

### 3. Girolamo Montesardo

#### Introduction

*Alfabeto* appeared **in print** for the first time in Girolamo Montesardo's **Nvova inventione d'intavolatura per sonare li balletti sopra la chitarra spagniuola senza numeri e note; per mezzo della quale da se stesso ogn'uno senza Maestro potrà imparare**, printed from moveable type in Florence in 1606. Although two copies of the original are extant, one in the Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale G. B. Martini in Bologna and the other in the library of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, this has not been published in facsimile. Pages 25, 26 and 31-40 are missing from the Bologna copy. The book is dedicated to Francesco Buontalenti, possible a relative of the Florentine architect and sculptor, Bernardo Buontalenti.

In translation the title reads

*Newly invented tablature for playing balletti on the Spanish guitar, without numbers or notes; by means of which anyone will be able to learn without a master.*

Because Montesardo refers to his “Nvova inventione” in the title as being a means of playing the instrument “without numbers or notes” it has often been assumed that he invented *alfabeto* himself. However from what he says in his introduction it is clear that what he has actually done is to try and devise a system of indicating **metre** and **note values** which doesn't call for a knowledge of **lute tablature** or **mensural notation**. He explains that by profession he is a composer of madrigals and serious music, but as he has been asked to do so, he has invented an easy rule for the Spanish guitar indicating time and measure.

#### *A'Lettori*

*My principal profession is that of a composer of madrigals and other serious forms of music. Nevertheless in order at once to please our lively and noble youth and to obey their honest wishes I must try to play a new rôle. And because many of the gentlemen and noblemen with whom I have spent much of my life have always desired to know how to play the Spanish guitar, I need to take special care, in order to please them. For they not only wish to know how to play this instrument but have also urged me to invent an **Easy Rule so that they can learn to play in the correct time and measure without having either notes or numbers.** And so that anyone can learn to play the aforesaid instrument, I decided to publish this newly invented very easy rule. Anyone who studies the rule which I will show you will be able to play according to it without having a teacher. You will quickly be able to achieve the noble and charming accomplishments which you desire.*

Montesardo's real surname was Melcarne; Montesardo refers to his place of origin, a village in the province of Lecce in the Puglia region of the Kingdom of Naples. He was a clergyman and held appointments as a singer and *maestro di capella* at various churches

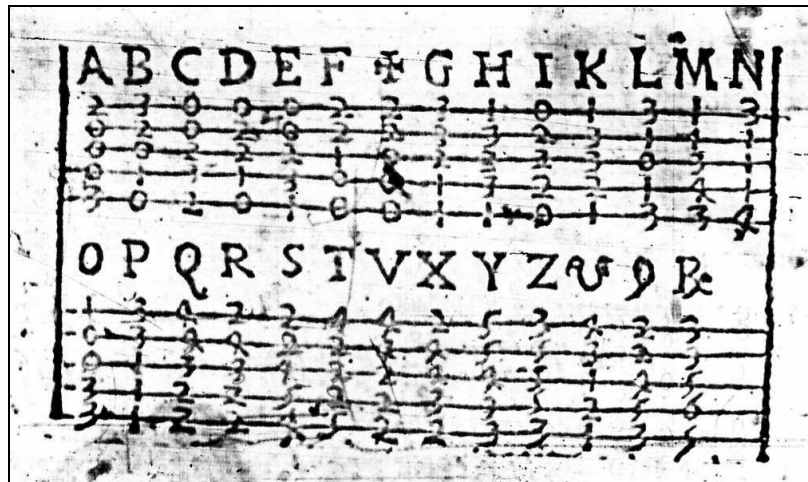
and cathedrals in different parts of Italy, including Fano, Ancona and possibly Lecce. He published a collection of Italian songs in the Spanish style for two or three voices with *alfabeto* – **I Lieti Giorni di Napoli** - in Naples in 1612. It is not clear whether he himself played the guitar and even if he did he may not have been familiar with all its practices. *Alfabeto* had clearly been in use for some time before he wrote his book and what was lacking was a coherent way of indicating metre and rhythm. Because he was musically literate he was approached by guitar enthusiasts and asked to devise a suitable method.

