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James Tyler

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## Plucked String Instruments

### The Guitar and Its Performance from the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

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James Tyler

#### The Four-Course Guitar (Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries)

In the 15th century the terms *chitarra* and *chitarino* (Italy), *guittara* (Spain), *quitarre*, *quinterne*, *guisterne* (France), and *gyterne* (England), *et al.* referred to a round-backed instrument that later developed into the mandolin. Only in the 16th century did several of these terms come to be used for members of the guitar family.

The guitar as we know it, with its figure-eight body shape, began to be widely used from the middle of the 15th century onward (paintings already show such an instrument early in the 15th century, although no actual instruments survive prior to the end of the century). This guitar (as opposed to the larger *viola da mano* or *vihuela da mano*) generally was a small treble-ranged instrument of only four courses of strings, with an intricately constructed rosette covering an open sound hole and gut frets tied around the neck.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Tyler, *The Early Guitar: a History and Handbook* (London, 1980), 15-17, 25-26. This includes an extensive listing of repertory for the four- and five-course guitar.

The guitar was intended to be played with gut strings. Information from the earliest sources indicates that the gut strings were tuned to either  $g'g-c'c'-e'e'-a'$ , or to  $f'f-c'c'-e'e'-a'$ , or sometimes a tone higher to  $gg'-d'd'-f\#f\#'-b'$ . There are some indications of a larger instrument tuned a fifth lower than the first tuning, but this was less common. The high tunings cited give the little treble instrument, with ten frets on the neck, a range of  $f$  or  $g$  to  $e$ " (or higher, as some tablatures indicate).

It is assumed that the guitar was played using a technique common to the lute and other finger plucked instruments of the time, as is suggested by its extensive repertory of quasi-polyphonic music similar to that of the lute.<sup>2</sup> A rhythmic strumming technique must also have been employed, since in 1555 Bermudo described this technique as "the old-fashioned way."<sup>3</sup> It is likely to have been similar to the strumming technique notated for the five-course guitar from the end of the 16th century.

In addition to its use as a solo instrument, the four-course guitar is described as having been employed in consorts with other plucked instruments. And as its French solo repertory, consisting mainly of settings of well-known dance music with composed "divisions" of a highly florid nature, shows, it could be used as the treble instrument of just such a consort. The French repertory also includes printed music for solo voice and guitar.

In the early 17th century, Agazzari<sup>4</sup> recommended the use of the four-course guitar as a continuo instrument (presumably along with one or more other continuo instruments, since the four-course guitar, like the cittern and five-course guitar, has no true bass notes and, therefore, cannot provide complete continuo support on its own).

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 25-34.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Bermudo, *El libro llamado declaración de instrumentos musicales* (Osuna, 1555), f. 28v.

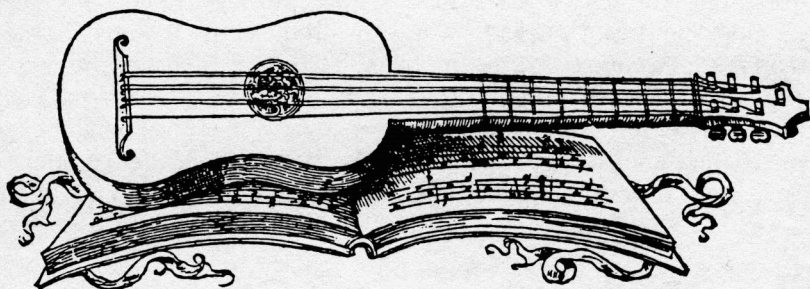
<sup>4</sup> Agostino Agazzari, *Del sonare sopra 'l basso con tutti li stromenti e dell'uso loro nel conserto* (Siena, 1607), 3-4.

## Four-course Guitar

Guillaume Morlaye, *Le premier livre* . . . (Paris, 1552)

Illustration on the title page of one of his books of tablature for guitar.

I. E  
PREMIER LIVRE DE  
CHANSONS, GAILLARDES, PAVANNES,  
Bransles, Almandes, Fantaifies, redui&tz en tabulature de Guiterne  
par Maistre Guillaume Morlaye ioueur de Lut.



A PARIS.  
De l'Imprimerie de Robert GranJon & Michel Fezandat, au Mont  
S. Hylaire, à l'Enseigne des Grandz Ions.

1552.  
Avec priuilege du Roy.



It is not known how, specifically, the four-course guitar was used in the remainder of the baroque era, but we do know that it continued to be used, certainly for popular music, until at least the early 19th century. Every edition of Amat's *Guitarra española* from 1626 to ca. 1819<sup>5</sup> contained a chapter on the little instrument.

