

M-TAB VIHUELA Tablature¹

In preparing this performing edition of *Los seys libros del Delphín* by Luys de Narváez, I was concerned about a suitable format for the tablature. My first thought was to use French tablature, since it is so widespread in modern playing editions. However, from a visual point of view, the French use of letters for frets seemed to me a bit anachronistic for vihuela tablatures. This music has come from the staid Iberian culture, heavily traditional in many respects, unlike the progressive humanistic spirit that was developing elsewhere in Europe at the time. Thus, I felt that the “look and feel” of vihuela music in a modern edition would be greatly enhanced if some aspects of its 16th-century *Hispanicism* could be retained in the presentational format. With that in mind, I developed M-TAB.

To briefly define M-TAB, it is the vihuela tablature style employed by Luis Milán², including original mensural signs (if any) and rhythmic values, except that rhythmic symbols have been visually minimized. Here is the opening of Milán’s first *Pavana* (f.G3v) shown in its original tablature and in M-TAB:

Ex. 1.

The image displays two versions of musical notation for the opening of Milán's first Pavana. The upper version is the original tablature, featuring six horizontal lines representing the strings of a vihuela. It includes mensural signs (diamonds) and rhythmic values (numbers and letters) placed on the lines. The lower version is the M-TAB notation, which uses the same six-line structure but with simplified rhythmic symbols and clear mensural signs (diamonds) above the lines. The notation is organized into measures, with the first measure containing three notes and the second measure containing two notes.

A more complete definition of M-TAB is given in “The Solution” below.

The Problem

Los seys libros del Delphín de musica by Luis de Narváez, the five subsequent printed vihuela collections by other composers, and all known manuscripts of vihuela music³ appear in what is termed Italian tablature. Of its six lines, the visually lowest represents the highest pitched first course. It is like a mirror of the strings when an instrument is in playing position. The left-hand fingering is shown by numbers, “0” representing an open string, “1” the first fret, etc.

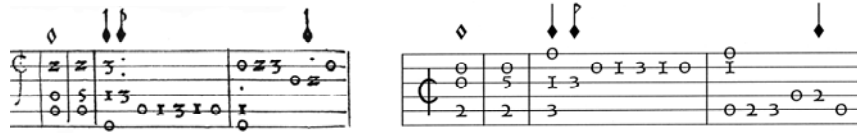
French (-English) tablature was the opposite of the Italian in its two main respects: The line representing the first is in the highest visual position; and the left-hand fingerings are represented by letters, “a” for open string, “b” for first course, etc. During the 16th century, many pieces originally in Italian tablature were transcribed into French tablature manuscripts and printed publications. Notably (for this discussion) publisher Pierre Phalèse and composer Guillaume Morlaye published the “Fantasia del primer tono” [Fantasia No. 1] by Narváez (f.26) in French tablature.⁴

For whatever reasons, Italian tablature has not been widely learned by our contemporary lutenists. This has had the result that many modern editions from the U.S.A., Britain, and Northern Europe have adopted the French format exclusively. This has been done rather casually and without much comment. For the purpose of merely decoding the printed page and turning it into sound, this approach is completely viable and worthy of its success. However, as I pointed

out above, French tablature may be anachronistic in representing vihuela music. Something closer to the original — yet accessible to today’s player — would be in order.

To illustrate the relationship between Narváez’s Italian tablature and M-TAB, here is the opening of the famous *Canción del Emperador* (Book III, f.40v) shown in both formats:

Ex. 2



Historical Precedent

Italian tablature was not the only format employed in 16th-century vihuela publications. In the very first book, *Libro de musica de vihuela de mano intitulado El Maestro* (Valencia, 1536), Luis de Milán utilized an adaptation of Italian tablature, in which the first course was represented on the top line. Visually related to staff notation, higher pitches were shown by higher visual positions. Milán used Italian numbers for the left hand, and the full sequence of rhythmic values in each piece appeared over the fingerings. (See Ex. 1 above.)