## Montesardo's Instructions to the Player

After his introduction Montesardo sets out three rules explaining his notation. The first of these deals with *alfabeto*.

*The first and principal rule which anyone who wishes to know how to play this instrument well must learn consists of the following alfabeto which should be memorized.*

### *Alfabeto, and foundation for playing the Spanish Guitar*



In the table Chord A (G major) varies from most later versions, having the second course unfretted (as in the table in the **Cancionero de Bezon**) instead of being stopped at 3<sup>rd</sup> fret. In later tables Chord + (E minor) is usually placed at the beginning of the sequence rather than after Chord F (E major). Chords B-P are already standardized; those from Q to Z represent the same chords in the earlier part of the sequence played one or two frets higher. (Chord R is misprinted; it should be the same as Chord H at the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret). Three other miscellaneous chords are added at the end. In Montesardo's table Chord U is the chord represented in later sources by & 9 is an E minor chord in different position represented in later sources as M+ and Be is the same as M played at the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret.

## **Open courses – to include or not to include?**

**It is fairly obvious in the table that the unstopped courses represented with zeros are to be included in all the chords.**

Today many people find it strange that the letters don't bear any relation to the (nominal) pitch of the chord. The first three chords – A B C represent the simple chord progression I IV V in a major key and the next three, D E F - i iv V in a minor key. After that the chords are arranged in a more random order. Since guitars varied in size and the pitch to which they were tuned was not standard, there is no need for there to be any correlation between pitch and symbol.

The next rule explains the two ways in which *passacaglie* (or *ritornelli* in Italian) are played.

## **Notation of rhythm and metre**

*The second easy rule is necessary for those who wish to learn to play passacaglie, as they are called in Spanish or ritornelli in our language, in the first manner.*

*First and foremost if you wish to play well the passacaglie set out below, you must observe two points; start by giving the first stroke from above downwards with the right hand; the second stroke is given from below upwards; the third stroke is given from above downwards; the fourth given from below upwards; and the fifth is given from above downwards. There are five strokes, which are given on the first letter which you will find indicated in the passacaglie, whatever this may be. This is called playing in the first manner.*

*If you wish to play the passacaglie, or ritornelli in the second manner, it is necessary to give two downward strokes and one upward stroke on all the letters.*

As always in guitar sources, the terms up and down refer to the direction in which the hand moves when strumming the chord.

**The third rule** explains how the duration of the strokes is indicated.

*Many people will be surprised to see **so many letters** together; but in order to free you from all doubt, I have arranged things in such a way that once you have whichever letter you wish to play firmly in place,[you will know how to play it] either down or up.*

**In other words he will repeat the letter each time the chord is to be repeated. In this he varies from later sources where the letter is usually given once with stroke marks only.**

*And then when you see letters which are placed below [the line], the stroke is given downwards with the right hand, and when you see letters which are placed above [the line], the stroke is given upwards. Note also that when large letters are found, that is to say capitals [upper case letters], the strokes will be played very slowly, giving them twice the amount [of time] that you would give them when a small letter is found. And the same letters are repeated giving as many strokes as there are letters downwards or upwards just as they are indicated.*

*Note also that when a letter is found with a dot [beside it], the stroke will be given somewhat slowly, that is to say, given less time than the capital letters [but more than the smaller ones], as can be seen in the examples below.*

### **Example of quick strokes - Example of slow strokes - Example of a dot**



Although the lower case letters are worth half the upper case ones, it is not clear what their actual denomination will be. The dot following a small letter lengthens the stroke but it also implies that the small letter following is reduced in value. This is a throwback to mensural notation where dots are used to alter the value of notes according to complex rules. No mention is made of the fact that some of the pieces will be in triple time and others in common time.