### **The Five-Course Guitar (Late-Sixteenth to Early Eighteenth Centuries)**

Although it was known as the Spanish guitar (*chitarra spagnola*), the early development of the larger-bodied, lower-tuned, five-course guitar began in Italy in about the last quarter of the 16th century, and its most significant early repertory was produced by Italians. Larger than the four-course instrument, but smaller than a modern guitar, its sides were relatively shallow, and it could have either a flat back or, especially in Italy, a slightly vaulted one. Like the four-course guitar it had tied-on gut frets and a lute-like bridge glued to the soundboard. An intricately worked rosette glued into the sound hole was a normal decorative feature.

Several sources from the 17th century indicate that the fundamental tuning was a re-entrant one: *aa-d'd'-gg-bb-e'*, with the lowest pitch that of the third course *g*. The most common modification of this tuning was *aa-d'd'-gg-bb-e'*, in which one of the *d'* strings is replaced with a string tuned an octave lower. Notice that the placement of the higher of the pair of strings is such that it is the first one to be plucked by the thumb, and can be selected as the only one of the pair to be sounded. This is an important feature, unique to the five-course guitar, which was utilized idiomatically in much of the instrument's solo music. A few tuning sources indicated an upper octave on the third course (*g'g*) as well as the fourth, and use of this tuning is found in many tablatures. The least common tuning in the 17th and early-18th century required, in addition, a lower octave on the fifth course (*Aa*). As the tunings make clear, the sound of the five-course guitar was remarkably different from

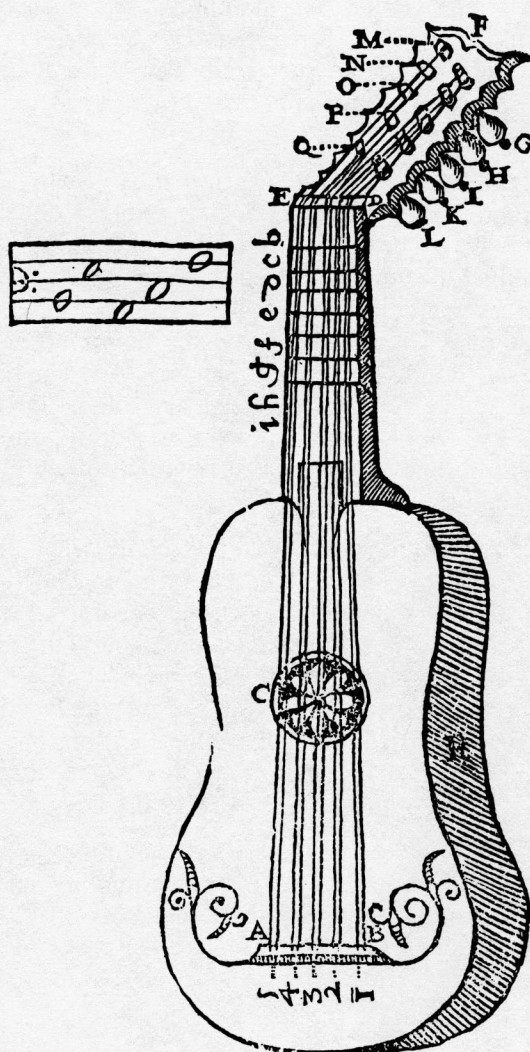
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<sup>5</sup> Joan Carlos Amat, *Guitarra española* (Lerida, 1626).

## Five-course Guitar

Marin Mersenne, *Harmonicorum libri XII* (Paris, 1648), f. 68.

Illustration of a five-course guitar and its re-entrant tuning.  
The clef should be read as a C clef on the middle line.





that of any modern guitar by reason of its mainly alto range and quality.

From the last decade of the 16th century the five-course guitar appears to have been developed by the northern Italian (especially Florentine monodists), whose new composing style required it to play "block" harmonies (rather like the chord parts played by modern guitarists in 20th-century dance bands). Indeed, the tunings make text book chord inversions practically irrelevant, and the earliest five-course repertory employs, exclusively, a type of chord notation (known as *alfabeto*).

This earliest of the five-course guitar's repertory usually includes indications for a strumming technique which employs down and up strokes notated for the guitarist's right hand. Contemporary instruction books reveal that the simple strokes given in most sources often were played in a much more rhythmically dynamic fashion.<sup>6</sup> However, it should be borne in mind that *alfabeto* notation per se does not always imply strumming, and the majority of the hundreds of monody and aria sources employing *alfabeto* symbols do not give stroke signs. Rather, the symbols are there merely to help the guitarist to realize any style of continuo that might be suitable for a given piece.

