My Guitar's Persona Is a Lute

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Objectives – Students will be able to:

- Explain what a lute is, and how it resembles and differs from a modern guitar
- Tune a guitar for renaissance lute pieces
- Read French (alphabetta) lute tablature, and translate it into plucked strings and pressed frets on guitar
- Find lute music online and assess its appropriateness and authenticity

What is a lute?

- Plucked instrument with round back, long neck, gut strings, gut frets
- Descendent of North African / Mid-Eastern *oud* (or *al'ud,* pictured)
- Arranged in *courses* (pairs of strings tuned to same pitch or octave), except for highest-pitched string (call the first course, or *chanterelle*)
- Medieval lute (ca. 1100-1500) had 4-5 courses, played with plectrum
- Renaissance lute (ca. 1500-1620) has 6-7 courses as wrapped bass strings become available
- Lutenists switch to finger plucking to allow for polyphony (multiple lines of music)
- England comes to prominence in the 16th century, and published lute music is popular
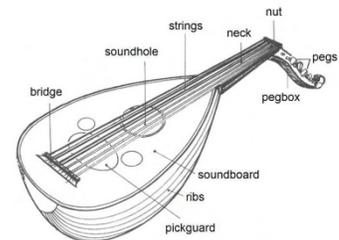
How do you play lute music on a guitar?

- Nylon strings recommended for sound and ease of play (or consider lighter silk-steel composite strings)
- Tenor lutes were tuned on *perfect fourth* intervals, except a *major third* between the 3rd and 4th course
- 6-course tenor lute tuned in G, from lowest to highest, (G) (C) (F) (A) (d) (g)
- Intervals are very close to modern guitar, except the *major third* is one string higher on a guitar
- Use standard tuning, and tune the third-highest string down half a tone (from G to F#)
- To play in the tenor lute key (G rather than E), place capo on the third fret
- Play approach is similar to fingerstyle or classical guitar; generally the pinky is anchored on the soundboard with the right hand, and strive for an inward plucking motion with each finger
- Lute style focuses on delicacy and ornament; typically no more than 3 or 4 notes are sounded together
- For pieces with lines for the 7th (bass) course, these notes can transposed up an octave, or dropped

What is lute tablature, and how do you read it?

- Tablature explains a piece of music *mechanically*, instructing which strings to play with the right hand, and which frets to press with the left, on a given beat
    - Flags or notes above the staff set the duration of notes until next change
    - More flags shorten note by powers of 2; dot indicates additional half beat
- Three main forms of tablature evolved for lute music: French, Italian, and German
    - Italian (ancestor of modern guitar tablature): Zero (0) means the string is played open, numerals above 0 indicate which fret is held down when the string is played
    - However, strings are shown from lowest (top) to highest (bottom) pitch
    - German tablature was harder to read, less-used by non-German speakers
- The *most popular* tablature for English speakers was *French* (alphabetta) notation
    - lowercase letters: *a* for an open string, *b* for a string held down on the first fret, *c* on the second fret, etc.
    - The lines are arranged to match the strings when playing right-handed
    - Translates readily to guitar tab, *a*=0, *b*=1, *c*=2, etc.
    - However, *j* was omitted from note sequence (it was a considered a variant of *i*)
    - Note that lowercase *c* and *e* can be tricky to distinguish. In any piece of music, they are distinct from one another (often a flat top stroke is used for *e*), but styles vary and require examination
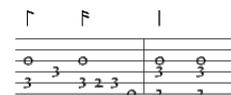
Italian tablature
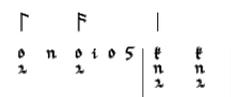
German tablature

French tablature

Why play lute music on a guitar? What do you gain, and what do you lose?

- Guitar (as a start, or as an end point) has a number of advantages over the lute:
  - *Easier* to obtain, repair, replace; *cheaper* for comparable sound quality; *easier* to get lessons
  - Easier to tune and *keep in tune*, plays *louder*, easier to *hear* in SCA settings
  - The narrower neck makes it easier to *reach strings and frets* without contorting your fingers
- The lute is, however, a distinct instrument with its own voice:
  - Two-string courses and wide neck allow for *greater subtlety* and *faster play* when proficient
  - The unique look and sound contribute to an *immersive experience* when played well
- Why you should feel comfortable playing lute music on a guitar:
  - It's perfectly reasonable to learn period-appropriate music on a modern instrument
  - 6-string guitar is more similar to Renaissance lute than any other instrument
  - Compositions for lute translate to guitar with a little study and some slight adjustments
  - A range of *lute guitars*, which look more like a lute but play more like a guitar, can be found

How do you assess the authenticity and appropriateness of a piece of lute music?

- Most pieces that are recorded in lute tablature are likely transcribed from a period source, but transcription and interpretation errors are still possible
- Pieces that specify details of the source (title of the book, composer, song number, date of publication) are more likely to be reliable and can be verified
- Remember: the SCA generally considers music published as late as 1650 to be acceptably period
  - Music publication tended to lag behind when the music would have been composed or performed for reasons having nothing to do with authenticity, such as access to musical printing presses and publishing rights, which were often rigidly controlled
  - For example, most lute music in England appears beginning 1597, because that was the year after the royal patent expired for music printing, and the previous patent-holder didn't play lute
- The gold standard for authentic lute tablature is *facsimile* (scanned image from an original period source)
- May be harder to read, but can be used to check someone's computer transcription for accuracy
- With free music software like MuseScore 2, you can transcribe sheet music, add a Lute or Guitar Tab staff to the score, and copy and paste. Translates the notes into tablature so you can understand how to play it

Where do you find lute music?

- YouTube, SoundCloud, and Spotify are good sources to find music by a given composer (such as John Dowland, Thomas Campion, Robert Morley), and discover songs that you like
- The Lute Society of America has a page with links to a number of rich sources: https://lutesocietyofamerica.wildapricot.org/Lute-Tablature-Sites
- Internet Music Score Library Project (https://imslp.org), aka Petrucci Music Library
- Choral Public Domain Library (https://www.cpdl.org), aka ChoralWiki
- I have a personal library of lute tablature from various sources that I'm happy to share. Contact me via email (ericnjb at gmail dot com) if you have a request