It is necessary to skip to the end of the introduction at this point to get some idea about how all this works in practice. The last section is headed

#### *Of the passacaglie or ritornelli.*

*The passacaglie or ritornelli are played in two manners, or principal tempi. In the first one begins with the first stroke down, the second up, the third down, the fourth up and the fifth down, which makes five strokes as can be seen below.*

*The passacaglie in the second manner or tempo are played beginning always with two downward strokes and then one upwards, as can be seen below.*

This really repeats what he has said in Rule 2. The *passacagli* are then presented on each of the *alfabeto* letters from A-Z. There are two rhythmic modes for each of the *passacaglie*, the first apparently subdividing the triple metre measure into four quavers and a crotchet or possibly four crotchets and a minim and the second beginning with a dotted crotchet, then a quaver, and then a crotchet. Common time is not mentioned.

### Passacaglie in two different rhythmic modes

Prima Passacaglie, ò ritornello del primo modo sopra la lettera, A.

a a b b

a a A b b C a

---

Del fecondo modo.

a b c a

a a b b c c a a

Primo modo                      Secondo modo

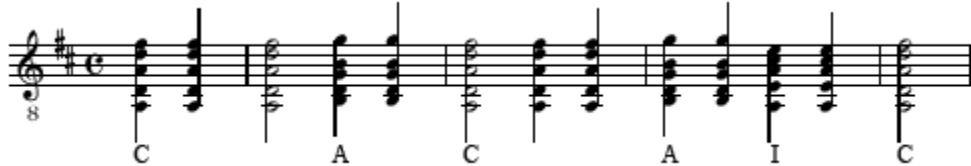
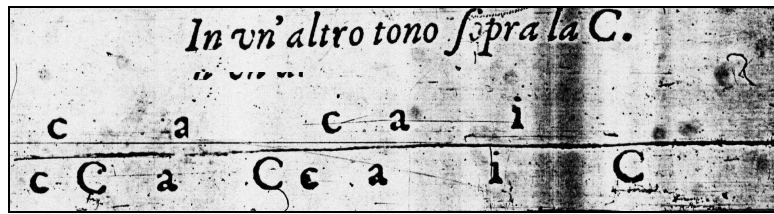
A B C A B C A

In theory he has devised a workable system which makes it quite clear how many times each chord is to be played, whether the strokes should be down or up and how long they should last. However because there are no time signatures or barlines and the note values are variable it is not always easy to work out how the pieces should be played.

As the contents are the standard dance formulae the time signatures can usually be ascertained from other sources but the rhythm and note values are sometimes difficult to determine. Montesardo's version of the **Villano di Spagna** is more or less the same as that found in the **Cancionero de Bezon** and **Sanz**. The upper case letters are twice the value of the lower case ones so that the rhythm is slightly different from Sanz.



## Montesardo's *Villano di Spagna*, p.16



Although in principal it is quite a logical system it also seems to have been difficult to print accurately and many of the pieces are difficult to decipher.

### The rest of the introduction

The intervening sections deal with more general matters and include some interesting and useful information. First he gives some advice on right- and left-hand technique.

#### *How to play with the right hand*

*If you wish to have a beautiful and elegant hand on the guitar it is necessary first and foremost to keep the hand relaxed from the [wrist] joint as much as possible so that it feels almost weightless. This will make the playing more delicate. And then strike the strings sweetly with three or four fingers in the manner of an arpeggio, not altogether, as this will make too much noise, and also make a crude sound, giving much offence to the ear.*

#### *How to play with the left hand*

*The left hand will not match the other well if it is not placed properly on the fingerboard. Place the fingers as close as possible to the frets which are to be played. And some times leave the little finger free in order to trill or to make some ornaments on the frets where this is appropriate.*

**His comment about keeping the little finger free for trills is particularly interesting as most other *alfabeto* books don't mention the use of left-hand ornaments in this repertoire.**

The next section deals with right-hand ornamental strumming.