Milán lived and worked at the court of Valencia, at a time when its joint viceroys were Germaine de Foix and Ferdinand of Aragón. Ferdinand had close ties with southern Italy, being Neapolitan himself and bearing the title Duke of Calabria. Considering the active communications between Valencia and the Italian peninsula, Milán undoubtedly had access to Italian lute publications preceding his own book. These, along with freely circulated manuscript tablatures of Italian lutenists, undoubtedly were dominant influences on the visual aspects of his own tablatures, particularly with regard to the use of numbers to represent left hand fingerings.⁵

The reverse-Italian orientation of courses was a different matter. We now know that Milán was neither the inventor nor the exclusive practitioner of his course orientation. The following table shows sources of this practice before, in the same year as, and after the publication of Milan’s *El Maestro*.

Date, Origin	Identification	Description	Instrument
c.1490- c.1495, probably Venice	Pesaro, Biblioteca Oliveriana, MS 1144	Manuscript tablature book, including three pages (p.101-103) in Neapolitan tablature.	6- course lute
1514 or after, Valencia	London: British Library, C.48.h.1	Manuscript tablature fragment written on the flyleaf of a copy of Lucius Marineus Siculus’s <i>Epistoarum familiarum</i> (Valladolid, 1514) originally in a private collection. ⁶	6- course vihuela
1535/1536, Valencia	Luys de Milan, <i>Libro de musica de vihuela de mano intitulado El Maestro</i> . (1536) ⁷	72 tablatures.	6- course vihuela
1536,	<i>Intavolatura de viola o</i>	55 tablatures in Neapolitan tablature.	6-

Naples	vero lavto. . . (Publisher: Johannes Sulzbach)	Works mostly by Francesco da Milano.	course viola [da mano] or lute
1549, Venice	Melchiore Barberiis, Opera intitolata continua . . . (15492)	Folios Gg4v-Hh1v at end of book: four short fantasias for “chitarra da sette corde” (7-string, 4-course guitar) in Milan’s orientation. All other tablatures in the book are in Italian orientation.	4-course guitar

The earliest example is also part of one of the earliest surviving lute tablatures, the famous *Pesaro Manuscript*.⁸ This heart-shaped book was copied by several hands. Most of the book used letters to designate left-hand fingerings in what would become known as “French” tablature (following Attaignant’s publications of 1529-1530). However, on p. 101-103, numbers are used instead in what more recently has been dubbed “Neapolitan tablature”: identical to Milan’s format, except for the left-hand numbering, which begins with “1” to represent an open course.⁹ Thus, we have proof that Milan’s orientation was in use in Italy very early on, in fact, probably before he was born.

The next example is a fragment — a single manuscript leaf — which employs numbers for left hand-fingerings (except that, possibly for clarity, “y” is used in place of “1”). The connection between its possible Valencian origin and Milan’s Valencian activities may be significant.

In 1536, the year of *El Maestro*, the Neapolitan publisher Johannes Sulzbach released a two-volume collection of tablatures for the “viola or lute.” We may infer that “viola” is short for “viola da mano”, the Italian counterpart of the Spanish vihuela. The Kingdom of Naples was one of Aragón’s dominions, which may help to explain the connection between Milan’s and the very rare Neapolitan tablature (used also in the *Pesaro Manuscript*).

Milan’s tablature format has also become known as “guitar tablature”, and nowhere is this better illustrated historically than in one of the 1549 lute books by Melchiore Barberiis. This priest/composer/virtuoso was active in Parma, where the university attracted students from the North. Many of these were from France. The flurry of Parisian Renaissance guitar publications that came out in the early 1550s implies the intense popularity of that instrument in France, probably extending back about a decade. Very likely, then, French students brought guitars and music to Parma and apparently interested Barberiis in the instrument. The four brief “fantasias” at the end of his book — otherwise devoted to the lute and in Italian tablature — are printed in four-course tablature with the first course on top but with Italianate numbers. Perhaps the idea was to blend the French and Italian formats. In any case, this music historically validates the use of Milan’s orientation in Italy at least up to the mid-16th century.

