

Renaissance Guitar Music for the Baroque Guitarist

Origins of the Guitar and Its Music

Before the guitar as we know it, came the *vihuela de mano* (or *viola da mano*). This waisted instrument of six courses was essentially a Renaissance lute in the shape of a guitar. Its rise in popularity in Spain parallels that of the Italian lute, beginning before 1500 and peaking in the course of the 16th century.

The term *guitarra* is first mentioned in a vihuela book, Alonso Mudarra's *Tres libros de musica* (1546), where the composer presents the first published music for the four-course guitar. An actual definition of the instrument appeared over a decade later in Juan Bermudo's *Declaración de instrumentos musicales* (1555). Bermudo describes the *guitarra* as being smaller than the vihuela and having four courses tuned to the intervals of the middle courses of the vihuela called *Temple Nuevo*, or with the fourth course lowered by a whole tone called *Temple Viejo* (see below). By the 1570s, the four-course guitar had become popular in France and Italy through the publication of about a dozen books of pieces.



The four-course guitar has lived a long and fruitful life, lasting until today. Over the centuries, it morphed into several New World instruments, including the *triple* (Colombia) and the *jarano* (Mexico). After Portuguese settlers from Madeira landed at Honolulu, their version, the *barguinha* (or *cavaquinho* or *machete*) became part of Hawaiian culture. Renamed the *ukulele* ("jumping flea"), it has enjoyed many waves of popularity in America.

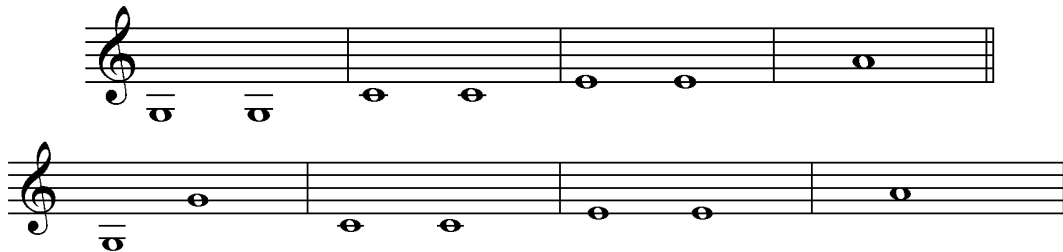
Bermudo also describes a *guitarra de cinco ordenes*. This instrument added to the four-course guitar one more course a perfect fourth higher than the existing first course. We know of no music written for the 5-course Renaissance guitar. However, a five-course vihuela had already debuted in print in Miguel Fuenllana's *Orphénica lyra* (1554). The instrument's stringing was actually a hybrid of the guitar and the vihuela: We can think of it as either a vihuela lacking the first course or a four-course guitar with a fifth course added below (see below). Evidently, the five-course instrument was also smaller than the vihuela, judging by its earliest surviving example, a 1581 guitar/vihuela built by Belchior Dias in Portugal. After Fuenllana, the next music published for the five-course instrument was Joan Carles Amat's *Guitarra española* of 1596, which ushered in an era of immense popularity for strummed guitar music during the next 150 years.

Tunings and Suitability to Later Instruments

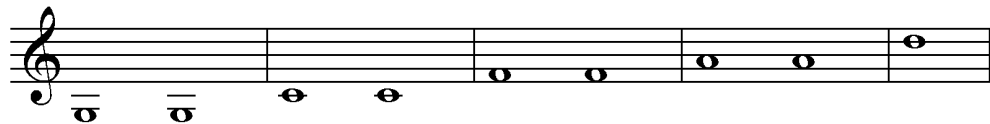
Bermudo had described the four-course guitar's tuning as resembling courses 2 to 5 of the vihuela. By inference from the Fuenllana tablatures, the tuning of the five-course vihuela was that of the six-course vihuela without its highest course. To illustrate:

4-Course Guitar (<i>Temple Viejo</i>):	♣	P5	♣	M3	♣	P4	♣	1						
4-Course Guitar (<i>Temple Nuevo</i>):	♣	P4	♣	M3	♣	P4	♣	1						
VIHUELA:	♣	P4	♣	P4	♣	P4	♣	M3	♣	P4	♣	P4	♣	1
	♣	P4	♣	P4	♣	P4	♣	M3	♣	P4	♣	P4	♣	1

This is simplified, naturally, since the four-course guitar's 4th course could contain both a lower and higher octave string. The same was true of both the 4th and 5th courses in the later five-course guitar. Thus, the *nominal* tuning for the four-course guitar could be either of the following:



and for Fuenllana's five-course vihuela:



We must bear in mind that the particular *intervals* between the strings — the perfect fourth (P4) or major third (M3) — are the only important considerations. The actual pitch to which a set of strings might be tuned was *relative* (especially in solo music), since (1) pitch at the time was not absolutely defined and (2) tuning standards for lutes, vihuelas, and guitars were often given in terms of *tension*, not pitch.

The great majority of music published for the four-course guitar used the *Temple Nuevo*. Note that the intervals of this tuning (with M3 between 1st and 2nd course) are identical to the first four strings of the Baroque guitar (assuming a bourdon string on the 4th course). This suggests, that music for the four-course Renaissance guitar would adapt perfectly for the Baroque guitar with no need for editing. In theory, that is true. However, the string scale of the four-course guitar was smaller than that found on the Baroque guitar. Renaissance composers utilized the short neck of the instrument for often very wide stretches, sometimes as much as fret 3-8 fret (Mudarra). The instrument had only ten frets. Thus, on a Baroque guitar, placing a capo on fret 2 will achieve the necessary range. However, due to large stretches, a few fingers may need to

be changed. Aside from minor editing such as this, four-course guitar music is eminently suited to left-hand technique on the Baroque guitar.

The second tuning (above) for the four-course instrument is nothing other than the standard “Corbetta” tuning for the Baroque guitar with the fourth-course octave strings reversed and minus the fifth course. Thus, on a Baroque instrument, playing on the upper four courses —



— enables the performance of virtually all the four-course guitar repertoire.

The five-course vihuela music of Fuenllana is also transferable to the Baroque guitar. Of the known Baroque guitar tunings, that with bourdons on both the 4th and 5th courses corresponds to the Renaissance tuning shown above. The 5th course *must* use at least one bourdon to sound properly. Furthermore, due to the contrapuntal employment of lower courses in Fuenllana’s counterpoint, leaving upper-octave strings on the 4th and 5th courses may not yield completely satisfactory results. Optimally, the stringing should resemble a vihuela, i.e., double bourdons on both courses.

— Michael Fink