### *How to play trilli with the right hand*

*If you wish to make the trillo properly with the right hand, it is necessary first of all to stop [the strings] firmly with the left hand and to have the fingers well placed for playing. Then in order to achieve your end, hold two fingers - that is the large finger and the other finger next to the large finger, called thumb, and index finger, [pollice, & indice] extended well and as if bound together. Then make a stroke with these two finger from above downwards and another from below upwards, playing all the strings without ever twisting these fingers which are stretched out in the above mentioned manner. Note also that if you wish to play the music more sweetly, it is necessary to play close to the rose, some times even close to the neck itself.*

*Truly this rule will serve well so that you will know how to take the road towards making the trillo. By custom and practice you will quickly achieve your desire to play gracefully. Note also that this effect is so very necessary, that some times it should be included in places where it is not indicated. Although you may begin by playing harshly and drag the strings too much, eventually your hand will become so accustomed that after much practice it will achieve its end in a short time.*

**[It should be noted that elsewhere this passage has been wrongly translated as meaning that the thumb and middle finger should be used for the strum. Montesardo clearly refers to the fingers as *pollice & indice* – thumb and index finger.]**

Montesardo hasn't really made it clear how the *trillo* should be played but the general idea is that two or four strokes, down and up should be played in place of one. There is no indication in the tablature as to where one should be played.

This is followed by the well known instructions for the tuning of the guitar

### *Rule for tuning the guitar*

*First of all if you wish to tune the Spanish guitar well it is necessary to tune the uppermost string to a convenient bass note, as the foundation of the notes of the other strings, and afterwards tune its accompanying canto an octave higher: these two strings together are called fifth.*

*Then tune the second string unstopped a fourth higher than the first and tune its canto to the higher octave of that string: these two strings together are called fourth.*

*Then these being well tuned, tune the next string, called the third, also a fourth higher and its companion in the unison with it.*

*Then if you want to tune the second, tune it a major third higher, and its companion in unison.*

*Finally tune the first, or canto, as it is called, tuning it a fourth higher, and your instrument will be well tuned.*

What is unusual about these is that they suggest that the player should start by tuning the lowest course first. Instructions for tuning the lute usually start with the instruction to tune the highest course as high as it will go without breaking and work downwards. Rather than providing a practical way of tuning the guitar he is really describing the way it is strung. The fact that he has done so in this way may explain why tuning instruction in later Italian books follow a similar pattern in spite of the fact that this is not the easiest way to ensure that the instrument is in tune. It should be noted too that he describes only the intervals between the strings, not the method found in later sources where one course is compared with the next in unison.

Finally we have some comments on the kind of strings to be used on the guitar.

*It is necessary because of the many octave strings, which you find on this instrument, to have slender strings which are not false and which are of fifth [cinque] quality; thus the first course from above [i.e. the fifth course] has to be thicker than the second [i.e. fourth], as much as common sense ordains; and the second [fourth] course somewhat less thick than the first [fifth].*

*Then the canto, or octave of the thickest string has to be of the same thickness as the second [course], and the canto of the second course, called fourth, has to be of the [same] thickness as the first [course] or canto whatever you wish to call it.*

*The third course has to be thicker than the second in a similar amount to that of the third of the large lute.*

*And it seems that few have had this rule, because many guitars are seen on which the cantos are all slender, and of the same thickness, which does not render a very just note. Note also that your cantos or firsts should be as pliable as possible, and avoid their being too thin, which will not make them sound good.*

This seems fairly sensible advice. The reference to thin strings of “fifth quality” probably refers to the violin first strings imported from Germany, which were called a “quint”. The term is apparently derived from sixteenth century German lute strings; the highest course was represented by the symbol 5 in German lute tablature. It is not entirely clear what Montesardo means when he compares the second and third courses of the guitar with the lute, but on the lute these would have been of almost equal tension with a diameter ratio of 4:3.

## Conclusion

As an instruction book it leaves many important questions unanswered. Aspiring guitarists in the early seventeenth century would have been able to seek further help and advice elsewhere. Clearly it is intended for the dilettante rather than the professional player and it is difficult today to be sure how representative what he says is of practice in a wider musical context.