Modern Precedent

With the revival of the guitar in the 1960s also came the revival of tablature notation. New generations of amateur players with little or no musical training wished to play the music of their “guitar heroes,” and the solution that evolved was actually a revival and adaptation of an old format. In “guitar tablature,” the string orientation is the same as in Milan; numbers are used for the left hand; and rhythms are shown in detail. Guitar tablature is readily self-taught, and has become the *de facto* standard for myriad individual publications in all styles and for pieces printed in periodicals like *Guitar Player*.

The Solution

Probably, all of today's lutenists can play from French tablature, and adjusting to numbers instead of letters is not a big leap. Serious vihuelists will already know Milan's orientation and can pick up M-TAB at sight. These are the parameters of M-TAB:

- Six-line tablature with course 1 appearing visually highest.
- Numbers are used for left-hand fingering, "0" for an open string, "1" for the first fret, etc.
- Original mensural and proportions signs (the forerunners of time signatures) are preserved.¹⁰
- Original rhythmic values are preserved.
- Rhythmic symbols are visually minimized (as in Italian tablature), that is, a value is in effect until a new value appears.
- Ties are substituted for dotted values across solid or dotted barlines.

The transcription of music across time and across cultures is always problematical. While employing modern systems and symbols may be expedient, it is not always desirable.

The content of notation systems, the musical information they convey, is specific to the cultures and music from which they arise. At the same time, notations will include some information that pertains to intercultural aspects of music, in accord with the features shared by their musics and musics of other cultures. . . . The content of a system is largely culture-specific, with varying admixtures of features that can be distinguished as having intercultural relevance.¹¹

In a large sense, the quotation above is an *apologia* of the cultural aspects of M-TAB. If a transcription is of Spanish music, I believe it should *look* Spanish. For the player, it is important that the appearance of the tablature should convey the flavor of the culture of origin. I believe I have achieved that with M-TAB, but I leave that to your critical assessment of the format. To that end, I invite you to take up your vihuela or Renaissance lute and read through the pieces in this edition.

Michael Fink

¹ In slightly different form, this essay appeared in the *LSA Quarterly* 44, no. 4: 29-32.

² , *Libro de musica de vihuela de mano intitulado El maestro* (Valencia, 1536).

³ For a full listing of known vihuela sources along with their modern editions, see the Internet web page: http://www.lgv-pub.com/vihuela_sources.htm.

⁴ *Des chansons reduiz en Tabulature* (1546₁₈); Guillaume Morlaye, *Premier livre de tabulature de leut* (1552₄) — see note 5 below.

⁵ The Italian connection can be seen in *El Maestro* itself. Milan introduces his six *pavanas* by writing that their spirit is the same as those played in Italy; and further, he sets six Italian *sonetos*.

⁶ See Antonio Corona-Alcalde, “The Earliest Vihuela Tablature: A Recent Discovery”, *Early Music* 20, no. 4 (Nov. 1992): 594-600.

⁷ Numbering from Howard Mayer Brown, *Instrumental Music Printed before 1600* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁸ Pesaro, Biblioteca Oliveriana, Ms. 1144.

⁹ See the color facsimile and extensive discussion in *Early Lute Tablatures in Facsimile*, ed. by Crawford Young and Martin Kirnbauer (Winterthur, Switzerland: Amadeus, 2003). See also the in-depth discussion in Vladimir Ivanoff, *Das Pesaro-Manuskript: Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Lautentabulatur* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1988), especially, pp. 108-110. In addition, Ivanoff identifies three examples of Neapolitan tablature, which I have not examined: (1) Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, MS 596. HH. 2⁴ (fragment); (2) Bartolomeo Lieto Panhormitano, *Dialogo quarto di musica* (Naples, 1549); (3) Michele Carrara, *Intavolatura di liuto* (1585) (single broadsheet showing pitch equivalents in Italian, French, and Neapolitan tablatures — *New Grove* 2).

¹⁰ In the music of Narváez (1538), Mudarra (1546), and Valderrábano (1547), mensural signs also indicate tempos. See Charles Jacobs, *Tempo Notation in Renaissance Spain* (Brooklyn, NY: Institute of Mediaeval Music, © 1964).

¹¹ Ter Ellington, “Notation,” in *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*, ed. by Helen Myers (New York: Norton, 1992), vol. 1: 160, 161. I am grateful to Jocelyn C. Nelson for suggesting this essay.