From the 1630s onward a new solo style for guitar, which employed a mixture of lute-style playing with carefully controlled strums on important music stresses, gained prominence. This mixed technique was coupled with a special technique made possible by the re-entrant tunings and octave stringings already mentioned. In this latter technique as many open strings as possible were employed to play scale passages, so that each note of the scale rang on, one melting into the next in the manner of a harp or bells. Much of the finest music in the instrument's huge solo repertory employs all three of these techniques.

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<sup>6</sup> Tyler, *Early Guitar*, 83-86.

In the early baroque period guitar *alfabeto* notation was included in a great many collections of Italian vocal music, indicating the importance of the guitar as a continuo instrument for this repertory. It includes music by such composers as Caccini, Landi, d'India, Vitali, Marini, Grandi, Mazzocchi, Cavalli, Frescobaldi, and Monteverdi, among many others.

Many of the guitar sources, solo as well as song collections with guitar, include some continuo instruction, from very simple charts to the extensive treatises by Matteis<sup>7</sup> and Murcia.<sup>8</sup> As a continuo instrument the guitar was also used in large ensembles performing court *balli*, operas (two were employed in Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo*, 1647), and oratorios. Documents such as payment records and eye-witness accounts mention the guitar with reasonable frequency, but it is possible that the instrument was used even more often than these documents indicate. There is much evidence that theorbo players, most often mentioned in the documents, normally doubled on guitar. The two instruments have tuning characteristics and technical idioms in common and many famous performers, such as Bartolotti and De Visée, played both instruments.

### The Six-Course Guitar (Later 18th Century)

With the rise of the *galant* and early classical styles in the 18th century, the guitar, which for more than a century and a half had maintained its own unique sound and idiom, now was adapted to fit the requirements of the new music. By at least 1764 it had become standardly fitted with a low A string on the fifth course; soon after, a sixth course with a low E string was added, thus enabling it to take over the role of the more harmonically sophisticated, but by now

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<sup>7</sup> Nicola Matteis, *The False Consonances of Music* (London, 1682).

<sup>8</sup> Siantiago de Murcia, *Resumen de acopañar la parte con la guitarra* . . . (Madrid, 1714).



## Alfabeto Notation (chart)

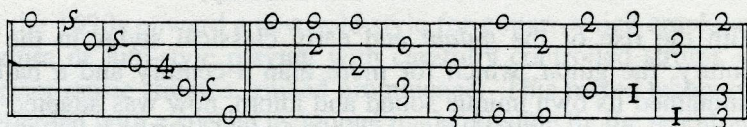
Antonio Carbonchi, *Le dodici chitarre* (Florence, 1643), f. 5.

A chart in both Italian and French tablature. The letters, when printed above music in staff notation, represent the harmonies shown by the tablature, which gives their respective left-hand finger patterns.

### *Alfabeto della Chitarra*

A	B	C	F	G	H	I	M	N	Q	R	Y
2.	3...		2...	3...	1.	2.	1.	3.	4...	2.	4...
3...	1.	2.	1.	2...	3...	2.	3.	1.	4...	4...	3...
3...		3...		1.	3...	2.	4...	4...	2.	4...	2.
O	L	E	†	P	K	D	S	T	V	X	Z
1.	3...		2...	3...	1.	2.	1.	2.	4...	2.	4...
	1.		2...	3...	3...	2.	1.	1.	4...	4...	2.
2...	4...	3...		1.	2...	1.	3...	3...	2.	3...	1.
3...	3...	1.		1.	1.		2...	4...	2.	2.	2...

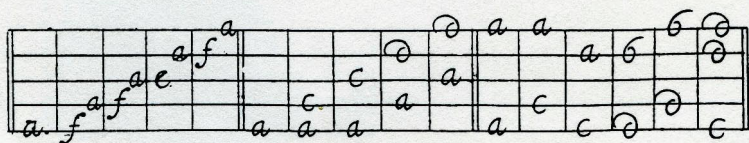
### *Regola per accordarla*



### *Alfabeto alla francese*

F	I	C	A	B	G	H	M	N	Y	Q	R
6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.
6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.
6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.
†	D	E	O	L	P	K	S	T	Z	V	X
6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.
6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.
6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.	6.

### *La sua accordatura*





obsolete lute. The guitar's new arpeggio-oriented style made it an ideal instrument for accompanying the solo voice, and this was its main function. Reinvented as an instrument with a true bass range, it was soon to lose its double courses and to emerge as the "classical guitar."

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