 83/74: 7-8.

Example Two, "La Princess" (72: 9-12)

shift

shift

[4 3 2]

a, 2c 4o a, 1b 4o 1o ax 4o 1b,

3o / 1c 3o / 2x 1o 2c / a

Example Three, "La durette" (73: 8-13)

4o 4f

4o 1b a 4o 1b 1o x

2c a

*

4o 1b 4o a

1c

a

*

The Break before an Anacrusis

Vallet's fingering directions sometimes require a break in articulation prior to an upbeat. The same types of fingering instructions as were described above, i.e. the same finger on two consecutive frets or a shift in hand position, appear in the following *courante* (Example Four) and give a special emphasis to the upbeats. In m. 50 we see finger 4 on the "d" fret followed directly by the same finger on the "f" fret, creating a break between the half-note f and the anacrusis quarter-note c". Then, in the following measure the 1st finger on fret "d" succeeded by the 2nd finger on "c" represents a shift, requiring a break before the upbeat note a'.¹²

Example Four, "Courante" (54: 50-52)

¹²Other breaks before an anacrusis occur in courantes 64/52: 8; 65/53: 10; 65/54: 34, 36; 67/55: 1; 71/60: 7-8; 72/61: 1, 14-15; 74/64: 20, 24, 32; 75/65: 32-33; 78/68: 5, 25, 52; and in songs 79/69: 7-8; 81/72: 20; and 85/77: 25.

The Break prior to an Ornament

Occasionally left-hand fingerings create a space before ornaments. A typical example may be seen in the repeated use of the first finger (on fret "d", then on fret "b"), which results in a slight pause before an appoggiatura in "La durette" (Example Five).¹³ And similarly the use of the same finger on two consecutive frets (2c-2d) in "L'avignonne" (Example Six) causes a lift before the trill (marked x) on the strong beat.¹⁴

Example Five, "La durette" (73: 29-30) Example Six, "L'avignonne" (70: 19-20)

Handwritten musical notation for a piano piece. The notation is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The music consists of several measures. A circled note in the bass staff is highlighted. The notation includes various notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'f' (forte) and 'a' (accendo).

¹³Similar fingerings precede appoggiaturas in 78/68: 15-16; 85/77: 25; 86/78: 17-18; 87/80: 48.

¹⁴For another example of this type see 77/67: 5

The Articulation of Dance Rhythms

Vallet sometimes enlisted the articulation of beats (strong beats or upbeats), as illustrated above, to bring out the characteristic rhythms of dances; this is seen especially in *courantes* and *voltes*. In *courantes* the fingerings may bring out the opposing accents of either 6/4 or 3/2. For instance, in m. 21 of the following (Example Seven), we notice breaks before beat four and before beat one (of the next measure), brought about by the recurrent use of the 2nd and then the 1st finger and by a shift following beat one. This groups the notes into the accentual patterns typical of 6/4.

Example Seven, "Courante" (62: 21-26)

The musical score for Example Seven, "Courante" (62: 21-26), consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff has a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. The bass staff has a key signature of one flat. The score includes fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4) and accents (a, x) for both hands. A "shift" is indicated in the bass staff. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

The continuation of the musical score for Example Seven, "Courante" (62: 21-26), consists of two staves: a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff has a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. The bass staff has a key signature of one flat. The score includes fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4) and accents (a, x) for both hands. A "shift" is indicated in the bass staff. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

In another *courante* (Example Eight), however, the rhythmic patterning of 3/2 is brought out by the consecutive use of the same finger (as well as by the placement of a trill on e-flat').

Example Eight, "Courante" (64: 25-30)

The musical score for Example Eight, "Courante" (64: 25-30), is in G major and 3/2 time. It consists of two systems. The first system shows the right hand with a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, circled. The left hand has a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, also circled. The second system shows the right hand with a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, circled. The left hand has a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, also circled.

The musical score for Example Eight, "Courante" (64: 25-30), is in G major and 3/2 time. It consists of two systems. The first system shows the right hand with a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, circled. The left hand has a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, also circled. The second system shows the right hand with a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, circled. The left hand has a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, also circled.

The musical score for Example Eight, "Courante" (64: 25-30), is in G major and 3/2 time. It consists of two systems. The first system shows the right hand with a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, circled. The left hand has a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, also circled. The second system shows the right hand with a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, circled. The left hand has a trill on e-flat' in the first measure, also circled.

A sequential bass pattern in the following *courante* (Example Ten) displays fingerings that require a break preceding the successive leaps. This lends emphasis to the syncopation, while at the same time maintaining consistency between the patterns.

Example Ten, "Courante" (53: 53-57)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piece titled "Courante" (53: 53-57). Each system consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The first system includes a keyboard fingering diagram below the bass staff, showing letters 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f', 'g', 'h', 'i', 'k' and numbers 1-4. The second system also includes a keyboard fingering diagram with similar notation. The diagrams show specific fingerings for notes, with some notes circled and crossed out to indicate breaks or specific techniques.

Vallet's system of interpretive fingerings is remarkably simple, while being clear and precise. His fingerings contribute to our understanding of some of the many details in performance which added up to "good taste" in early 17th-century French music, and may be mined for artistic guidance today.