

Renaissance Guitar Music for the Classical 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 about a dozen publications.



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 *jarana* (Mexico). After Portuguese settlers from Merida 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.

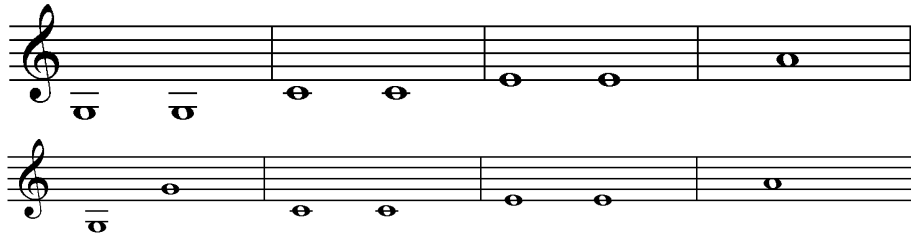
Bermudo also describes a *guitarra de cinco ordenes*. This instrument added to the four-course guitar one more course a perfect fourth higher than the existing first course. We know of no music written for the 5-course Renaissance guitar. However, music for a five-course vihuela had already debuted in 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

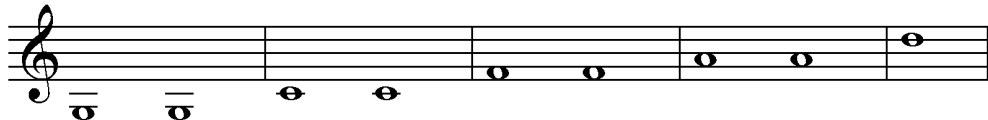
Bermudo had described the four-course guitar's tuning as resembling courses 2 to 5 of the vihuela. By inference from the Fuenllana tablatures, the tuning of the five-course vihuela was that of the six-course vihuela without its highest course. To illustrate:

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

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 2nd and 3rd course) are identical to the first four strings of the classical guitar (discounting a possible upper octave string on the 4th course). This suggests, that music for the four-course Renaissance guitar would adapt perfectly for the classical guitar with no need for editing. However, the string scale of the four-course guitar was much shorter than that found on the modern classical guitar. Renaissance composers utilized the short neck of the instrument often for very wide stretches, sometimes as much as fret 3-8 (Mudarra). The instrument had only ten frets. Thus, on a classical 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, much four-course guitar

music by Mudarra, Fuenllana, and others is eminently playable on the classical guitar and is a nice enhancement to the instrument's repertoire. (See also the article, "Stringing and Tuning the Renaissance Four-Course Guitar" on this website.)

The five-course vihuela music of Fuenllana is also transferable to the classical guitar. Stretches are not as common this music, and the occasional fret 1-5 stretch can easily be re-fingered.

— Michael Fink